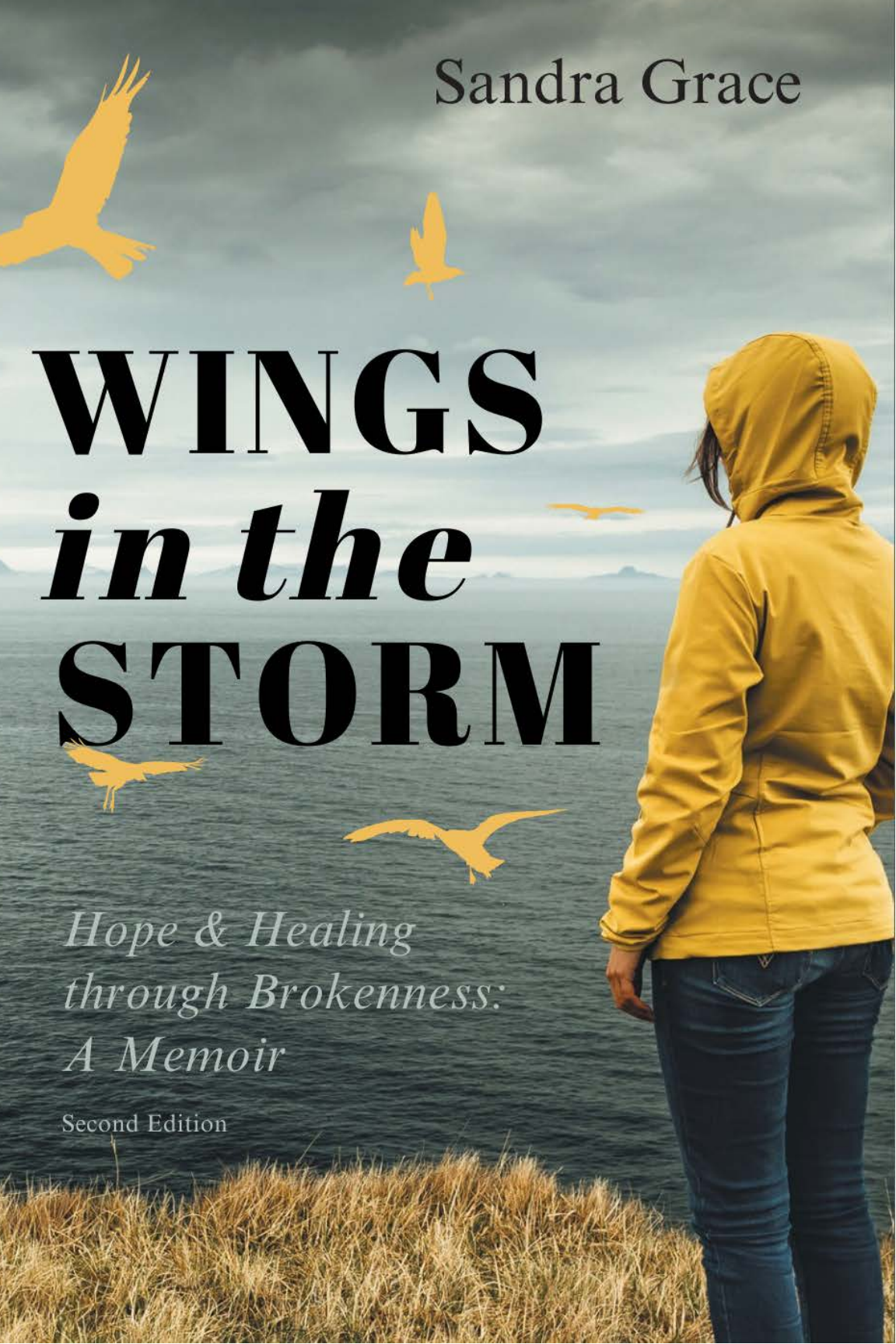
Sandra Grace
WINGS
in the
STORM
Hope & Healing
through Brokenness:
A Memoir
Second Edition

Wings in the Storm

Hope & Healing through Brokenness:
A Memoir

Sandra Grace

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Second Edition — 2025

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Italics are used for dialogues that are not direct quotes; these dialogues are as accurate as possible, according to the author's knowledge and records. Slight creative liberties were taken with dialogues in the humorous accounts for clarity and flow.

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1. Biography & Autobiography, Personal Memoirs

Many thanks to my readers, my friends, Lorie Gurnett, Julie Simpson,
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Special thanks to Bethany for letting me sequester myself in her
guestroom while I immersed in writing
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Contents

For all who are broken and hurting

Dark Unknown

That moment...that choice that changes everything...

The pathway before you winds through wilderness into deep shadows, haunting and beautiful. You stand at the edge alone, longing to know where it leads. You step forward, intrigued.

The sigh of the breeze calls you...

The bend in the road draws you...

The breath of the forest chills you...

You stop, uncertain. A touch of foreboding brushes over your skin. What's ahead, you wonder... Reward or destruction? Do you follow or flee?

You glance back at all that you know. It's still there, waiting—the familiar and safe. It reaches for you, pulling you into its light and warmth. You reconsider that unknown pathway, its hazards and risks—is it worth it? You waver. Instead, you withdraw and start to return the way you've come...

Then, that nudge... That whisper again, "No, no. Come this way," it entices.

You turn forward again and peer into the distance, the dark unknown, the cragged and twisted. It beckons, softly.

Your breath catches, and you answer its call...

The Storm Within

Saskatchewan
May 22, 2013

My hand rested on the small canvas bag beside me, the one I'd packed hastily two hours before. I sat, unmoving, alone in my seat, staring ahead, seeing nothing but the fragmented images in my mind, a kaleidoscope of my life.

Tires hummed as the bus sped along the unfamiliar prairie road, oblivious to me and the tug-of-war in my heart. My throat ached from my efforts to stop the tears that spilled relentlessly down my face into my lap. Muffled voices drifted over me from the smattering of passengers scattered across the other seats. If they noticed me or my red, wet eyes, they were polite enough not to let on.

I lifted my gaze to the window and the scenery that spread beyond the glass. A blanket of velvety green covered an expanse of low, rolling hills, interrupted by the occasional pond that glistened in the evening sun. Here and there, a clumping of bushes, squat and feathery, broke the smoothness of the terrain, and a rare tree stretched upward. It was

beautiful, captivating, this gentle landscape under unending sky, so unlike the steep hills and curves and forests I was used to.

The beauty outside the window did nothing to quell the ache in my heart. Faces flashed before me—Robert, Jack, Ian and Suzanne, my parents, baby Ethan. Each face brought with it a rush of memories, overwhelming emotions of love and loneliness, unworthiness and longing, joy and regret.

Apprehension and doubt swirled together. *What am I doing? This isn't me. I don't stray from what's safe; I follow what's expected.*

I wanted security...the family...the babies that were waiting back home. Yet I'd already left all that behind months ago. How was the possibility ahead any worse than what I was already living?

It was all off kilter, mixed up, foreign, this unexpected life I'd been dropped into. My insides tightened, panic building. It welled up until it filled my stomach, my throat, my head. It was all I could see...all I could hear.

I don't want to go! I finally erupted, my fists clenched like an angry child. I shrank back. My eyes darted around the bus, but no one acknowledged me, my silent cry contained within my own mind. Still, I marveled that they could not hear the fierce storm within me—what might be, raging against what used to be. Which was right and which was fear?

I told you, God, I don't want this! So, why am I on this bus? My lips stretched mutely over each syllable, as I hurled the words in my head toward Heaven.

And this place I'm heading, I'm not fit for...

We're all broken people, Sandra, living in a broken world, called by God to minister to other broken people... Words that seize me. Words that melt me. The email... The invitation... A stirring in the deepest part of my soul. I had to know, so I would go...

Not so long ago, I knew the path my life would take. I was Robert Glenn's wife, married at just twenty years old. I was mother of four babies, sweet and beautiful, each one my joy, my reason for living. I stayed at home to raise them; there was nothing I'd rather have done. When they went, one-by-one, off to school, I spent my days keeping house and yard, making a home for the six of us. The years flew swiftly. I devoured books, spent time with friends, served in church, and travelled. It was all pretty ordinary and predictable. I'd grow old in that house in Kenton, and when it all came to an end, I'd be buried in the little country cemetery farther down Frasier Road.

But last December, it all changed. Abruptly, the course of my life was altered by another decision—a different offer that came out of nowhere, one I grabbed up quickly and spun into action. It whisked me away, leaving all behind, and though I couldn't foresee it at the time, everything I knew was gone forever. The mundane became upheaval—life turned upside down.

Where was ordinary now, I wondered, clattering over a maze of roads, drawing ever closer to my dreaded destination. I hoped it was waiting for me—I believed it was—for when this was over, I was going back home.

I looked down at my lap, at my fingers that fidgeted with the zipper on my jacket. I breathed in deeply. It would be okay, I told myself. I'd go, just as I'd said I would. I'd look. I'd discuss. And then I'd return to Moose Jaw like nothing had interrupted. I could do what I wanted, and that's what I wanted.

So why was I gripped with cold foreboding, like there was no going back?

The bus droned on, heedless, every mile taking me farther from myself and closer to a me I didn't yet know.

Crystal and Ice

Celebration

Moncton, New Brunswick
November 14, 2012

The final event. Our last farewell.

My eyes danced from face to face, those I'd labored with every day for the past year. We'd waded through the hard stuff together, helped each other, vented our frustrations. Here we were tonight, on the other side, with hopes and plans for tomorrow filling each one of us.

The auditorium was hot—too many bodies packed into seats that felt too small and too close. Yet nothing could stifle the excitement that buzzed around me that evening. Sandwiched in, just a few rows from the front, I was already flushed under too many layers of fabric. At forty-seven, I was too old for the red and black cocktail dress I had on under my gown, but I didn't care. This was my night, and I was dressed to celebrate.

My friends and family were somewhere in the mass behind me, murmuring to each other, shuffling their programs, probably bored. I wondered if they'd seen me come in, if they knew where I was sitting.

Lights dimmed and chatter died as the speaker approached the podium and welcomed us to the night's event. I tried to pay attention, but not long into the speech, my mind wandered. Pinpoints of gold glitter from my dress twinkled at me from the seatback ahead, a fairy dust trail that powdered every place I'd passed since I'd put it on. My thoughts bounced from one thing to another: *Let's go out to celebrate!* Robert's excitement a year ago when I'd announced that I'd enrolled in a business college (he supported me in pretty much everything I did), then the struggles of the last thirteen months, this gathering tonight, the work ahead—find a job; pay back a weighty student loan. How would I do it?

I sighed under my breath. *Not now*. Forcing my mind back to the front of the room, I pulled myself up a little straighter. *Pay attention, Sandra! You're missing it!*

I fixed my eyes on the speaker who was announcing the next award. I'd already missed most of it, but it was something like, *...did extra work outside of class, practiced and researched beyond the given material...helped her classmates, explaining the concepts...* There was more, but I'd tuned in too late.

Oh, how nice, I thought, wishing I'd caught the person's name, so I could perhaps put a face to the comments. This girl had worked hard and was admirably helpful, this mystery student. *I need to be more like that*. The virtues of others become a challenge to myself.

And I'm distracted again. Back to the speaker. *It's my privilege to present the award for Excellence in Computer Applications to Sandra...*

Ah! The other Sandra! Oh, Good! I glanced around, trying to spot her. I'd met her once, hadn't I? She'd sat at my table one morning during break; we'd chatted a bit?

...*Glenn!* my instructor finished with a smile.

I sat waiting for this girl to make a move toward the stage. I was sure I'd know her when I saw her...

Wait...! What? I froze in my seat. Realization hit like a truck. Sandra Glenn! That's me! Wasn't that what he'd said? My classmates were smiling and clapping and looking at me. I was too stunned to move. *Is he sure?*

I managed to get my feet under me before the delay became awkward, and I stumbled out of my row, picking my way carefully up the steps, *I will not fall on my face in front of everyone!*

I made it across the stage, shook my instructor's hand, and accepted the glittering crystal award, a shocked smile plastered on my face. Okay, it wasn't crystal. It was some sort of plastic, but it did gleam in the stage lights. And it could not have meant more to me had it been hewn from the world's largest diamond. For computer applications, of all things! Computer! Me!

The rest of the night was a blur. I applauded with gusto while many other awards were given, some of them for very impressive accomplishments. Then we all stood together, my class quite small among the many, and filed forward as our names were called out one-by-one. I'm pretty sure I floated across the stage to get my diploma, though onlookers might have seen it differently.

The program ended and our guests descended upon us, the graduates. Our gowns swished and floated around us as we flung ourselves into hugs and cheers and congratulations. Cameras flashed for picture after picture. I stood beaming, posing smartly with my mother, my husband, my friends, our arms round each other, our smiles frozen forever inside the frame.

The commotion faded as my thoughts turned inward. I ran my fingers along the parchment clutched in my hand. Rolled up inside were my name in black letters and the silver seal of the college. Administrative assistant. An intense, two-year course crammed into twelve months. Hours of homework and reading assignments. Up at five a.m. to study—three on exam days. Putting the brain back into school mode after all those years. Tears and frustration. Challenges. Successes. Pressing ahead. Now, here I was, a victor.

I smiled to myself, proud of my achievement, yet I held no illusions. It was just an associate degree. I wouldn't be running any departments. That was okay, though; I didn't want grandeur. Just a small office job—a job I liked—that would help with household debt and expenses.

My joy in that hard-earned moment was real, but behind my smile, a shadow of doubt stretched its dark fingers around my merriment. From amidst the drone of voices, I lifted my eyes out over the auditorium, the seats now empty. If I were honest here tonight, with myself and everyone else, this was not what I wanted. I wasn't a career woman. The hassle, the schedule, the stress. That wasn't me. I didn't need a job to feel fulfilled or to escape boredom. I was content to remain at home, a housewife, that old-fashioned word. My chores and my projects brought purpose. I loved taking care of my home and family.

I looked back to the faces celebrating with me, their pleasure in my achievement, their faith in my abilities. Forcing the thoughts aside I pushed down the unsettled feeling. Everyone expected it—that I would go on from tonight and slip into the role of admin assistant somewhere.

They believed in me, so I would do it. I had to.

I'd already come too far to turn back.

The Bomb

Moncton, New Brunswick
December 9, 2012

It was warm for December, above zero degrees Celsius. Robert and I were gathered, with our older daughter's new in-laws, around a table for four at Robert's favorite Moncton restaurant.

We'd met Manny and Joyce only last spring at a wedding shower for our kids; I don't even remember which of the relatives had hosted it, theirs or ours. They were a nice couple. I could tell Robert liked them, and I had hopes we might develop a friendship among the four of us.

Manny and Joyce had just returned from Alberta where they'd visited their son and our daughter. I missed my girl, so I soaked up every word they told us about their trip.

Our Holly had moved to Grande Prairie three years before, and it was there that she'd met their son, Scott. Funny thing, Scott , Manny, and Joyce were from Shediac, a lovely beach town just forty-five minutes from our home in Kenton. The same beach I went to as a kid, the beach to which I took my own kids. Yet it had taken a move across the country for Holly and Scott to meet.

Their wedding in our backyard last June was a magical day, one still so vivid I could almost smell the warm spring air, even that December night. My beautiful girl, elegant and graceful in a white gown that brushed the grass as she walked barefoot down the aisle... The delight on Scott's face when he saw her... Their dogs, Chichi and Scout—the ringbearers—bouncing between the chairs, almost laughing, poking their noses into laps...

We went for wedding photos in the Boyce family's garden, then back to our place for luncheon, served from our kitchen. Last of all, we gathered under a white tent for cake and toasts. Kimberley, our younger daughter, played a slideshow she'd put together for her sister—photos and memories of their childhood. And there was my rock of a husband fighting to control his tears.

Late into the evening, still in our wedding clothes, we goofed around outside—Robert and I with Holly and Scott and Kimberley and Jack, our youngest. Only our oldest, Ian, was absent; he and his girlfriend, Suzanne, had already gone home.

There we were, snapping pictures of ourselves in silly poses, making faces—such fun with Robert and the kids.

It was one of our best family times.

One of our last.

That day in June is what had brought us to tonight, to this restaurant dinner with near strangers who were now our family. We shared our kids because of that day—they, part of our daughter, and she, part of them.

That they had been with her just days ago, had seen her new home with Scott, brought a twinge of jealousy in me—that they'd gotten to go to Alberta, something I knew Robert and I would never do together.

I don't know if my feelings showed that night. I probably complained on the drive home that we didn't take trips like that. Robert seemed quieter, more pensive than usual. How could I know that from somewhere had come to him an idea so outlandish? Sitting in our living room in Kenton later, he threw out to me those fateful words.

It started out okay. *Why don't you go?* he asked.

Go? I prompted.

Use our air miles to go out west and visit the girls for Christmas.

Holly in Grande Prairie, Alberta and Kimberley in Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan for college... I'd never visited either of them. Now, fresh out of school, in debt, and jobless, I figured I was bound to Kenton for a long time to come.

But I hadn't considered those air miles. They danced before me like magic wands. Maybe I *could* go. I didn't like the idea of not being home for Christmas—I'd never done that before. But seeing Holly and Kimberley was too big a draw. It occurred to me how much fun it would be to surprise them. I pictured their delighted smiles, finding me on their doorsteps. Plans were quickly taking shape in my mind, even before I knew I had decided to do it.

And if you want to, Robert was saying carefully. *Take your* resumé, *and look for a job while you're there.*

The bomb.

I stared at him mutely. Look for a job? He meant for me to stay?

Robert explained that perhaps I could work in the west for a couple of years to get some experience. Then, he figured, it would be easier for me to get a job here when I returned. Robert, always practical.

It wasn't so strange to me once I gave it some thought. Everyone said there were so many more jobs out west. Lots of people had gone to work temporarily, leaving spouse and kids behind here in the east. Why couldn't I?

Through twenty-seven years of marriage, Robert alone had carried the financial burden for our family. He was a welder and a very good one, not at just the welding part but at designing the structures, too. For many years he'd been a foreman of the maintenance department at one of Moncton's biggest employers; it was his full-time job. Then he spent his evenings and weekends welding in his shop at home. I don't know how he kept it

all going. He was driven, wired to work. Right or wrong, he believed we couldn't afford life if he didn't work just about all the time.

I'd taken some part-time jobs in recent years—money for the extras like fixing up and furnishing the house, outings for the kids, that sort of thing. I'd waitressed and bussed tables, served crepes at the farmer's market, and cleaned houses.

With the kids now grown, I was determined to dig into full-time employment to help with the bills—that's why I'd gone to school to study admin. I hoped my contribution would eliminate Robert's excuse for putting in those excessive hours, and maybe he'd slow it down and enjoy simple things, like coffee on the deck with his wife on a quiet Sunday morning. I dreamed of that sort of thing with my husband.

Now my classes were over, and graduation was behind me. The dreaded and feared job hunt was on top of me, the student loan almost suffocating. I was a nervous jobseeker, hesitant to approach managers, and I probably left little impression. Plodding from business to business, putting resumés in hands... Polite smiles, *Thanks for coming in,* following me as I ducked out the door. I'd not gotten called for a single interview.

Most office job descriptions required at least two years' experience and fluency in French, New Brunswick being a bilingual province. Yet, here was I, no experience and no French.

That's why Robert's bizarre idea made so much sense. I wouldn't need French in the west, and that would eliminate the second big disadvantage while I worked on acquiring the first.

So... Robert's suggestion... Should I take it? Could I pull it off? Was this my solution?

The words floated again—*Go, and take your* resumé...

All right, I decided. I will.

Hornet's Nest

Up early the next morning, I flew into preparations. I pulled out the big suitcase and stuffed in as many clothes and necessities as I could. I picked through my CDs and DVDs, throwing my favorites onto the pile. In my carry-on, as always, I stowed survival items—toothbrush, hairbrush, and a complete change of clothes that absolutely must be with me in case my checked bag went AWOL or the kid in the seat next to me threw up in my lap.

Accounts in order, a one-way flight to Regina booked, then a jaunt into town to do shopping and errands that I can't remember now. During the half hour's drive to the city, the brain kicked into high gear—mental checklists...detail planning.

And time to ponder, just a bit, what I was doing.

Oh, the hornet's nest I'd stir up with this one, I mused. People don't like it when one departs from the conventional. I could picture the astonished looks...could hear the arguments.

What are you doing?

You can't move away!

By yourself?

What about Robert's supper??

These types of encounters did not go well for me. I'd been there before many times, and it usually went something like this:

Unbeknownst to me, I'd do something that offended—I seem to have a knack for that. The offended person would get upset and decide to address the problem with me. Without warning, he'd come at me forcefully, indicating not the least bit of interest in the *whys* and the *hows* or in a solution but just that he was right, and I'd better get on board.

I'd attempt to explain but would be so taken aback, I couldn't put words together. I'd stammer and stutter, which would, of course, indicate to the other person that he was quite right and justified. I'd concede in silence. I'd walk away, humiliated, wondering how it had all gotten so turned around and why I couldn't make sense of any of it. *I must have been wrong,* I'd shrug. *Why can't I connect the dots, here?*

My hindrance, most times, was being blindsided. I really can speak rather well and can reason and understand quite adequately.

But then, sometimes during these altercations, amidst my silence and humiliation, the worst would happen. If pushed too far, I'd reach my breaking point, and like a can of pop, shaken hard, my words would come spewing out all over. The wrong words. Harsh, clipped, defensive words.

Just a sentence or two lashed out, and I'd be done. But those few sentences would be enough; the damage would be irreparable. I'd shrink back, horrified. At me. At what I'd said. At the other person.

Nope, I confirmed to myself as I drove along Frasier Road toward Moncton. The news of my work-away would not go well for me.

I've decided not to tell anyone that I might stay out west, I told Robert that night, *just that I'm visiting for Christmas.* Before he had a chance to object, I went on. *I don't want the hassle; I don't want the lectures. For that matter, we don't even know yet if it will work out. There's a good chance I won't find a suitable job, or I might not want to stay.*

Then I assigned the dirty work to him. *But if I do get a job and decide to give this year away a try, then* you *can explain to everyone what's going on.*

Avoidance is how we deal with things.

He agreed, or at least he didn't disagree. Whew! Problem ~~solved~~! Postponed.

I mean really, I probably wouldn't go through with this crazy plan, anyway. Move half the country away by myself for a year or two? Pfft.

I didn't have the courage. I'd be so homesick, I'd be right back here in a month. So why upset people for nothing? Really, I was just being considerate.

It's my biggest regret in this whole silly scheme. I wish now, more than anything, that we'd sat our boys down and told them their father's suggestion to which I'd agreed. I wish I'd talked to my parents. I wish I'd explained to my friends.

There was a disconnect in my wiring. I don't know what was missing. I couldn't relate to people properly. I didn't understand how things affect others. That day, scurrying from one task to the next, I didn't think anyone would care if I left. I was annoying to most people and cranky with my family. I figured most would be glad to have me gone, and the rest would be indifferent.

If only I could have known it then: When you leave without saying good-bye, people think they don't matter to you.

Reminiscing

Tuesday morning descended, and the flurry broke again. Searching, sorting, shopping, packing. Finally, I had my things together, ready for departure, and I turned my attention to the things I'd leave behind.

I walked through the house, room by room. Gosh, I would miss it, these walls I once hated. I'd helped build this house, pounded nails into the roof till I had blisters and kept hammering. I'd poured blood, sweat, and tears into its formation. It finally felt right.

But, boy, it hadn't started out that way...

This is our land, Robert told me, proudly, one Sunday afternoon before we were even engaged. We'd pulled off at a patch of ground in the middle of nowhere, far, far out Frasier Road. *We'll build the house there on the hill.* He leaned over and kissed me. "Hill" was a bit generous a term for the slight elevation, but I supposed it was a good spot.

I gazed, for the first time, over my future. Bushes grew in tangles, and woods of evergreens bordered the drab field. I didn't like it at all. As a kid, I'd loved every inch of my stomping grounds around my country home. But this...this was so isolated. Not another house in sight. Too far from everything. It felt cold and lonely and ugly.

But it would be okay, right? I looked at Robert with utmost faith. We'd build a good home here, and the location wouldn't matter. I'd have a wonderful husband, so I wouldn't be alone.

I resigned myself to it, then and there, just as I should. I believed I didn't have the right to argue...no right to ask for anything else.

Forever after, when I complained about the isolation or the long drive into town, *You knew this when you married me,* was Robert's flippant defense. Nothing could defeat that.

Then there was the day he spread out a blueprint and told me it was our house plan. I tried not to show my disappointment. I'd dreamed of designing together. I wanted a two-story with a pretty wood staircase. *When we're seventy and have bad knees, we won't be able to climb the stairs,* was his reasoning. A basic bungalow was cheaper and more practical, he said, so that's what he would build.

And I took heart that I liked the floorplan.

We settled into the house that August, right after our wedding, but for me there was little excitement in setting up my first home. We didn't have much to work with. The house was a long way from being finished—bare

floorboards; no interior doors; sheetrock, not mudded; walls, drab and depressing. Without my even knowing it, it began to wear away at me.

We had almost no furniture. The place echoed, it was so bare. Our living room boasted a couple of musty old armchairs borrowed from the Glenn family camp. Our first "couch" was a metal thing that looked more like a bus seat than a sofa. It had red vinyl cushions that never stayed in place, and we would giggle for years to come at how we'd have to lift the back cushion and hold it up out of the way while we scooched our posteriors onto the seat before it fell again.

The countertop on our home-built cupboards was Arborite—a thin sheet of veneer with veins of color to resemble marble. It would have been okay if we hadn't both christened it when it was barely installed. In one corner, a long, jagged crack ran from front to back, the result of a mishap when Robert was setting it into place. Then one day while I was chatting with him at lunch time, heedlessly going about my task of getting food to the table, we heard, *SNAP!* I lifted the hot pan I'd foolishly just set down, and staring back at me were two huge, ugly holes like eyes, burned into the Arborite. Those eyes glared at me every day for the next twenty-seven years.

We couldn't afford to finish the house, Robert told me over and over. It was another of the many decisions he made with little thought for me. That he should have the say seemed a given for him, an unconscious expectation the way we expect air to fill our lungs every time we inhale. I suppose he thought he was being a good leader and taking appropriate responsibility for our family. But it made me feel like a child...like a secondary occupant, granted the privilege of a space in his accommodation. I don't think he meant to crush me, but instead of blossoming in my home, I withered.

I went into marriage with an attitude of submission, and I tried to keep quiet, I did. I wanted to be that shining saint, meek and smiling, regardless of her situation, fair or not.

But I couldn't handle it—the ugliness, the loneliness... The awful cycle began. I'd grin and bear it for a while. Slowly, my patience would wear. Eventually I'd erupt, the good wife, gone, replaced by the witch.

In truth, my expectations were too high. Back in those first years, I'd wanted a big house, all nicely finished. I felt cheated that I didn't have what other wives had. Even in my willingness to start out in an unfinished house, I felt cheated again that it sat with little progress for so long. I became grumpy, impatient, and resentful.

Robert didn't understand, back then, how crucial a woman's home is to her, how she's wired to care for it, fuss with it and fluff it. My house was my haven, my comfort, my restoration. It was my canvas for letting loose my creativity, the expression of my personality. Thankfully, my wants and expectations eventually adjusted to something more reasonable.

I wish we'd both known, way back then, God's plan for the man and the woman in marriage. The man, created first, is the head of his wife and his family, and the wife is commanded to submit to his leadership (Colossians 3:18 & Ephesians 5:22). It's not that he's better or smarter. It's not that God favors him. It's that there's an order to everything. This order for the man and the woman was put into place even before sin entered the world; it's not a punishment. Similar to the Trinity of the Godhead, the man and the woman are equal, but they are not alike. They are differently equipped for different purposes, designated from the beginning by our Creator. Christ submits to the Father; the woman submits to the man. It was sin that corrupted our desires and caused us to misuse the places for which God designed us.

God created woman from man's rib, taken from next to his heart. She's not to be disregarded, used, or ordered around; she's to be cherished. The wise husband values his wife's insights; he listens to her and considers her.

He strives to meet her needs and cherishes her dreams as though they are his own.

God commands husbands to love their wives as Christ loved the church and to love them as their own bodies. I Peter 3:7 says, "Husbands, live with your wives in an understanding way, showing honor to the woman as the weaker vessel, since they are heirs with you of the grace of life." In other words, *It's your job, husbands, to honor your wives and work to understand them.* Wow! Putting that into action flips traditional thinking that the man is boss and the woman follows unquestioningly.

The man doesn't rightfully get to decide everything all on his own just because he is the head, and he shouldn't expect his wife to yield in silence to everything he says and does. He's not her commander; he's her leader. She is his partner and helper. She completes where he's lacking. At creation, it wasn't Eve who was deficient and needing a help meet. It was Adam (Genesis 2:18).

However, just because the man can't do all that the woman can do, doesn't mean he's dumb or inadequate and she swoops in with all the answers. He doesn't deserve to be laughed at, made fun of, or disregarded. He should not be cast as an incapable, bumbling family appendage, as is so commonly done in today's "entertainment." It dishonors God to do that. The man's place is one of respect. He is security and strength. He is his wife's defender and protector.

The woman can't do all that the man can do, either. But she doesn't need to try; she's got nothing to prove. Her role is a crown for her and an honor. The wise wife understands this. There's no reason for her to be threatened by her husband's position; they both know she's not inferior. She appreciates what he does for her and their children. Her place as his supporter, helper, and companion is her joy.

God has a place for both the man and the woman in marriage. Both places work together to fulfill a purpose—to complete the whole. Husband and wife are meant to be a team. Where one lacks, the other excels. Like a dovetail joint, they are strongest when each one receives from the other what he or she is missing. And when both partners want what's best for the other, they thrive. Both are free to communicate what they need, allowing each other the pleasure of giving it. The relationship deepens.

From the start of our marriage, I yearned to build this kind of deep relationship with Robert, though it's true that I didn't fully grasp all of it yet. I thought we'd talk and laugh and cuddle even while I expected altercations, intending to work those out together.

But he didn't have time for the closeness and the relationship. From even before our honeymoon ended, he plunged himself into his work, and his reasons sounded logical. So I adjusted my expectations for us to better fit with his.

Eventually, Robert came to desire conversation and cuddles with me, and he tried. But by then I was too far gone the other way. I couldn't bring myself back. I didn't know how to talk to him and no longer wanted to try. I didn't want so much of the hugs and kisses, and I resisted his attempts, causing him frustration and disappointment. I didn't honor him as I should have. I wasn't easy to live with, I know.

And so we stumbled along year after year, neither of us realizing the hindrance we were to the other.

Interior Design

Eventually, Robert let me do what I wanted in the house, and he left me to my decorating. Once I got going, I was unstoppable, splashing colors

and throwing patterns everywhere. From caterpillar to butterfly, it went through agonizing transformation. Agonizing for me. For Robert, too, sometimes...

Finally with the walls ready for paint, I picked a rose color for the living room. Robert brought home a five-gallon bucket of the stuff (a buddy of his sold paint). It was more pink than even I could deal with in a lifetime.

Once it was on the walls, I saw that it was way too harsh. But with most of the five gallons still in the bucket and given that money was tight for us, my conscience wouldn't let me just discard it and start over with something more...ah...bearable.

We endured that color for a few years. At one point I toned it down—something like a cup of the rose paint mixed with two gallons of white. Still, the pink was overwhelming. It was a relief when enough time had passed that I could justify covering it all up with—that's right—wallpaper!

I became obsessed. I'd see a décor on TV or in a magazine and fall in love. I'd pore over the photos and *oooh* and *aaahh*. "Where can I fit that in?" Then days of furious painting and papering, for a whole new style that clashed with every other harebrained combination around it.

I loved it all. Every time I finished a project, I basked in it. *So pretty!*

Until I'd spend a little time in a sane, reasonable surrounding and return home. I'd come into our house and wonder what was wrong—why my eyeballs were spinning and my insides were screaming.

But not all my ideas were so crazy. Robert walked in after work one night to find me crouched with the jigsaw, buzzing through the wall between the hall and the kitchen. *This doorway's too narrow. Why do we have it so closed in?* I explained. The two of us took out about eight inches of wall, slapped on new casing, and the whole kitchen became more breathable.

He got so he loved to see me excited about a new project. He'd smile as he listened to me go on about my plan. *Your ideas always work,* he'd say. W*hen you're done, it's always better than before.*

I redesigned the hall and bedroom closets to make them more functional. I turned one closet into a book nook, building and installing my own bookcases—another project checked off my list.

Now, Robert's closet...

Robert had a closet at the back door that was all his own, for his work coats and coveralls. He'd come home, drop everything onto the closet floor, and shut the door.

It looked like the debris left behind a tornado.

Me: *Hmmm... I was thinking...*

Robert: *Don't touch my closet,* before I could utter my plan.

So I didn't. Yet.

Me, a few weeks later: *Oh, that closet's such a mess!*

Robert: *Don't touch my closet.*

Okay, okay. For now.

Finally, I had to do something. I mean, the door wouldn't even close any more. His plaid and denim were oozing out into the entryway, for goodness sake. If it wasn't stopped—and soon—it would take over the whole house. It was my duty, as a mother, to protect the kids...

When he came home that night, I had it all torn apart. He eyed it suspiciously then walked away without argument, a tiny grin playing at the corners of his mouth. By two nights later, the closet rod had been repositioned, new shelves installed, and everything put back into place, clean and organized. Shipshape.

He was impressed.

I basked in satisfaction.

Ah, it was pretty now, this little bungalow I never wanted. On this, my last day, the sun peeked between the clouds, pouring cheery yellow through the new windows that reached almost floor to ceiling. The house had a view from anywhere I stood, and lots of light brightened every room.

What are you doing, Sandra? Forget this crazy plan. Unpack your suitcase. Tell Robert you changed your mind, that you don't want to leave. Find a job here. Stay at home.

I wonder now, should I have listened to that voice? If I'd never left, would we have become better together? Would we have learned our lessons?

Or would we have kept coasting along as we'd always done, sometimes good; sometimes terrible; never great; most often, just existing?

Did God use our dysfunction—this awful, messed-up scheme—to pluck me out, saving us from something worse?

What did we talk about those last two days? We didn't say much to each other. Robert was off to work each morning, and when he was home, he was cool and distant. He showed no more interest in me and my impending departure than if I were stepping out for an after-dinner stroll. When did this start, this apathy toward me? Caught up in my studies and my job-search worries, I hadn't noticed.

What were our plans for this time to come? Had we talked at all about how we would handle us? We'd visit back and forth, naturally. Or was that an assumption in my own mind just because it seemed so obvious? Was it ever actually spoken by either of us?

Robert showed no concern for how we would make things work. I shoved aside my thoughts and matched my attitude to his. No point weighing myself down with how this could go wrong. There was much to

do. Take care of the business at hand. The nitty gritty of husband and wife would sort itself later.

This was how we did things. Nobody confronted the hard stuff; nobody talked about deep thoughts or feelings. Robert and I had never built that kind of relationship; neither of us knew how. Neither of us could set ourselves aside long enough to see the other person.

As bizarre as all this is to me now—his sending me away, my agreeing to go—at that time, it wasn't weird to either of us. The plan was just a plan to get us to the next place in life. What was a little time apart for the sake of my skills development and our financial good? In the span of a lifetime, a year or two was miniscule, right?

And now that I'd made my decision, it even looked enticing. I'd never lived on my own. It could be a good education in itself and an enriching experience. Could I do it? Could I make my way?

The challenge beckoned.

And I stepped out in answer.

Cold Good-bye

From bookcases to cabinets to tables and cupboards, I gathered up things I didn't want to leave sitting—things that might be in Robert's way—so they wouldn't get broken or be an inconvenience to him. I set them carefully in drawers, on closet shelves, tucked at the back, safe till my return.

With that task done, finally, alone in the master bedroom, I reached to the back of the closet and pulled out a denim memory album—the last of four.

The first album, I'd given to Ian in 2007. Next was Holly's for Christmas, 2008. Kimberley's was on her twentieth birthday in 2010. This one was thickest of all, the cumulation of our years as a family of six.

On the cover was a snapshot of a five-year-old boy, smile beaming, hugging a puppy.

My boy. Jack.

I carried the album to the office and sat down at the oversized desk in front of the window. For more than a year, I'd worked on this keepsake. I flipped through the book, page by page—hundreds of photos, cropped and sized, carefully placed and captioned. From birth to today, Jack's life in pictures.

He'd come to us like a long-searched-for hidden treasure when I thought I'd never have the fourth child I longed for. I cooed and smiled over him when I dressed his little body. *You really needed that baby*. Robert beamed at me. *You sure are happy*.

I lost myself in the memories preserved in that album, longing to revisit days gone by, to sweep up that little boy in the pictures—to sweep up all of my little ones—one more time...

I enjoyed my kids at every age, from newborn all the way up through their teens. I laughed with them; chased them through the house in our games; took them on outings and trips; watched their favorite movies with them, over and over and over. We shared a good relationship back then. I thought, as adults, we'd be friends.

While I celebrated their every milestone—first word, first step—I never wished for them to hurry into the next stage. Those years with them were but a moment, I knew. They would be gone far too quickly, slipping away with each sunset, each tick of the clock. I wanted to freeze time. I wanted to take the sight of my children playing...the sound of their laughter and seal it in a bottle. I'd secure it somewhere safe to take out sometime later,

years away, and live it again. Some of those memories—those images—are burned onto my mind, as clear as the photos in that album.

At thirteen and fourteen years old, Ian could tell incredible stories, and he could do a little old man voice that put me in stitches. Night after night, he and I would whoop and laugh together at his antics, after the others had gone to bed.

Holly was always a little mother, mature for her age, watching everything, making sure all was as it should be. In a crisis, she would jump into action even before I was fully aware of what was happening.

Kimberley was shy through middle school. Even so, she loved to perform—a solo, a play, piano; it didn't matter. She came alive on the stage.

Jack had a mechanical mind that astounded me. He could look at something and figure it out—how it worked and how to build it.

He was eight years younger than his big brother, but that never mattered to anyone. He fit in well with every age. Whether it was paintball, camping, or driving quads, Ian and his friends never questioned that Jack would be right there in the middle of it all with them.

We lost our fifth baby in an early miscarriage. My friend, Melody, crochets booties for moms who've lost babies—her ministry to hearts that cry over empty arms. One Mother's Day, she gave me a tiny pair of delicate white booties with gold ribbon to honor the child who waits for me in Heaven.

I put the final touches on the last couple of pages, wrapped the album, and placed it under the tree with the rest of the Christmas presents. We would gather tonight to exchange gifts, a celebration thrown together too quickly, so I could see them all one last time before my flight in the morning. Robert and Jack would be here, of course, and Ian and Suzanne would come with two-month-old, Ethan, our only grandchild.

It would be a pleasant evening. Family. Conversation. Food. Gifts. Robert and I wouldn't tell them that after my Christmas visit with the girls, I might not come back for a while.

Robert would sit in his recliner across the room from me, avoiding my eyes. He would not speak to me, a strange tension between us. I would never learn the reason for his distance.

He would drive me to the airport the next morning, saying little. He would grab my bag from the back of his truck and carry it to the check-in counter. He would utter a quick good-bye without a hug or a kiss or a touch. He wouldn't wait to see me off.

I would mirror him—like synchronized skaters, coming together, almost touching, blades skimming the ice the only sound. Just like him, I would say nothing, pushing down what was in my heart, my mechanical smile part of the performance. I would not reach for the hug that wasn't offered. I would follow the program. I would not let myself hurt.

When it was ended, we would glide apart, our backs to each other, heading opposite directions, ignoring the ever-growing separation between us.

Cold as the ice beneath us, our eyes, our words, our hearts.

Like none of it had ever mattered to either of us.

Kiss the Bride

Moncton, New Brunswick
August 10, 1985

To have and to hold from this day forward, till death do us part; we repeated the pledge to each other. I placed the ring on Robert's finger, and he slid one on mine. The preacher spoke a few more words, then smiled at us and waited. I turned toward my new husband, expectantly...

I'd met Robert fourteen years before, all the way back in elementary school. But because he was two grades ahead of me, I didn't really know him.

I didn't like him.

We both advanced to different schools, and I'd probably never have thought of him again except that about the time I was in grade nine or ten, I started attending youth group at a church across town.

And there was Robert.

Boy, was he cute!

The fall of my senior year in high school, he asked me out, and two years after that, he proposed.

So, apparently, real girls dream of their weddings and plan them out years ahead. I was different. I did not.

When I was at last engaged at the ripe old age of nineteen, I threw together the components of a no-fuss wedding. I wasn't creative. First thing to come along, that's what I picked. I couldn't have cared less about the music or the decorating—what did I know of colors and melodies? I didn't pack in any special extras like a candlelight ceremony—I might catch myself on fire. I wanted the service as short and painless as possible—fifteen minutes from *in* to *out*.

The things that did matter: The cake. The photographer. My attendants, their dresses, their long-stemmed roses. The bouquet I carried.

I met with a baker and chose a cake. My color was mauve; I don't know why. I've never had a favorite color, though I think I claimed this one just because a favorite is expected. The baker kept calling it blue, and I kept correcting him and showing him the difference. Still, on the big day, the icing roses that graced the cake were more blue than mauve. Whatever.

I heard about a florist who did nice work for a reasonable price, so I looked her up. She produced exactly what I asked for. I was particularly thrilled with my bridal bouquet—mauve roses with matching buds tied into trailing ribbons.

I bought the cheapest wedding dress I found—$160.00. It wasn't "The Dress." I didn't tear up or gasp in awe when I saw it. But hey, for that price, I pretended to love it. It was a floor sample the shop was finished with. It smelled like cigarette smoke, but that was all right. I washed it in the bathtub, and after it dried, I re-glued the tiny pearls that had come off in the water.

I went all out on a photographer and met with two of them before deciding which to hire. After all, what shows in the frame is what you take with you after the day is over.

And there was one more thing I wanted: The Kiss.

Kissing the bride was not normally done in our church. I think such a public display of affection was too risqué for our people. I'm sure Robert couldn't have cared less. He wasn't crazy about having to be up in front of a crowd in the first place—the less attention drawn to himself, the better.

But I really wanted the bride-kissy thing. It was traditional wedding mush. Romantic. I asked for it to be part of our ceremony and was delighted to be given the okay.

So here we were on our special day. I stood at the front of the sanctuary—chiffon and lace—next to my husband. "You may kiss the bride," the preacher said.

With those words, we stepped over the threshold and into our magic moment. My moment. Robert lifted my lace-trimmed veil. I was already a little nervous, and this departure from the conventional had me grinning like a silly schoolgirl. We were going to kiss in church! Lips touching lips!

He was awkward; I was jittery. He leaned in. Hesitation...could we pull it off? Heart pounding. Everyone waiting. I tilted my face upward in what I imagined was a graceful sweep. He was almost there. About to touch ... Then ...

I didn't even realize I'd done it till he asked me afterward, "*Whyyy...?*"

At the last second, I turned my head to the side and thrust my cheek up to meet his mouth...

Like an eight-year-old's first kiss on the playground.

Poor Robert fumbled; should he chase the lips? This way, that way... Before things got any more awkward, he planted a quick peck on my cheek to titters from the audience.

And I glowed...

My romantic, mushy, magical wedding kiss!

Maritimer on the Prairie

Arrival

On December 13, 2012, I boarded a plane with a suitcase, a carry-on, and $400—all the money I had left after my schoolyear and Holly's wedding. I settled into my seat and buckled up, wondering what would become of me.

My thoughts were heavy. I didn't understand Robert's behaviour those last few days with me. I knew no reason for it. Caught up in the whirlwind of preparation, I'd told myself nothing was amiss. Now, it nagged.

I thought about little Ethan, sweet baby grandson. My excitement at his arrival and the tug on the heartstrings looking into his perfect face for the first time. Seeing my son step into *Dad* so smoothly there in the hospital room. With my being away so long, this child, this wonderful gift, wouldn't know me. Didn't I want to be the nana who visits every Sunday with Grandpa? Who sweeps up the little one in hugs and kisses and giggles? Who chases him around the yard with water guns and whisks him off for ice cream on hot summer days? I'd miss all of that now for the next two years.

For so long I'd hardly cried. Robert had said tears were useless, so I'd shut them off decades ago. On the flight to Toronto, that changed. With so much tugging at the heart, I couldn't hold back. I turned my face to the window and let them fall.

I arrived in Regina, Saskatchewan to -12 degrees Celsius, light snow, and ice fog. I don't know why I was expecting my eyeballs to freeze open and to be blown away in a blizzard the minute I stepped out of the airport.

I buckled into the rental care and pointed it westward. Somewhere I'd heard about this treacherous stretch of highway leading from the city and was nervous as I pulled out into traffic. But I made the forty-five-minute drive to Moose Jaw incident free.

I didn't own a cell phone and had never been in a car with GPS. Somewhere, I'd looked up directions to Kimberley's address. This had to be it. I pulled up across the street from the old house where she rented a room.

The buiding had that empty look, like the life had gone out of it. There was no answer to my knock. *Hmmm*... I hadn't considered this. I'm a one-step-at-a-time sort of girl—get to the place, then worry about what comes next.

There I stood, on the doorstep of a stranger's place in a city where I knew no one, and Kimberley had no idea I was coming. What if she were away for the night? Perhaps I was the one about to be surprised.

I went to the house across the street and asked the lady if I could use her phone. I dialed the number, and when Kimberley answered, I played it cool. I asked what she was up to and if she had time to chat. She said

she was just walking home, so I agreed to call her back in a few minutes. I ducked back into the rental car and waited.

In moments, she and Shawn came into view, talking, looking content with one another. It was my first glimpse of this man who would one day be my son-in-law. The man who, with a few brief words to me in the months to come, would help redirect my course.

I don't remember much about those first few days. I slept on Kimberley's floor, I think, or maybe she had a double bed that we shared. But in planning my ingenious surprise, I hadn't considered the inconvenience I might be to her landlord, Vicki, who also lived in the house. That was me, totally clueless about such things.

I started applying for jobs right away. If nothing came about in Moose Jaw, it would be okay. I'd try again in Grande Prairie when I visited Holly; that was my plan. If I couldn't find anything in Grande Prairie, I'd go back home. And that would be okay.

I didn't ask for God's direction just as I hadn't asked for it about going out west in the first place. In fact, I hadn't thought much about what He might want for me in a long time.

Loneliness and homesickness set in almost immediately coupled with unease about the future. I already missed Robert terribly and wondered if I could last even one year, let alone two. I used Kimberley's computer to call him shortly after arrival. I needed contact—to know he was still there and things would be okay.

But when he answered, his voice didn't sound as I'd expected; it wasn't the reassurance I needed. It sounded strange—sad...hollow.

What's up, I asked. *Everything okay?*

My wife left me, he joked, *and she isn't coming back*.

Haha, I chuckled—typical Robert—and I joked something in return.

But... Wait... Something wasn't right. His tone—the comment—was off. What did he mean? He knew I hadn't left him, not the kind of "left him" I was hearing through the phone.

It had to be a joke, right?

Of course it was. It had to be.

Taxi!

It was early Christmas morning when I flew to Grande Prairie. It surprised me how many people traveled on Christmas Day. I just figured most would be at home already, enjoying coffee in their jammies gathered around the tree with their families. However, the flight was full. Stragglers like me. The plane erupted in applause when we touched down at our northern destination—passengers overflowing with holiday cheer.

To keep my coming a surprise, I didn't call Holly for a ride. Instead, I picked up the phone by the airport exit. The direct line instantly connected me to a taxi company. I explained the rural address and the thirty-six kilometers to my stop and asked for a driver willing to take me that far. Oh, yes, I was assured. This would not be a problem.

When my driver greeted me, I went over my request again and presented him with the directions I'd plotted out on paper to make sure he understood what he was in for. The route through back roads in the frozen north intimidated me, but I had complete faith in my diagram and in the driver who would navigate the route.

Yes, yes, he happily agreed, tucking my little carry-on into the trunk. (That made me nervous. I like my bags with me, nice and close, quick access. Ya just never know.)

We both climbed into the front of the cab, and he flipped off the meter, promising to deliver me to my end for sixty dollars. I agreed. I settled into my seat, confident he knew exactly how to get me to Holly. I would have turkey dinner with my daughter today! Would ring her doorbell in just a few minutes!

Outside, the air was nippy, but the car was warm enough. The sun peeped through the clouds on this crisp, white morning. We zipped along, past Clairmont, occasionally chatting about family and the holidays.

Approaching the town of Sexsmith, my driver slowed and muttered something about taking the next entrance. I pointed out that we were not going to Sexsmith; the road we should take was farther on, just the other side of the town.

He persisted—no, no this was the right way; the next entrance was the street to my daughter's, he claimed.

I shoved my paper in front of him again, *Look here. This is where we're going.*

He was not impressed.

With his resistance mounting, my first misgivings took root. I asked that he pull into the Husky parking lot, and I darted into the store for help from the locals. The man at the counter confirmed what I already knew. *The road you want is just up the highway a little farther.*

Back in the car, I restated the attendant's directions and insisted we keep going. My driver reluctantly complied.

Sure enough, we soon came to the desired road, the one I'd believed in all along. Oddly, my driver did not appear at all excited with proof that the route was just as I'd told him, but he turned in just the same.

He barely got the rear end of the car off the highway when he stopped. *Too much snow. My car can't go any farther.* He shook his head as though disappointed for me, but this was our lot, too bad.

Yes, it can, I told him. *It's perfectly safe.* He sat staring at the road ahead, at the few inches of snow that covered our path. He must have known I meant business because he slowly took his foot off the brake, and we started forward again.

Turn here, I told him after a few minutes. He turned the wheel but no more stuck the car's nose onto the new road than he stopped again, *Too much snow. My car can't go there.*

Yes, it can! I wasn't backing down.

He inched ahead again.

Every few minutes, we cycled through the dialogue—stop, refusal, persuasion, onward. Fear began to wind through me. This man could boot me out of his car, me and my suitcase, in minus thirty degrees Celsius. I would die at the side of a ditch on Christmas morning, frozen on this forsaken road in the middle of nowhere, and no one would know I was missing.

My driver's hands gripped the wheel tightly while he sat rigid in his seat. He stared at the road with eyes of fear. I could tell, even while forging ahead, he was still on the verge of refusal. Ridiculous, I knew! The snow wasn't deep, slippery, or heavy. We'd come all this way without incident; never once had we slid or lost traction. By now he should have realized there was no danger to us or his car, but there would be trouble from me if he didn't follow through on his promise.

Finally, I spied a dwelling just down a road that was coming up on our left; it might be my only chance to save myself. *See that house? Take me to it,* I instructed.

Again, he protested about the road and the snow and his poor car. Fed up with his excuses, I had to be firm. *The snow is not deep. Your car is fine. It's not far to that house. Take me there!*

He inched along, exaggerating his agony, and finally came to a stop in the driveway. I bolted for the door and knocked, feeling a little intrusive on this Christmas morning. A lady appeared with a friendly smile and seemed not at all interrupted. *Can you please help me?* I pleaded. I quickly explained my predicament with the exasperating driver and asked if she knew the way to the address on my paper.

Oh, I know that house, she said. *I taught piano lessons there. I'll take you!*

I couldn't believe my ears. Really? Of all the places I could have picked in this vast wilderness, I had happened upon someone who knew exactly where I was going and was willing to take me there herself! Bless her heart!

I ran back to the car, retrieved my little bag, and reached across the seat to hand the man some bills, *Here's the sixty dollars you quoted me...* I pulled out another ten, *And here's for a tip.* I closed the car door and stalked off.

The driver's door flew open and my now-former chauffeur jumped out and came after me, *That's not enough!* he yelled.

I'm not paying any more, I called over my shoulder.

He chased me up the steps and pushed right into the woman's house. He stood before us in the porch and gave his spiel: the drive was too far, the snow had ruined his car, and I owed him two hundred dollars for gas.

Oh, for Pete's sake!

I crossed my arms and glared back at him. I shook my head and stated one last time, *It does not cost that much for gas! You didn't even take me to my destination! I'm not paying any more!*

At that, the woman added her own reprimand, shooed him out, and shut the door. *Wow!* She smiled at me. *Now I'll just get my coat.* And as

quickly as she could pull it on and get keys in hand, we were off to Holly's, just a few minutes' drive.

Holly must have heard us, because she peered out the window. I kept my head down as I stepped out of the car and went for her door. Though I was bundled in my down coat with hood up, hiding my face, she knew me instantly. *Tiny little thing, it had to be Mom,* she said.

My Christmas angel and I had some good chuckles as we retold our tale to Holly. But I don't know what I would have done without that lady; I wish I could recall her name. What a fortunate coincidence to come upon someone of such kindness, just in the nick of time.

If you believe in coincidences.

Which I don't.

Prairie Beginnings

I flew back to Moose Jaw on New Year's Eve with two job offers in hand. I'd fallen in love with that city the moment I'd first arrived three weeks before, and I was excited that I'd get to make it temporary home. I accepted a position at one of the spas. I'd be taking calls, booking appointments, processing payments, and promoting our products. There was a little "light housekeeping" that went with the job, I was told, like dusting the mantle in the waiting room.

Excited about my new possibilities, I determined to give this endeavor at least a year. Whether at this spa or elsewhere, however difficult things got, I'd do my best to make it that long. That was my resolution.

I worked my first shift on January 2, 2013. I was a little disappointed to discover, soon afterward, that my position was not so much admin as I'd expected. After all that money and my long hours of study, the

nagging thought that I'd sold myself short floated through my conscience. I dismissed my doubts with the fact that I liked what I was doing, and that was more important.

I lined up an apartment right away, borrowed from a number of people I knew, and used my line of credit for the damage deposit and first month's rent. Robert helped me a little here and there and let me use our joint credit card for groceries.

I started buying supplies at discount stores—dishes, towels, bedding, all the basics. I stacked them along the wall of the guest room that Vicki had offered me until my apartment was ready.

Vicki didn't seem happy to have me back, incidentally. I wondered what that was about. Surely, Kimberley was free to have guests. How can you expect your from-out-of-town boarder not to have family visit? But you know that vibe that something's not right? I had that. So, I went to Vicki with a fist full of rent money and hoped my offering would buy me her favor.

It got to me just the same, being the uninvited extra in her home. The ever-growing feeling that she resented my presence, along with my job training and adjusting to a whole new life, escalated my stress to the point I couldn't sleep. My jitters wouldn't settle.

So one night after midnight, I coaxed Kimberley to come with me. We tip-toed down the stairs and snuck outside. As we shivered in the cold on the back doorstep, I pulled out a cigar, one of those slender things, vanilla flavored. Holly had given it to me at Christmas. I'd always liked the smell of them, but I'd never smoked anything in my life till that cigar. That night, all I cared about was calming my insides before I spun right apart. Only three or four puffs and my body relaxed; my mind stopped rushing. Lightheaded and serene, I padded back inside to sleep, Kimberley close behind me.

That cigar was not only my first but my last smoke. I don't even know what happened to the rest of it after that.

On January fourth, I moved into my tiny attic apartment in an old house on Ominica Street, my first home of my own. My new place was barely big enough to turn around in. The floors were noticeably slanted, and over the tub, the sloped ceiling made it impossible to stand up straight in the shower.

But it had a cute bedroom with a gabled window, and it was dry and warm and cheap. So I was very grateful. My little home was colorless and plain, though. I'd have to do something about that.

I'm not a tea granny, yet I have a thing for teacups. I'm drawn to their elegance, their dainty shapes, their personalities. I especially like the ones with little feet, unusual colors, and out-of-the-ordinary patterns.

I was browsing an antique shop, one day, a few blocks from home when my eyes alighted on one special teacup that seemed to pose just for me. It was adorned with pink roses and gold trim and had a matching spoon and a saucer that bowed out to give a spot for a cookie or a square.

Oh, how I'd love something to lift my place with a little color! I stared at the cup for a long time, going back and forth in my thinking—get the teacup or save my money. It wasn't expensive but my few dollars were precious.

I wandered the store but came back more than once to stare at the teacup. Finally, I gave in. I took my little treasure to the register and handed over the cash, determined to give no more thought to the money spent. I took the cup home and displayed it on the bookcase, angling it just so. It

was almost lost in my sea of greys and wood. Nevertheless, it shone like a beacon of cheer, my one small, silly teacup—one minute splash of *pretty* in an otherwise dreary décor.

A few years and a few more miles away, the teacup would again come into my story.

That winter, Moose Jaw got more snow than they'd had in ten years, so they told me. I came to realize how spoiled we are in the east, our streets and sidewalks plowed so quickly, entitled customers on the phone in the middle of the night—while it's still storming—inquiring why their driveways aren't yet cleared. For heaven's sake!

Out west, sidewalk care is the responsibility of the home or business owner. Some do it, some don't. I trudged through nearly knee-deep snow and slipped on icy lumps all winter long on some of those sidewalks.

Streets are cleaned three or four times a season, or at least that was the case in my corner of the west. There were deep tracks down each lane which made driving across an intersection like going over giant speed bumps.

Streets were so slippery, pedestrians risked life and limb when crossing. I picked my steps carefully to the middle of an intersection one day, with cars stopped all four ways, when without warning, my feet flew all directions and down I went: SPLAT. Why don't these things happen when there aren't any witnesses? That wasn't the first time, nor the last, that I ended up in a heap on the frozen ground.

But the hazards of hoofing it aside, I loved not owning a vehicle. No scraping frost in the morning, no insurance, no repairs, no weekly gas expense. I walked most places. My apartment was fifteen minutes from

work—even on the coldest days, I could do it when bundled up well. There was a grocery store on the way home, and there were city busses to take me the bigger stores at the edge of town and busses to towns and cities beyond. I really did have all I needed at my fingertips.

Forgotten

I decided to look at my time in the west as a challenge and quickly came to cherish the two years ahead of me. Just the same, my emotions were all over the place in those early days. I even commented to Holly, in one of those moments of uncertainty, that I didn't know if I was going back home. Yes, of course, I was, but it was true that part of me didn't want to, at least not yet.

For in truth, these months away were more than just a chance to stretch myself. They were freedom, being out from under the legalism I'd lived in most of my life. Being away from the scrutiny, relief now was sweet. Like the warm sun coming out from behind a cloud, I felt it move over me, envelop me, fill me. It sure would be hard to trade it back to re-enter the life I'd left behind.

The joy at this new freedom, though, was overshadowed with loneliness and homesickness. I craved contact with Robert, and I finally splurged on Wi-Fi, so he and I could email and call.

Sometimes Robert and I bickered during our talks, but hadn't we always? Boy, did we rub each other the wrong way.

What baffled me over the years I'd known him was how solid and steady he seemed. He rarely showed excitement or anger, and even his irritation with me wasn't overdone. I was often frustrated by his arguments that seemed to go every direction, yet somehow, he made sense in the end.

But his odd comments and strange behaviour over that last little while before I'd left New Brunswick had planted questions inside me. I didn't want to face that something had gone awry, but it was there, sprouting in the back corners of my mind. It infected my words during our phone calls and my attitude toward him.

Above all, though, I missed him. I ached for the home I wished we'd had and the marriage I still believed we could achieve. I talked with him about these things, but it didn't go well. I tried to explain how hard it had been all those years while he was busy with work—how alone I'd been and how lonely, the difficulty of being left on my own to take care of house and kids, tasks put fully on me that should have been shared between us. While I loved my place in our family, the extra weight was more than I could carry well. I told him I wanted a husband who would be my partner—my friend—and would support me, defend me, live life with me.

He completely missed it. At the time, he didn't let on at all, and I had no idea my meaning was lost. But I learned much later that he'd thought I was telling him I wanted to start over and to build this kind of marriage with someone else. How foolish we were not to clear this up. In truth, I was describing what I longed for in him, the man I believed he could be.

In our conversations over those months, from time to time, Robert would mention get-togethers with his family—birthdays...anniversaries. He'd list who had attended and tell me what went on. I'd envision it all as he described it. Then I'd question, *Anyone ask about me...how I'm doing?*

The answer was always the same: "No."

It stung me every time. I'd hang up the phone and linger on the word. How could it be that there in the place that was home my whole life, the people I called family and friends—who'd assured me I was family and friend to them—never asked of me? Like they'd forgotten me completely.

It was huge for me to go away on my own for the first time in my life, to try to make something of myself for me and our family. I was proud of what I'd achieved. I longed for their interest, even just a little. Did they not care at all?

No one talks about you, Sandra, Robert told me.

Oh, that hurt. Like I'd never mattered in the first place.

Overdose & Affliction

"Dusting the mantle" and "light" cleaning duties were gross misnomers of my assignments at the spa. Here's what they really meant: after we closed each night, we staff had to scrub all the rooms and vacuum and dust the hallways and waiting area. So that's where things got tricky.

See, my joints had protested vehemently against much of what I'd put them through ever since my mid-thirties. Hips, shoulders, knees, and wrists... I'd had trouble, back then, getting up out of a chair most days. Having been in school for the last year, though, and away from such physically challenging tasks, I'd recovered. The joints didn't hurt anymore.

Until now. Here at the spa, I was thrown back into scrubbing showers and mopping never-ending floors. Before long, the old, familiar aches returned; my joints hurt all the time.

I trudged home every night, slipping and stumbling over snow-packed, ice-slick sidewalks, hips, knees, and elbows protesting. I worried what all this was doing to my joints. Wait, wasn't this why I'd gone to school in the first place, to get out of body-breaking jobs like cleaning?

There was good reason to be concerned; at least in my mind, it was valid. For I was still small and weak from a two-year ordeal. I was doing well by this point, comparatively speaking, and still improving. I'd made it through

school and was grateful to be able to hold down a full-time job. But I worried the physical demands of the spa might put me right back into the long misery that still frightened me.

It had started three-and-a-half years earlier, in the fall of 2009, back in Kenton. I'd been into healthy living, without being too rigid, for a number of years. Someone suggested a cleansing tea; I don't remember what it was, but I thought, *Hey, I'll give it a try*. This time, I confess, I overdid it with the dosage, thinking the more the better.

Not so.

I unwittingly brought destruction upon myself. Then I tried one remedy after another to correct my mistake, but each only made it worse. Before long, every bite of food that hit my stomach caused my insides to revolt. I was painfully hungry all the time but could only get down three or four bites before I'd be in worse agony.

My energy plummeted, and I lost strength. A year of doctor appointments and tests yielded nothing. "Your results are normal," I kept hearing. Much as we don't want to be diagnosed with a disease or sickness, it's discouraging to have no cause for the condition; therefore, no course of treatment.

I was eventually sent to a specialist who was convinced, with barely a look at me, that I had celiac disease, though two blood tests had shown otherwise. He insisted on a gluten-free diet, and I stuck to the wretched thing religiously for six months, desperate for a solution. But with the added food restrictions, I lost more weight and felt worse still.

For the few who knew of my affliction, it seemed to me it must be a hard thing to understand. With no label to put to it, it didn't sound valid. I felt silly. I didn't like to give details, especially, *Yeah, this all started when I OD'd on colon tea...*

I hid myself away, so I wouldn't have to explain.

Butterflies and Raindrops

Kenton, New Brunswick
2010

Interspersed throughout our lives, in the humdrum and the storms, are flashes of beauty that interrupt our scurry and cares—a word; a smile; the glories of nature. Sometimes with grandeur, they astound. Sometimes with soft whispers, they warm our hearts.

It was during this time of physical difficulty that I witnessed two such unforgettable displays. They were moments touched by God because I'm His, and He waits for me when I'm far from Him.

The afternoon was warm and sunny as I trudged alone along the road. I forced myself, each day, to make this march whether I felt like it or not.

I was just about to my turning point when it happened. I didn't even notice them till I was in their midst.

Suddenly, they were there...

Exquisite yellow butterflies. There must have been eight or ten. They came up from the ground in a flutter, dancing. Delicate and elegant. They circled and swirled around me—my legs; my torso; my arms; my head.

A kaleidoscope. A pageant. They took their time like they were playing. Laughing. Pulling me into their joy.

They'd come there to meet me; they'd waited for me. To put light in my heart, a smile on my lips, and strength in my step. I stood transfixed, an undeserving guest at the centre of their celebration. It was one moment of indescribable beauty when time paused to give adoration.

Then they were gone.

The second event was on another walk. This day had a mystical aura—no breeze, no rustle of leaves. All was silent and still, like I was the only one on earth. The clouded sky was bright, not like the usual dismal grey of an overcast day in New Brunswick.

It came without warning—there was no wind, no darkening skies. Just...

Rain.

Rain is cold in New Brunswick; it drives the heat away. But not this time. This rain fell straight down in gentle drops, fragrant and clean. It was not heavy or fierce but a quiet patter that tapped the leaves. Light; rhythmic; melodic. Warm beads against my skin... Warm air clung to the earth, refusing to flee. Thick forest and lush vegetation swelled to the moisture and drank it in. Showers sang; they soothed. Fresh and new and free.

Glorious!

These moments weren't just for me. They were God's expression of His majesty like He flings out every day across the universe. He is God. All nature sings His praise. Whether I had been there or not, the rain would have come; the butterflies would have danced.

But on those days, He paced my steps, so I would witness these splendors of His creation. They were His gifts, to uplift my spirit and remind me He's there.

“Look who I Am. See what I do. I direct the butterflies and time the raindrops...

"And I hold you.”

Long Road

All Fun and Games till Someone Loses an Eye

Kenton, New Brunswick

At some point during those months of fighting for my health, I went out one hot afternoon and started up the mower. This, I figured, was a good way to get in a bit of exercise and accomplish some lawn care at the same time.

As the machine roared to life, bits of dust and grass fired out all directions. *Oh, right.* I remembered that something had broken, and Robert had taken off the guard that goes over the chute in order to fix it.

Well, this is dangerous! I realized. And I ducked back into the house for my sunglasses. Protect the eyes, at least—how had I forgotten them?

Armored up, away I went, pushing and struggling as I plodded across the front lawn. Grass, little rocks, and debris shot everywhere. *This really isn't safe,* I kept muttering, *I could lose an eye!*

About a half hour later, sufficiently exhausted and satisfied that I'd accomplished enough, I shut off the mower and trudged back to the house. I opened the door and tossed my sunglasses in onto the porch shelf. Then,

still standing out on the back step, I slapped the dirt from my legs, shirt, and arms. *Really,* I chided to no one, *he has to get that put back together. I shouldn't have used it.*

There was debris all through my hair. Taking out the clip, I shook the hair loose, leaned forward, and, head bent, brushed it with my fingertips. Bits of grass and dirt rained down; but most of the lawn was still in there, and I didn't want to drag it into the house to make a mess everywhere. Fiercely, I shook my head again, bringing my hand up to give it another good tousle, and...

I didn't even see it coming! That's what startled me the most. My hand came up fast, and I rammed my thumb right into my eye so hard I felt the eyeball move. My vision went black and back again.

I couldn't believe it! How could I be such a klutz?! I fumed. I stomped to the bathroom and glared at myself in the mirror. *Oh, good gosh!* There was a huge, deep-red splotch on the white of my eye. *Great, just great!*

I gave another huff and inspected the injury more closely. It did look pretty bad. *Oh, for Pete's sake. I'd better get it checked.* I showered quickly and drove myself to the optometrist's.

Given the circumstance, they took me in right away, into the dark room where they had me sit at that machine—*Put your eye here and open it wide*.

I leaned in and opened the eye. Instantly, the pain struck like a hot needle, piercing. I jerked back from the machine and dropped my head. Unexpected tears gushed down my face, unstoppable. My eyelids squeezed tightly closed, and try as I might, I could not force them open.

It was about ninety seconds before the stinging subsided. I wiped up my face, and on the second attempt, was able to get through all the pre-exam exams.

Then in the eye-chart room, the optometrist met me with the inevitable question: *How did it happen?*

Well, I felt a little silly; nevertheless, I launched into my narrative—the missing mower guard, the dirt in my hair, the thumb...

And the whole time, I finished, *all I could think was, 'this is dangerous! I could lose an eye!'*

The doc and I had a little chuckle over that, then she assessed the damage. *You did a good job of it,* she told me. *This is a bit worse than I normally deal with, so I'm going to have you see a specialist, just to be on the safe side.*

I drove across town to the specialist and sat myself in a chair in the second exam room of the day. The new doctor greeted me, and he asked the very same question, if you can imagine: *How did you hurt your eye?*

Heh, well, funny story...

White Chocolate

The specialist gave me some goopy prescription cream for my eye and sent me home with a huge cotton-batting patch which I was to wear for the next twenty-four hours. The hot needle came in waves, again and again, for about a day-and-a-half, gradually becoming less frequent and less severe, thank goodness.

A day or two after these shenanigans happened to be the wedding of our pastor's daughter, and Robert and I were invited. She'd come through some serious health challenges, during which time she'd fallen in love with this guy she was about to marry. I was thrilled for her, and nothing barring death was going to keep me from that celebration.

My eye was a revolting sight, though, and the gunky medication made it all the more repulsive. So I donned two pairs of sunglasses—yes, two, one pair over the other, to keep the thing hidden. Not taking any chance on grossing out the other guests.

The wedding was fairy-tale, high on my list of favorites. Robert had some work commitment that prevented his attending the ceremony, but he met me afterward for the reception. I was glad not to have to go it alone there, especially with my affliction.

The venue was beautiful. There were round tables about the room with, I think, eight chairs at each. Lighting was dim, which is pleasant and cozy at the best of times. But this day, it was an especially welcome relief to me, ensuring that my face with its hideous eyeball couldn't be seen.

Robert and I were among the first to arrive, and I chose an empty table that was out of the way. Another couple we knew quickly took their places across from us. Everyone was coming in, greeting each other; there was noise and commotion.

Robert and I sat down, and whoa! Lookie here! On a little plate off to the side of the table setting was a gorgeous, smooth, round, white chocolate. It had to be one of the good ones, I just knew, it was so perfect and rich-looking with a pearl finish. My mouth watered.

But food of any kind frightened me, knowing it could turn my stomach into knots. Did I dare? Could I get away with this one treat? There was the rest of the meal to consider too, and that could also be tricky. It really was a conundrum of what to eat and in what combination.

Finally, I leaned over to Robert and asked him to try his treat first, just in case there was something sketchy in the centre that I didn't want to risk. If he brought back a good report, I decided, I was going for it.

He popped his bonbon into his mouth and chewed. Long and slow. I waited.

He stared straight ahead, expressionless. I waited.

At last he swallowed. I held my breath for the verdict, anticipating the taste of this sweet drop of pleasure.

Still without any change in his expression, not a hint of his assessment, he put his mouth against my ear. *The white chocolate...* he whispered.

Yes...?

It's butter!

Well! I lost it right there—his flat tone...his poker face... Knee-slapping, uncontrollable laughter, I couldn't stop! And he was laughing too, how could he not? There we were, the two of us, shoulders shaking, giggling like fools.

A lady came to join our table while we were in the middle of our convulsions. She kicked the table leg hard, spilling our water, as she pulled herself into place. *Goodness! I'm sorry!* she apologized as we all dived upon the napkins and rushed to mop it up.

Then she noticed that Robert's little plate was empty, *Oh, dear, what happened to your butter?* she asked. *Did I knock it on the floor? I must have knocked it on the floor!* She lifted the edge of the tablecloth and crouched to peer underneath.

Robert took the cue, *Maybe so,* he agreed, and he pulled up his part of the tablecloth too. *Hmmm... I don't see it...* So, he ducked down farther and she doubled over more. And there they were, the both of them, practically crawling under the table, scouring for the missing ball of butter.

Which put me in stitches all over again.

We never did let Mrs. Butterball know it wasn't her fault.

She'll be okay.

Action

March 2011

By a year-and-a-half into the tummy troubles, it was time to take action. Facing another follow-up with my general practitioner, I made a decision. If she didn't give me convincing evidence to keep on the gluten-free diet, I was ending it immediately. If she had no answers again, this would be my last appointment.

The way I saw it, whatever the initial damage, with these long months of limited foods, my system had forgotten how to digest. It needed to learn again, so went my theory.

So I decided that I would reintroduce one new food a week, a few bites a day, hoping to rebuild a tolerance. Variety first. Then I'd work on quantity.

It's hard to grasp the enormity of this decision if you've never been there. With the pain they brought, I'd fled from most foods for over a year...shuddered in fear of the untried and unproven. The diet change I was entertaining could plunge me into a deeper mess that could take weeks to overcome. But I worried that if I didn't do something soon, there might be irreversible consequences. So my mind made up, I waited in the chair of the examination room to hear my results.

It was a replacement doctor who saw me, and she was not a friendly lady. *Why are you on a gluten-free diet?* she demanded, like an accusation. I got the feeling she thought I just up and decided it might be cool to be celiac—join the going trend. On the contrary, I loved food and wanted nothing to hinder it. When I'd first heard of this disease, I'd been horrified

at the restrictions it brought, and I'd greatly sympathized with its sufferer, so thankful that I wasn't one of them.

So I explained to the doctor that it was the specialist who'd put me on the diet—not my idea—and I didn't think it was helping. I left out the part where I couldn't wait to throw it all out the window.

Fifteen minutes of chastisement from her, and I walked out both shrunken and elated. She'd produced no answers for me, so there was no reason to pursue this vein any longer. Done with doctors, I would employ my own plan.

Months of careful management followed, and I slowly regained some strength. Every few weeks I could look back and mark my progress, thrilled with my steady improvement. By September, I was coming back to the old me.

That brought me to thoughts of my part-time house cleaning job. Cleaning was so hard on the body, I lived with constant pains from the heavy scrubbing, and it wore away at the little strength and energy I was building. I needed an easier way to make money.

I'd been noticing the admins and receptionists in the offices I frequented. I figured I'd like that sort of thing well enough; a job like that just might suit me. But, naturally, I'd need an education first.

So I did something I'd vowed I'd never do...

I went back to college.

Now, a year-and-a-half later, here I was in Moose Jaw, just getting started in full-time work, still not all I should be, but so much better than I was. And after that long battle to get healthy again, it frightened me to think of even a small slide backwards. I couldn't jeopardize all that I'd gained.

So after first searching for alternatives within my job and being denied, I gave my notice, and on May 2, 2013, I worked my last shift at the spa.

The In-Between

Broken People

Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan
2013

I was living in the in-between—that limbo after one job, before finding another. I'd been hunting since the first week of April, hours a day, day after day, searching online, handing out resumés.

Nothing had come of it yet. Not a response. Not an interview. Money was dwindling, and I was getting discouraged and stressed. I worried this might be the end of the line for me. My little adventure in the west might be over already, and I might have to pack it in and go back home to Kenton.

But I wasn't ready to do that yet. I didn't want to give up so quickly. The first little hitch...to return, defeated, after only four-and-a-half months. I could tough it out a little while, couldn't I, and make it work somehow? Surely this blip would be resolved soon... Something would come my way, right?

I came across a position at an optometrist's office in Regina that grabbed my attention. Now this was more like the admin I'd studied for. I liked

what I read. I wanted this job. So I sent off my resumé to the contact in the ad.

The doctor emailed that he wanted to meet with me. I perked up, hopeful, and wrote back right away, suggesting some dates for an interview. I waited and waited. But I never heard from him.

Well. What now?

I was hunched over my laptop, frantically scribbling online job postings in my rapidly-filling notebook. Shawn and Kimberley were just heading out my door after a brief visit when Shawn turned back and suggested, *You should apply at Cornerstone.*

I pulled my head out of my screen to stare at him, *Really? Cornerstone? You think?*

Cornerstone is a residential, Bible-based recovery program for youth with addictions. The kids live there for a full year while attending the on-site high school. The program is highly structured with a full schedule of chores, school, church, activities, sports, chapel, and service in the community.

For these youth, working through such deeply-rooted and binding issues is a heavy load in itself. But many of them are also dealing with family conflicts, problems at school, effects of abuse, arrests, parenthood, and other difficulties that I couldn't have imagined at their age. Shawn played an important role in helping them. He'd been a part-time youth care staff at Cornerstone for some three years, supervising the kids outside their school hours, morning and night, seven days a week (one week on shift, one week off).

The organization had been without a head administrator for a couple of months. Shawn, who had been filling in, thought I fit the bill. He offered to take my resumé to his boss the following Monday.

I wasn't so sure. You see, the site was in the middle of nowhere in Saskatchewan, I'd been told, about a half-hour's drive from the nearest town of Shaunavon, also in nowhere. It was an hour from the closest shopping mall in Swift Current (how do those people survive?) and about three hours from Moose Jaw, where I was already feeling pretty at home. Apart from some staff houses, a few outbuildings, and the facility itself, there was nothing as far as the eye could see. And face it, it was the prairie—the eye could see pretty far.

I don't know... I groaned to Shawn. *I couldn't stand it—stranded out there, no car. What would I do?*

Why, I wouldn't have to live on site, Shawn suggested. I could live in Shaunavon like some of the other staff did. He volunteered Kathryn Beck, the education director, to transport me to and from work, since her schedule would coincide with mine. He had this all figured out, didn't he?

I pictured the place, as I imagined it must be, and tried to visualize myself as the administrator. Aside from the desolate landscape I saw in my head, being on staff at Cornerstone wouldn't be easy, I figured, carrying the stories and heartaches of these kids every day. It was more than I wanted to take on. I wanted a neat little job that started at eight a.m., home at five every night, and leave my work cares at the office.

I'd read the brochure. It all sounded like a wonderful ministry in a needed sector, but it wasn't for me. Nope. I had my fill of the middle of nowhere back in Kenton, and I saw no reason to put myself back into such a place while here in the west. I liked the activity of the city. I liked the people and the close proximity to shops and services. I wasn't going to Nowhere anytime soon, I determined. Uh-uh. I'd stick to the city, thanks.

But even after Shawn and Kimberley had left my apartment, my head was still full of the conversation.

Cornerstone.

I knew I wouldn't like the place. Of course not. But what did it say about me if I didn't even follow a job possibility that was smack in the middle of my field? I should go through the motions at least, right?

Well, let's see what I could be getting into.

I pulled up Google Maps and typed in the name. My search brought me, via satellite, to the tiny town of Shaunavon. I brazenly spied up and down the streets of this foreign little settlement which had an old west look to the downtown. I clicked on every heading and scoured every bit of information. *Annual Boomtown Days are coming up the middle of July...parade and festivities. Cool!*

I punched in "churches" and came across one that seemed to be in line with my faith. I recognized the name of the pastor from discussions with Shawn. This is the church I'll attend, I decided, if I move to Shaunavon.

If!

All right, all right, I'll apply. But only so it can't be said I didn't try.

I did up a cover letter and gave it to Shawn with my resumé to pass to his boss, some Blake Webb fellow. I pictured a dull, rigid, cheerless character in a button-up shirt, eyes on everything, waiting to pounce. My duty done, I never expected to hear from the man.

The following Monday I received an email:

> *May 06, 2013*
> *Hi Sandra,*
> *Shawn gave me your resumé. Because we are a Christian ministry, I'd like from you a brief life story, including details about your walk with God and your core beliefs as well as your references. Thank you, and I look forward to hearing from you.*

Blake Webb, Executive Director
Cornerstone Inc.

Huh! Whadaya know!

Well, okay, I could go another step in this dance. I quickly sent off my references, then tapped out a brief life history along with a full page, outlining my beliefs. I read over what I'd written, hit the magical "send" button, and wondered what Mr. Webb would have to say about that.

May 08, 2013
Hi Sandra,
I really appreciated your write-up and your core doctrinal convictions. It's important that anyone who comes here agrees with us doctrinally.
Would you be willing to tell about your current journey, victories, and challenges, and why you'd like to work here?
Thanks again,
Blake Webb

That's where we hit a brick wall. My current journey? Victories and challenges? My latest challenge was my admin course. But I knew that wasn't what Mr. Blake was looking for. As for victories, well, my spiritual life was at a stand-still. I couldn't remember my last victory.

I spent days pondering what to write him. I'd no intention of prettying it up. Still, how could I put into words for a stranger that I was a failure, that I was stagnant, that I'd lost my passion for the things of God?

Finally, I sat down and beat out a raw reply.

May 13, 2013
Blake,
Sorry I took so long to get back to you.
I believe in what you're doing at Cornerstone. It excites me to see God work in the lives of kids and to see how He uses people like you and ministries like Cornerstone to accomplish His purposes.
For myself, I haven't felt victorious in a long time. For years, I've longed for just such an opportunity as this. I've had a heart for teenagers. The excitement is still there. But I won't pretend to be something I'm not. I don't think I'm strong enough right now. My faith has never wavered, but my endurance and enthusiasm have. I'm not sure I'm fit for a ministry like Cornerstone.
Thank you for your interest,
Sandra

I sent it off and knew I'd never hear from Blake Webb again.

There crept in a twinge of disappointment that I'd allowed myself to slip so far. For so many years I'd volunteered in ministries, putting in up to forty hours a week and loving it. And I'd thought, *Wouldn't it be great to have a job like this?*

Now, here was a ministry job opportunity, right in my lap, and I wasn't qualified. Didn't even want it!

(Sigh) *Whatever.*

I put Cornerstone out of my mind.

Four days later:

Hi Sandra,

We've learned that we all are broken people, in a broken world, called by God to bring the message of redemption to other broken people. Your difficulties right now don't necessarily disqualify you from this role.

We like to have applicants come to the site to see what all goes on here. We'd welcome you here for a few days next week. You could see what the role is like and have an interview. There's a place on site you could stay if you choose to come. Please let me know.

Man, this guy didn't quit!

His message touched something inside me. I sat frozen, glued to that line. Again, and again I read his words, *we all are broken people, in a broken world, called by God*... I tried to swallow the lump in my throat. What was this place?

I *did* want to see Cornerstone. My, where had that come from?

Okay, I decided, I would go, yes. Just to look. I didn't care about an interview. I couldn't work there, no way.

But I wanted to see first-hand what kind of place uses broken people and believes in them.

I would take the STC[1] bus to Shaunavon and find out for myself.

1. Saskatchewan Transportation Company

It was Wednesday evening, May 22nd. My bag was packed and ready at the door. An empty seat on the next bus to Shaunavon was waiting for me.

And I was getting more and more anxious as the minutes ticked by. As my departure for Cornerstone drew nearer, panic set in. *What am I doing?* I fretted. *This is ridiculous! I don't want to leave Moose Jaw, and I don't want to go to Cornerstone!*

I paced my apartment, ranting to myself, and by the time Kimberley came to say good-bye, I was in meltdown, doubled over the kitchen counter of my stuffy attic. *I don't wanna go*, I wailed.

I rambled on senselessly, pulling out all the reasons this was not a good idea. I shouldn't go, I knew it. I should forget the whole thing. It would be a disaster. I should stay right here.

I don't know why I was so gripped with fear, certain that if I stepped onto that bus my life would change forever.

Mom, you don't have to go, Kimberley soothed.

I looked at her. Yes! The voice of reason. Just what I needed. Permission to back out. It wasn't too late.

Deep breath...

My jitters began to still and my heartrate slowed.

Of course, I didn't have to go. I didn't... No, I didn't...

But... I would.

Her agreement was all it took.

You're right, I said, calmly. *But I'll go anyway. I'll go to Cornerstone. Because if I don't, I know I'll regret it.*

Too often, I'd stuck to the easy route—no effort, no risk. This time, I'd not pass up the opportunity in front of me.

Besides, going and looking was not committing.

Kimberley walked me to the bus station and saw me off. It was sweet and reassuring. I needed her presence, or I might not have, even then, had the strength to go through with it.

My eyes filled with tears as we waved good-bye and the bus pulled away from the station. Of course, it wasn't our parting that put the ache in my heart. I'd be back in two days.

No, it wasn't that. It was the torment inside me. Torment about past and present. Guilt over so many decisions in my life. Knowing that getting on that bus was the latest in a long list of wrong choices.

As the miles sped by, I was overwhelmed with impending doom, an intensifying premonition that nothing would ever be the same, as if just accepting this invitation to visit had somehow sealed my fate.

I didn't want another change. Not this kind of change. I wanted a comfortable job. Not this job. I liked Moose Jaw, not in this Shaunavon place, and I wanted to stay where I was.

I fought against all of it the whole long, excruciating drive.

I knew I was doomed. If this job was God's will for me, He'd make me want it. He'd make me fall in love with Cornerstone. He'd work out all the doubts and details, and He'd make me happy in it.

I stubbornly gritted my teeth against it all.

At last my prison of conflict ended when the bus pulled up in front of Hardin's Grocerteria. Just after ten-thirty p.m., I stepped down into Shaunavon for the first time.

The moment my foot touched pavement, I felt calm. The quiet of night on that empty street soothed. My fears, my hesitations fled away. And there stood Shawn, ready to take me out the dark gravel road to Cornerstone.

He deposited me at the home of Richard and Marion Williams who, it happened, were away on vacation in the Maritimes. Richard was a carpenter, a Mr. Fix-it, and the maintenance man at Cornerstone. He and

Marion were the campus hosts, and their home, right there on site, was a welcoming haven to many staff and guests.

The door was open, and I let myself into the empty house and settled into the guestroom that had been prepared for me. I stretched out in the quiet and soaked in the solitude. Being alone in that pretty little house was the balm I needed, and I was soon fast asleep.

God is in this Place

Cornerstone, Saskatchewan
May 23, 2013

Promptly at nine the following morning, Shawn knocked at the Williams' door to take me to the main building and show me around.

Walking across the yard after a rain, I learned *Cornerstone Essential #1:* rubber boots.

I'd never before encountered mud like this. It looked like regular mud, but it was a thick clay that globbed on the footwear and would not knock off. Shawn pointed out the staff houses, the work-out Quonset, and other buildings as we squished and slipped our way to the centre. No hope for my sneakers now. Once inside, off with our muddy shoes, and we set them on the mat. The "No outdoor footwear in the building" rule was for good reason.

Beyond the entryway was a foyer, steps to the left going down, coatroom to the right. After that, a hallway ran left to right, and a set of double doors sat straight ahead. That's where Shawn took me first.

The chapel.

It struck me as soon as we stepped in.

An aisle ran down the centre, several rows of old pews on either side. Across the front were the worship instruments—a piano, drums, amps, guitars. There were stacks of music and music stands, Bibles and hymnbooks down through the pews.

What caught my attention was the front of the room. Light streamed through windows that stretched across the width and reached from almost the floor to the peak of the cathedral ceiling. Warmth seeped into every corner. But more than that was the unmistakable sense of Presence: a stillness, a reverence, a peace. I stood in silent awe.

God is in this place.

I don't know what I expected in a home for troubled teens, but this was not it.

We followed the hall past the school classroom, where resident students were hard at work, and into the dining room where sat rectangular tables with chairs all around. A large, impressive kitchen, bright and open, stretched beyond. The wall that separated the two rooms boasted a long, high serving window cut above a deep counter.

Shawn and I retraced our steps, back past the chapel to the offices. I met Stephanie Bridges, administrative assistant. Hers was the smallest office, a multipurpose room, really. Besides her desk, there were the photocopier, all the files, the key box, storage, shredder, sign-out sheets, and everything that brought all the staff in and out all day long. It was a busy little spot infused with constant commotion.

Blake Webb brisked around the corner then and introduced himself. He was younger than I'd expected. I'd expected hurried and serious, preoccupied and stern. Instead, he was relaxed and pleasant and, as I observed over the next two days, fun-loving and approachable with a quick laugh.

Shawn showed me into the office of the head administrator. It was an adequate space with a window on either side—one that looked into Stephanie's office, another that looked into an office Blake shared with the student life director, Lyle, Stephanie's husband.

Shawn and I remained there in the office for the next couple of hours while he worked on whatever he had to get done. He had me read through the student handbook and other documents about Cornerstone and the head admin job, and he offered to answer any questions I might have. Already I felt inadequate, with not enough experience even to know what to ask. I knew my empty questions fell short.

At noon we went to the dining room, lured by tempting aromas from the kitchen. There were quick announcements and the blessing. We all filed up to the little sink to wash hands, then along the counter where we picked up plates and served ourselves while Joanna, the cook—a bright, cheery lady—made sure things went smoothly. Everyone went back to the chairs, residents and staff intermingled, and sat down to eat together. Wow!

The whole lunch hour, I watched and listened to voices all around me. Teenagers in adolescent conversation. Laughter. I watched their interactions with each other and with the staff. I could never have imagined such an atmosphere. How could this be? For all the pain and destruction represented here, for all the work and care and sometimes sleepless nights and tears and disappointments that every staff member must know, it was astonishing—the unmistakable tranquility that enveloped that room and those within. These staff and residents were a family, and God was truly there among them.

My second day on site, Friday, was to be my interview—the interview I didn't care about, for the job I didn't want. All morning my hands shook and my stomach flip-flopped. I was cold and trembling and sweating all at the same time. Just before noon, Blake happened by to let me know

the "interrogation"—his word—would begin at one o'clock, and then he laughed and hurried away.

So at one o'clock, we gathered.

I looked myself over, my interview attire—jeans and a jacket, much like that of the others around the interview table. (*Cornerstone's a farm,* Blake was proud to say. Even business-casual attire usually included a nice pair of jeans.) I'd never looked like this for an interview before, but certainly my little shoes and skirt would never have survived the trek through all that Cornerstone mud.

I lost all concept of time once the four of us sat down at a table in the dining room. There were the three directors, Blake (Executive), Kathryn Beck (Education), Lyle Bridges (Student Life), and me.

I don't remember a whole lot about what was said. I believe Blake asked me what skills I had that I thought suited me for this job. What did I answer? I don't know. I remember feeling humbled, unworthy, like I didn't fit there with those people.

But I wanted to, I realized. Somewhere in me, the desire was awakening.

He asked me how long I thought it would be before I'd be comfortable in the head admin position. I foolishly told him "two weeks," then worried that his definition of *comfortable* might grossly differ from mine. I just meant it would take me two weeks to feel at ease there in the office, not that I'd come to know the job that quickly. There were titters around the table. Of course! I'd underestimated my learning curve!

No, no, Kathryn interjected when she saw my embarrassment. *"Two weeks" is a Cornerstone joke, a Blake joke.* It had started, she explained, over a house that was being constructed in Alberta for Blake and his wife and would be transported to the site when finished. At some point, Blake had boldly predicted its completion as, "in two weeks!" That had been two

years ago. The house was still not finished. But Cornerstone had latched onto the metaphor for Blake's eternal optimism.

Blake asked what my hesitations were and how I felt about moving to a small town where I didn't know anyone. I hadn't yet formulated my hesitations. I mulled over and rambled and processed out loud. I told them, *This is not just a job to me. It's a total-life commitment*. I admitted it concerned me to be there alone, so Kathryn told of the wonderful community in Shaunavon and the people at the church who were like family to her.

I spoke of my inadequacy. Again, Kathryn smiled and told me in her quiet, gentle way that she knew exactly how I felt. It had been the same for her when she'd come to Cornerstone. She told me that, back then, they'd asked her to sign a two-year contract. She'd hesitated, thinking surely she'd be burned out before that. But here she was, three months into her third year. Still going strong, still loving it.

The interview wound down and conversation lightened, and for some reason I got telling them my Alberta taxi driver story from the previous Christmas—how I'd feared he'd boot me out in the cold and how I'd had to stand my ground. I was funny. I made them laugh. Later I learned the impact of that story.

We ended with Blake asking me to consider and pray about the job. He promised the directors would do the same. They'd be in touch.

Shawn drove me back to Moose Jaw that evening. I chattered on about Cornerstone and asked questions. I was elated. There was a tugging, a yearning beginning to swell. This place was not like anything I'd ever seen, and I was starting to think about having a part in it.

Saturday dawned, Cornerstone still foremost in my thoughts. I was conflicted as I walked about town on my errands. I loved Moose Jaw and

didn't want to leave. Kimberley was there, too. This job would mean I'd be completely alone, there so far away. Could I handle that?

Did I measure up—character, personality, heart? I have difficulty, sometimes, understanding people. I don't get them, and they don't get me. I'm oblivious to so many things. I rattle off my thoughts with no concept of how they sound to those who hear them. I've turned off many people just being me. How would I ever fit with Cornerstone?

The job. Could I do it? I was fresh out of school and hadn't worked in an office yet. What if I didn't have what they needed? Already, I didn't want to let them down.

It was all too much. I couldn't...

Yet something drew me to Cornerstone. I wanted the job, I did—what a turn-around in just three days.

A whisper urged: *Go, learn, help.*

Partway across the Safeway parking lot, amid my arguments with myself, the thought came out of nowhere: *Sandra, God will never send you to do a job without equipping you to do it.*

It stopped me up short. That's right! If God wanted me to be the head administrator at Cornerstone, He'd get me there; He would give me strength and help me learn. And like that, my fears settled.

Sunday in church, I couldn't sit still. Every neuron, every fiber in my body was wired. I sang. I grinned. I twisted and fidgeted. I had to get to Cornerstone.

Monday came and went, and nothing from Blake. Okay. I'd be patient. I checked email Tuesday morning. Still nothing. I was getting antsy.

I closed my laptop and scurried off for an interview at another spa. As the conversation progressed, it seemed like the owner wanted to hire me. Whether because of my experience at my last spa job or not, I wasn't keen on the idea. I didn't think it was a good fit. Just the thought of it wearied

me. I was completely up front with the interviewer and told her I was waiting to hear from another possibility, and I'd let her know by the end of the week my decision about her spa.

And I left her waiting while I waited.

Back at my attic, still no email. Time for action.

May 28, 2013 1:25 p.m.
Good afternoon, Blake,
I hope your week is going well.
I know choosing a head administrator is a huge decision, but please, let me know one way or the other as soon as possible.
I've done a complete 180 concerning my being at Cornerstone. From going, "Why are you sending me there, God?" to sudden reassurance. What a relief! It's okay, though, if I'm not the right one. I don't want to be there if I'm not meant to be.
Sincerely,
Sandra Glenn

May 28, 2019 8:44 p.m.
Hi Sandra,
Thanks for your email and for holding our feet to the fire. Is there a number where I can reach you?

I borrowed Kimberley's phone. Then came the call. Blake explained that when they consider someone for such a position, he meets with the directors to discuss the applicant and asks them if they see any red flags. It goes to the board, as well, for review. He told me that not one of them had

a single misgiving about taking me on as head administrator! There on the phone, he offered me the position, and I accepted.

Shawn told me later, *Blake said that email you wrote him, asking for the job, was "the last nail in the coffin."* Then he grinned, *Maybe not the best metaphor.* Blake said it showed I had courage. Later still, I learned my taxi story was another confirmation to Blake that I had what it takes for the job at Cornerstone.

Oh, and that optometrist I'd wanted to work for... Shortly after I was settled into my new position and loving it, I discovered an interview appointment in my junk email box. He'd responded after all! Probably wondered why I never answered him. I couldn't help but smile at how even this small detail had worked for my good, and I wrote to let him know why I hadn't replied.

Cornerstone, Place of Belonging

Dropped into a Foreign World

I returned to Shaunavon early in June to look at rentals and found an old house with lots of character on First Street West. The living room, with gorgeous woodwork, was the draw. That and the fact that it was about the only reasonable place in town that was available. I signed the lease and made a quick trip back to Moose Jaw to pack a U-Haul.

Though excited about the possibilities Shaunavon could offer, I'd brought with me no expectations. I'd come to terms with how hard it is to make friends, and I wasn't looking for that. It's not unique to me or the place. It's just life, especially the older we get.

Then there are a few small things with me that make friendships a challenge. You see, I'm not always good at group events. The problem is not that there are a great number of people; I don't mind being in a crowd. It's noise and commotion that can throw me. Overhead lights drain my energy—they almost hurt—and that makes it hard to focus on the

conversation; thus, I appear uninterested. Sometimes, I'd rather just not go at all than deal with that.

Particularly in a group I don't know very well, I spend a long time listening and observing, getting a feel for things. I mean, when I have nothing in common with anyone, what else can I do? People can't handle my silence; they assume I'm quiet, shy, moody, a snob. They might avoid eye contact with me or act like I'm not there. Sometimes, this doesn't bother me, but other times it makes me feel like I'm intruding where I'm not supposed to be. That puts me off kilter, and I become more and more awkward with every move I make. Then should I attempt to speak, what comes out of my mouth just proves to everyone that the weird girl is, in fact...weird.

And I am a bit odd. Everyone is. My oddities just sometimes show more than most people's. I mean, in my head things are fine with my interactions. But people just look at me and nod mutely. I'm never sure what's wrong; I just know I won't be seeing much of them anymore.

However, I'm usually good at one-on-one or groups of three or four. This is where you'll get to know me, hear me, see me. I love to have a lady or two over for evening coffee. I like the intimacy of a home setting. We can wear comfy pants and put our feet up. We can bring conversation from the trivial to the more substantial. These discussions allow greater insight into the minds and hearts of my guests. Usually, I listen well. But sometimes, get me going, and I yammer on like a wind-up toy, then come away horrified that I never shut up.

So I wasn't expecting to make friends in Shaunavon; however, I intended to be friendly. Even with these challenges, I was determined to put my best foot forward.

But I soon found out that friendly interaction was much more difficult than expected.

Shortly after my arrival in town, there was a shower at the church. Away I went, eager to meet people and make connections. Throughout the room were round tables set for luncheon. I picked the one where Kathryn was sitting, since she was the only lady I knew at all. Conversation picked up around me, smiles and chatter.

A couple of people introduced themselves and asked me questions—*Where are you from? What do you do? Do you have kids? Grandkids?* (Wow, that was new! People here in the west thought I was old enough to be a grandma! What's with that?) *Hello, I'm Sandra, nice to meet you. Why, yes, I do have kids and grandkids.*

And that's where it ended. There was nothing else for either of us to say. They looked at me, blinked a couple of times, then went back to their talk with each other.

I looked from face to face, helpless. It struck me for the first time what a foreign world I'd come to. Here I was, a Maritimer my whole life, now plopped down into a tiny prairie town I'd never heard of till a month or so ago. I was disoriented just hearing the names of the people and places they tossed about; I had no frame of reference. What could I offer? Any stories I could tell would be just as detached for them; they wouldn't be able to relate to my people and places either. We had no history, no common ground, nothing to draw on. I was aching for contact, real conversation, but was too shellshocked in this alien land to know what to do.

Socializing was lonelier than being alone.

I think many people have no idea...no concept of how difficult it can be to fit into a new place by yourself. Most people who move to a new town at least have a spouse, maybe kids, with them. And while I don't doubt that's hard, it's a whole other level doing it by yourself. You've no one to prop you up, no one to fuel you, no one to debrief with later.

Yet I don't know what the answer is, how to help each other along. For those who are settled in their surroundings, life carries them, a mind of its own. They already have family, friends, hobbies, and jobs established, no room for any more. They might not even notice the new girl in their midst. Or they might figure someone else can connect better with her, while everyone around them figures the same.

But what a breath of fresh air to that new person when someone reaches out with an invite to supper or coffee. Someone who steps right up and initiates rather than leaving it up to her to do it. After all, the one who's home has the advantage, being surrounded by the familiar. The newcomer's still out of place and off-kilter, still trying to dig her way out from under boxes and getting her feet under her. And the longer nobody comes around, the longer she'll be out of place.

But don't worry if you think maybe you could approach her. A coffee invite's not a life commitment, and you don't have to become best friends. Just offer something, once or twice, to get her started. Guide her first steps in learning her way around. It'll mean the world to her, trust me.

First Few Weeks

Having never worked in an office, I rested in the knowledge that I'd be thoroughly trained in all the inner workings of the Cornerstone head admin position.

Not so.

Shawn was assigned to train me since he'd been doing my job for several weeks until I got there. But he wasn't an administrator; he'd only been helping out in the office, taking care of the essentials while they had no one else. He showed me what he knew, but administration is a vast sea of

activities and intricacies that he couldn't possibly have learned in the short time he'd been in the role.

Not many days into my training, he and I were staring at each other with nothing to say. Just then, Blake strode past the office, *The cow got out,* he said, and he was gone.

A few more minutes of silence in my office, then Shawn put down the book he was holding. *I'm going to go chase a cow,* he announced.

And with that, my training was over.

Cornerstone runs in high gear, as you might expect for a residence for teens, and staff were very busy. They didn't have a lot of time to cater to the new girl. So I hit the ground running and dug in to learn as quickly as I could. Over and over I looked to Stephanie, "What's the Privilege System?" "Who's so and so?" "Where do I find...?" "How do I do...?" Questions and answers shot back and forth through the window that connected our offices.

Stephanie was a gem with her patient explanations—what would I have done without her? I didn't know it yet, but we were building a friendship that we'd take with us down the path of life to come. She's still there to help and guide me when I need it, and many times I still look to her for answers and comfort.

I knew I had to push my function at Cornerstone. I had to find a way to speak well in the midst of difficulties and not hide from them, as I was used to doing. I purposed from the start to address problems and clear up misunderstandings—no more ignoring them like they didn't exist.

What a stretch that was for me. I'd be nervous for days anticipating the discussion and break out in a sweat when seated across from the other person. Then I'd delay the issue with trivialities, one after another. I'd finally bumble through my concern, making more or less of it than should be, asking all the wrong questions. Some things I should have just left alone; some things I pushed too hard.

But I got better. Slowly, I learned to say what was needed. The atmosphere at Cornerstone encouraged honest discussion—it was safe to speak—and bit by bit, it drew out of me my thoughts. I discovered a whole new world for myself: communication. I began to open up in conversation and in writing. Now I wonder how I kept so much inside me all those years.

The first thing to strike me about Blake was his deep love for the Lord and his commitment to serving Him and the ministry. He wanted the best for Cornerstone and our kids.

We sent out a monthly newsletter to our supporters, and it was my job to put together the components and edit the letter. Every issue included a brief note on each resident, needs and prayer requests, an opening paragraph by the editor (me), and a note from Blake, Executive Director.

By the time I came on board in 2013, June's letter was due, and I was staring at the executive director's note in my inbox. I'd soon learn that Blake could hammer out a quality-content message in just a few minutes, something that, back then, would have taken me hours to do. But his structure, seen here for the first time, had my OCD screaming.

I corrected the typos and some punctuation. I read it again and again. What was I to do with the rest? I'm no pro, don't get me wrong, but I

knew I could improve it—clarity and flow. I figured it must be the head administrator's job to reconstruct it properly, right?

On the other hand, what if my new boss were the sort who didn't want the secretary messing with his words? A this-is-what-I-wrote-and-this-is-how-I-want-it kind of person? I worried about overstepping my bounds. My fingers fidgeted under my desk as I sweated out what to do.

Finally, when Blake was shooting by my office later that day, I called out to him, *What do you want me to do with your newsletter note?*

What do you mean?

Do you want me just to fix typos and spelling, or everything, like split infinitives and run-on sentences?

What's an infinitive?

I had my work cut out for me.

He told me to *do whatever you do* with the note and was on his way. I smiled with delight and dug in. I worked hard to keep his voice, his personality. I rearranged out-of-order phrases, cut down sentences, chopped words and repetitions. And when I sent him the finished product, he was pleased.

This was the beginning of a team—Blake and me. The odd time we quibbled about words, he listened as I explained why I'd made a change. Then he explained why he'd chosen the particular word he had. Most often, he made more sense than I did, and I put it back the way he'd had it. But when he saw wisdom in my reasoning, he'd graciously concede.

Just Show up and Serve Pancakes

One of the first things I did in this job was to familiarize myself with the office goings-on by scrolling back through the admin emails of the past couple of months. Most were trivial, and none of them struck a chord with me.

Until the mention of a pancake breakfast, which caught my eye as I sailed past it. I gave it little thought, at first. But then I came across another email. This time, I looked a little closer. It was a discussion back and forth between names I didn't recognize, and then Blake's weighing in. Time to pay attention.

I got buried in threads that went back for months. There were questions and responses about supplies and contacts; how to mix batter and store food; quantities based on the expected number of people; instructions on set-up, health regulations, and a temporary permit.

Cornerstone's doing a pancake breakfast? I called through the window between our offices.

Oh, don't worry, Blake assured me. *We just have to show up and serve pancakes.*

I pulled my head out of my computer and glanced at him skeptically. Something told me it was not that simple.

Cornerstone, I learned, had agreed to host the annual pancake breakfast for Boomtown Days in July. Not only that, this was our first attempt. Cornerstone had never done anything like it before. Nobody on staff knew how to put it together, and there were no lists or charts or documents for reference.

To top it off, this Boomtown Days of 2013 was the one hundredth anniversary of the town of Shaunavon. People would be coming from far and wide to celebrate.

Just show up and serve pancakes...?

This. Was. Huge.

I had one month to pull it off, and I'd never organized anything this big in my life. We were responsible for gathering and setting up our supplies and equipment as well as tables and chairs where the customers would eat. We had to prepare proper cooking and washing stations with health-approved procedures in place. And we needed volunteers to take payment, mix batter, cook, serve, and clean up afterward.

Where to start?

I went back to the emails and wrote to those townspeople named there, introduced myself, and asked what was going on and where to find what I needed. They were patient and eager to help; I was so grateful. I put together a grocery list, gathered volunteers, got our temporary vendor permit, and did a schedule for the pick-up and return of items we would borrow from businesses all over town. Staff jumped in to help make it happen.

On July 20th, I was in the Co-op Marketplace parking lot at five-thirty a.m. with many others, setting up. Blake and the residents brought in the tables and chairs. Everyone pitched in. And at eight o'clock that morning, we were ready to go.

If you cook it, they will come...

The people started showing up. One or two...three or four...here and there. Before I realized it, the line had grown to several bodies thick and stretched across the parking lot all the way to the sidewalk and wound down beyond the corner of the butcher shop. They talked and laughed in

line, visiting with neighbors they saw every day and friends they hadn't seen in years, as they made their way toward the front to pick up their breakfast.

That day, we served pancakes and sausages to more than 1500 people! We had to keep cooking forty minutes past our scheduled end-time because there were so many still standing in line!

Our staff, residents, and volunteers brought it together beautifully! We were fast and efficient with friendly smiles! The people loved us!

What an event! Cornerstone shone! A win!

Just show up and serve pancakes...!

Home is Where the Heart Breaks

Shadows

I swelled with joy that perhaps I'd found my place of belonging. I loved Shaunavon and my church. I loved Cornerstone, my job, and my co-workers. And I couldn't wait to share it all with family and friends back home.

My oldest son, Ian, would marry Suzanne that summer, on July 15, 2013, and I took four days off work to go back for their wedding.

I carried many emotions with me when I flew out of Regina on July 12th—excitement over my life on the prairie, anticipation of the upcoming celebration and the reunions it would bring, and hurts and confusions that had come with my departure from Kenton last December. Robert and I were still in touch almost daily, of course. I missed him and couldn't wait to see him. But I felt a hesitancy I couldn't explain.

He was there to greet me when I stepped off my midnight flight. I don't remember much about that meeting. I don't recall flowers or a card in his hand or a shower of sweet sentiments, no beaming smile, no sweep of his

arms to lift me off the floor. His hug felt a bit more careful than passionate. I held back too, feeling awkward. I'd been gone a long time, after all; it was to be expected we'd both be a little strange with one another.

But his greeting was warm just the same. Nothing struck me as troublesome. At the time, I wasn't looking for anything unusual. I didn't know yet what was coming.

By the time we reached home, it was the wee hours of the morning. We snatched a few hours of sleep before my first of just a four-day visit.

We went to the Saturday farmer's market, where I used to work at Cheryl's Sandwich Counter. I inched slowly through the long line of eager customers, peeking ahead, then ducking behind those in front of me to keep from being seen too soon.

At last I came in sight of Cheryl and Frank behind the counter, filling orders. Frank's face lit up when he spotted me, and he pushed between the people to wrap me in a hug. Frank—one place I was always sure to get a warm welcome. Bless him.

Robert and I squeezed through crowded aisles, between tables and booths, and nodded to familiar faces across the sea of shoppers. When we'd seen all we wanted to, we wandered back to the truck. It was still early, and we had most of the day to fill. Robert threw out a couple of ideas: we could go home where Ian and Jack were shooting skeets, or we could drive two hours to the Glenn cottage on the lake.

The lake! Ah, the lake! I warmed at the thought. The "cottage" was bigger than my house, but that wasn't the appeal for me. It was the lake and the beach that I loved. Every summer, we went there with the kids, a day set aside for the whole Glenn clan, and it was always a good time. Today was the day they were gathered, Robert let me know.

I wanted to see everyone, sit down with them, and chat about all that had happened in the last seven months. Kimberley had gotten into town days ahead of me, and she was already there with the family.

I expected Robert to smile and say, sure, let's go; they're eager to see you. He was usually quite keen to get together with his family.

But when I talked about going to the lake, he got quiet. He sat, hardly moving, looking anywhere but at me. *It's up to you, Sandra,* was his only input. I saw no real agreement, rather he seemed reluctant to take me. When I asked why this reaction, he wouldn't tell me anything. I didn't know what to make of it.

There was his other suggestion, too. I wanted time with the boys, and with the busyness of all that would go on over the next few days, today might be my only opportunity. *Let's go home and shoot skeets,* I decided. Yes, my boys were, by far, the better choice.

And immediately, I felt a relief that I couldn't explain, one that I would come to understand better as my four days unfolded.

That evening, Robert suggested we take a jaunt into the nearby community for ice cream at the corner store. Hey, going out for ice cream with my guy was just about the best way to top off our day. It was probably silly, but I was excited. Wearing my best smile, I hopped into the truck and we were off.

We came out of the store, treats in hand, and started across the parking lot when we spotted a couple of ladies from our community. About the time we sidled up to say hello, Robert stepped away from me—just a little step sideways, barely enough to notice. But I did notice; yes, I did. He never looked at me or touched me while we chatted; he never closed the space between us. It was almost as though he didn't want them to see him with me. Was that a bit of awkwardness I sensed in him...and in them?

The tug in my heart was to feel that I belonged after all this time—for just a small show of affection like I was still his without question. But there was that step away, that little bit of distance, just enough that it seemed it had to be on purpose.

A shadow of concern fell on the far corner of my mind.

Sunday was church, and we were all going together—Robert, Jack, Kimberley, and me. I looked forward to it, eager to greet everyone. There would be smiles and handshakes—*What is it you do out there in Saskatchewan?* they'd ask. And I'd get to tell them.

We had just stepped into the building when Robert and Jack walked off and disappeared into the crowd. They never said anything—not a word. They just left Kimberley and me standing there inside the door. I couldn't see where they'd gone. *Must be some pre-service ushering duties,* I figured.

Kimberley and I went into the auditorium and found an empty pew that had lots of room for the guys to join us later, when they returned from whatever it was that had taken them away. We'd just settled into our seats when two dear ladies came over to say hello. They sat down beside us, and we all chatted about things I don't remember now. But I do remember that they came and that they were sweet and friendly—in the days to come, that would mean a lot to me. Then they made their way back to their seats just as the service was about to begin.

Robert and Jack were still AWOL.

We sang the first hymn and were given the usual opening remarks.

No sign of the guys.

After they're done collecting the offering, I reasoned. *Then they'll come sit with us.*

Before long, the ushers went forward, Robert and Jack among them. The offering plate passed; it was only minutes before it made its way to the back of the room, and the service moved on to the next segment.

Still, they didn't come.

When the sermon was underway and all the commotion had died, there was still no sign of Robert. I twisted around. *For goodness sake, what's keeping him?*

Then I spotted them at the back of the room, seated in the row of extra chairs along the wall. There they were, both of them, looking unfazed and at ease with the world, as if Kimberley and I weren't even there.

What?

I straightened back around and tried to let on that all was perfectly fine. But inside, I wilted. They were not coming. They'd chosen other seats. My only Sunday at our church in seven months, and my husband and son didn't even sit with me. It was as if they didn't even know me.

There was something else. The singing, the sermon, the closing... Was I imagining it? Those around me, who certainly knew me and saw me, never met my eye. No one shook my hand during the greeting time, and as the congregation flowed out to the foyer afterward, no one approached me or said hello. Not even a smile from afar. Not one.

I pushed it aside as best I could. Was it really that big a deal, anyway? I tried to tell myself it wasn't.

Robert and Jack reappeared just as Kimberley and I approached the exit. It didn't escape me that they hadn't come near us or spoken to us the whole time we were inside the church.

Another shadow.

All in My Head

Ian and Suzanne's wedding was to be held in the front yard of their lovely home on a beautiful little acreage just outside the town of Hillsborough. Monday morning dawned sunny and hot. By mid-day it was in the thirties Celsius, plus humidity—perfect for a sweaty, drippy outdoor wedding.

Holly had flown in from Grande Prairie on Sunday afternoon, and she rode to Ian and Suzanne's place with Robert, Kimberley, and me while Jack took his own car.

We got there very early, unusual for us. Robert and I were in the kitchen when his parents came through. They both said hello to me, and his mother asked, "How are you?" I smiled and told her I was doing well. They passed on by me and soon headed outside. Maybe we'd chat later.

Just before the ceremony, Robert followed me, without a word, into a row of chairs on the lawn where we settled ourselves to wait. I watched him out of the corner of my eye. He sat a bit too rigid in his seat, not a smile for me or a touch, his face, his posture set with neither sadness nor joy at my nearness.

The wedding was lovely with a western theme. Suzanne was very pretty in her white gown. Ian was dressed in black with matching cowboy hat. Ian's best man carried the ringbearer, nine-month-old Ethan, who was adorable in his own little black cowboy hat.

After the "I-dos," Robert disappeared. I thought it strange that he'd gone off and left me without a word. Must have gotten distracted and didn't realize, I figured. I wandered around till I found him on the back step, chatting with Holly. I stuck myself into their midst, and their conversation petered out. A minute or so later they strode off, leaving me to trail after them.

After a while, I spied Robert's sister not more than eight feet away. She would say hello, I was sure. We'd greet each other and share our news. But when I looked to her for a smile, she wouldn't meet my eye. I knew she could see me; she was right there. Yet she looked right past me, almost through me. No smile. No hello. Like there was no me. It seemed so odd, like so many other things about this visit that should have been ordinary and pleasant but were, instead, strange and troubling.

Perhaps I should have marched right up and addressed her, but I'm not at all comfortable with that when I get a sense that I'm not welcome.

I brushed aside the odd behaviour. My spirits could not be dampened. I still hoped, today, to be part of the family that had claimed to be mine. I'd been gone long enough that I was ready with stories about my new job and the incredible place I worked. *Look what God let me be part of!* I wanted to shout.

I took my place in line to get a piece of wedding cake. One of Robert's brothers was just ahead of me. He turned to me and launched into discussion, and it was like there'd been no gap since I'd last seen him.

Finally, thank goodness! At last, the curse was lifted, and normal interaction could resume! We commented back and forth about nothing in particular until someone else took his attention, ending our discussion.

That was it. The curse was back...the end of conversation for me that day.

I picked up a piece of cake and carried it to where the Glenns were gathered in the corner of the yard—I could usually find them in a cluster together. I dragged over a chair and plopped myself down in their circle. I looked from face to face, eagerly. No one glanced my way. No one spoke a word to me. Not once. No acknowledgement of any kind, not even from my husband at my side. I was invisible.

I worked so hard not to let on a hint of what I felt, but inside I was astounded. Aching. I was doing my part to connect with them. How could they act this way?

True enough, we'd never been close, Robert's family—his parents, his older sister, and three younger brothers—and me. When I had become a Glenn years ago, I thought the world of them all, and I really wanted to be part of them. But I was a shy twenty-year-old and didn't know how. I was intimidated by his parents...couldn't come up with a thing to say. I was awkward; I felt inadequate, naive, and unknowledgeable. I needed the mature ones, the established ones, to teach me how to do it, to reach out to me, to set me at ease. Instead, they'd let me know it was up to me to make my way in and earn their approval. By the time I became strong enough to do it, it was too late. We were already set in our places and mine was just a little outside of theirs.

Even so, they'd never been unfriendly before.

I did my best to press on like nothing had happened. That was what I did—ignore the obvious tension because I didn't want to believe it, didn't know how to address it, and above all, did not want anyone to see that I was hurt.

The only other words to me from Robert's family that day were from a lady as she was leaving. She paused as she passed my chair. *And you like your job?* she asked. I told her I did. *That's good,* she said and went off. It struck me as an odd interaction, her smile not quite natural, her tone too bright.

Again, Robert was gone, and I went on the hunt. Disappointment filled me. Why did he keep leaving me on my own? I wanted to be with him all I could for the short time I was there. Why didn't he want the same?

I found him standing in the shade, chatting with a group of people. He had no smile for me when I approached, and I saw no light in his eyes. He

didn't move toward me, didn't put an arm on my waist or touch my hand. Once again, it seemed like he didn't want anyone to see that he cared for me.

Over and over that day, he left me standing alone. Over and over, I felt the sting. Over and over, I pretended nothing was wrong.

Finally, we all piled back into the truck and closed the doors. *What was that!* I exclaimed.

What...? What was what? came Robert's innocent tone.

That! Your family! How they ignored me! Wouldn't talk to me! Wouldn't look at me! And you, ignoring me...always walking off without me! I was shocked. I was hurt. I was furious. Pieces were starting to come together, like why his family had held a wedding shower for Kimberley just days ago, but before I arrived home. They hadn't even told me about it—hadn't invited me.

As we wound along the twisty road, Robert insisted nothing was amiss; it was all in my head. He'd done nothing wrong. His family had done nothing wrong. And the girls agreed.

This was the hardest blow of the day. No one in that truck acknowledged what had just happened or allowed for my hurt. Like I was half crazy, imagining the whole thing.

Where was support? Where was comfort? Where was my husband for me?

Peace of Mind

It was the morning after the wedding. I was curled up on the love seat in the library with my coffee. Robert appeared in the doorway. He didn't

normally join me in this ritual that I loved so much, though I'd invited him many times. He'd always had some reason not to.

But there he was, on this morning, standing across the room from me. I thought he would sit down and we'd chat together, even if just for a few minutes.

He put one knee up on the arm of the chair beside him and looked my way. *I'm getting a divorce,* he said.

I blinked and stared at him, mute.

Divorce.

He wanted a divorce. I sat, unmoving.

Seven months ago, he'd sent me away. To work, he'd said. To build a stronger resumé. To come back to him, find a job, and resume our lives. When had divorce become part of the plan?

So many things fly through the mind at this moment—thoughts that grapple with one another; they pull and tug every direction. The last weeks and months flashed before me, a kaleidoscope of images that didn't quite fit, a drone of voices speaking words I couldn't understand.

Divorce.

He went on. *I'm scared you're going to divorce me and take everything I have.* He couldn't sleep at night, he claimed, with worry that he would lose it all.

I still didn't speak. No tears, no horror. Just sat there and tried to take it in. Why did he think I'd divorce him? Did he really believe I'd want his things? These seemed strange fears, to me. Where had they come from? Why would he entertain them? There'd been no issue between us back last fall before I'd left—no anger, no fight, no split.

How small I must be to him to let this insult take root. What had happened to honor and trust? What had happened to care and protection? To *cherish your wife*?

I'm doing this whether you agree or not, he was saying. *I just want a legal document that says you can't take my stuff, that's all. I need peace of mind so I can sleep at night.* He explained how he'd worked it all out with his lawyer, and he rattled off the financial settlement he'd decreed for me. He was cancelling our joint credit card, too, he told me.

So this wasn't just an idea. It was already in the works.

He never asked what I thought. Didn't offer any variables. Not even the courtesy of talking to me before initiating the process.

It'll be a lot easier and cheaper for both of us if you don't fight it. And I'll pay your lawyer costs, he finished off.

Wow.

I didn't understand how he could give way to such fears...how they could take so strong a hold. But I did know that this way of thinking was not uncommon for him. From somewhere that I could never explain, an idea would come to Robert. He'd mull it over and over and begin to believe it. He'd be bothered and become distracted till it tormented him through the night. He'd convince himself that it was real, and then he'd act on it.

So sitting there, hearing him say words like "can't sleep at night," I got it.

You just need peace of mind? I asked at last. *You want a legal document to protect your stuff. But that's all it means, this divorce?*

Right.

You don't actually want to end things between us and go our separate ways?

No.

Then there's no need to tell anyone about this. I decided for both of us. *If we're not really splitting up... If I'm coming back as your wife, it'll be much easier for us to pick up and go on if no one knows.*

Right, he consented. Though I wonder now if he intended to stick to that, even then.

Okay. I'll sign your divorce, I conceded. Not that I had a choice.

It all sounds crazy, I know, especially now as I look back on it. I've hashed it through many times since that day. Should I have argued? Should I have fought it? Should I have laid out all the reasons this was so wrong and how badly it could end?

The truth was, I didn't have any money; I couldn't afford a lawyer or a fight. Besides, I wanted to give Robert what he needed to ease his worry; I wanted him to be okay.

So I trusted what he told me. We weren't really splitting. The papers were just his security. They didn't mean anything to us—as far as we were concerned, we were still married. And if no one else knew about it, what would it matter? We would tuck those papers away until I returned, and then we'd burn them.

How does my mind that feels huge disturbances out of minor tremors brush aside the real crises? Too trusting... gullible? Too tired? No fight left?

Or did I not care, too blind to see the dangers that riddled this plan?

Don't Miss the Boat

August 1985

Off in a camper we went, confetti blowing out of the air vents and tin cans trailing behind the bumper. Ah, the adventurers we were, we honeymooners, young Robert and I.

We drove and drove, no itinerary, no destination in mind. Robert wasn't one to plan this sort of thing, just, *We'll go to Nova Scotia*.

After a hurried jaunt through the Cabot Trail—Robert was also not one to stop and smell the roses—we decided to hop the ferry to Newfoundland. It was a long ride through the night till we disembarked early the next morning at Port Aux Basques.

Then we were away again through what seemed to be endless wilderness in a forsaken province. We should have stopped to explore, visit shops and attractions; there were plenty of wonderful things to see and do. We should have gone to St. John's—it looks so beautiful in the pictures. But we didn't.

Wanna go to Labrador? Robert asked suddenly, and I brightened at the suggestion. Just the word, *Labrador*. Wistful... Romantic... Oh, it would be glorious! So we headed up the west side of the province, north

to the little settlement of Saint Barbe where we'd catch another ferry to Blanc-Sablon, Quebec, just below the Labrador border.

We arrived in the settlement late afternoon and made our way to the dock to check the ferry's departure time. This was long before the days of Google schedules on cell phones. The ferry wasn't in, and we learned there wouldn't be another run that night, not till, I think it was, seven the next morning.

We turned back the way we'd come and headed to a gravel pit we'd seen just a short hop down the road. It would be a great place to camp for the night, we figured, nice and handy for our early departure. We situated ourselves in our rough and rocky campsite, pulled out our little propane stove, and heated up a can of something for our supper. Another camper was parked a few meters away, probably destined for the same ferry we were, we supposed. But we paid them no attention, and they ignored us right back.

We were so exhausted, we fell into bed at something like five-thirty p.m. and were both comatose in seconds. It was a beautiful sleep, one of those where you don't move the whole night—not a flinch, not a dream.

I woke feeling rested and ready to go. Sun was up. Robert stirred. One of us reached over to check the time...

6:55! We've got five minutes to get to the ferry!

Robert was into his clothes like a superhero in a phone booth. He bolted out of the camper and into the cab of the truck, leaving me to wrestle my way into my pants and shirt. He slammed the truck in gear and took off for the street like a maniac. I was thrown around in the back, underwear flying, as he bounced and swerved out of the gravel pit, a spray of stones shooting up behind us.

He came to a stop in the lineup just in front of the dock where the cars were waiting to load, and I was finally able to put myself together and join him up in the cab.

We hadn't missed the ferry! There it was, still waiting! Marvelous! And we were only third in line. We would make it, after all. We fell into snippets of conversation.

I had the best sleep.

Oh, me too.

Bet those other guys back at the gravel pit wondered what on earth got into us, eh, ripping off out of there the way we did!

Yeah. But they aren't going to make this boat if they don't get moving too. We both chuckled at their expense.

We nattered back and forth, feeling pretty good with ourselves.

Should start loading soon... One of us commented.

A few more minutes passed as we happily soaked in the early morning...

Hmm... They're late letting us on...

Not much happening out there...

Where are the workers, anyway? I don't see anybody...

Sure is quiet...

Tick-tock...

...Wait...!

Is it getting darker...??

Life Upside Down

Turmoil and Tears

July 2013

I maintained my tough exterior for the rest of my time in New Brunswick till I landed back in Shaunavon. Then I fell apart. I climbed into Kathryn's SUV every day, and we sped along for the half hour's drive to work. We weren't much for chatter in the mornings; I don't know if she took her cue from me or I from her. Talk might have helped—I don't know—or made it worse. My thoughts rushed in through the empty silence, and I couldn't stop the ache in my throat and the twist in my heart. I turned to the window so she wouldn't see. The endless landscape rolled by while my tears overflowed. I clenched my jaw, every muscle strained to stop them; still, they came. I tried to reassure myself that it would all be okay. This silly divorce didn't mean anything; Robert had said so.

But a dark cloud hung over everything.

"You came back," Blake greeted me when I walked in the first day.

"Yes, of course," and my smile was real.

But I lived on a constant verge of tears. I worked away in my office, people coming and going, Blake and Stephanie facing me through their windows. I did my best to hold it together, forcing my thoughts onto my tasks.

But I could only do it for so long. Sooner or later, the spring of grief would flood, and I'd be overcome. I'd quietly get up from my desk and take refuge in the bathroom where I'd sink to the floor and sob—complete meltdown. Before I let too much time lapse, I'd mop up my mess, pull myself back together, and troop back to work.

On my lunch hours, I'd trek down the dusty road alone and let myself crumble. I mourned the family that had so easily dismissed me. I relived the events of my visit—actions, tones, words spoken and not spoken. I tried to sort it out. I ached. I cried.

As much for my own sake as for theirs, I didn't want there to be problems between Robert's family and me. But I couldn't ignore that something was wrong. No matter what excuses I made for them, none fit what I'd experienced. It seemed that they had some issue with me, and the only reason I found that made sense for the behaviour I'd witnessed was a misconception on their part as to why I had left. When I put everything together, the only thing I could figure was that Robert had not followed through with a proper explanation of my departure the previous fall. What had he said to them? What did they think had happened?

But when I'd asked, he'd assured me he'd told everyone the truth; they knew we hadn't split up. All was well. They had nothing against me, he claimed. It was all in my head.

Then why the things that had happened? The questions swirled inside me. Why had no one asked about me in those first seven months I'd been away? Why was Robert not eager to take me to the lake with his family? Why hadn't he sat with me at church, and why did he pull away from me

every time we were with people we knew? Why hadn't his family invited me to my own daughter's wedding shower? Why hadn't they welcomed me into their conversations? Why did they reject me, for no other word fit how they'd made me feel.

And if they believed I'd done something terrible enough to warrant this, why hadn't anyone talked to me or written me? Not one of them had asked me what had happened. Not one had come to me in love, seeking restoration.

Nothing made sense.

I mourned the marriage Robert and I should have worked to build. I grieved over the husband who had so little regard for me and our home. I believed his words; trusted his promises. Still, I was ripped apart inside. I felt like he'd thrown me away. The word *divorce* stabbed through me, branded me—a big scarlet letter "D."

As I walked that road, unbidden images from the past reached up to me...

I saw Robert bundled up, plodding out into the dark early morning to start the car, clean it off, and dig it out of the snow for me, just as he did every winter Saturday for the six years I worked at the farmer's market. I never asked him to. He just did it, cheerfully.

There was the day he announced he'd found a previously-owned motorcycle at a dealership. *Do you like it?* Robert asked as we both circled the bike in the showroom. My coat-hanger smile was answer enough. We left the shop with my new little Suzuki Marauder standing proudly in the back of the truck, just because he knew I'd always wanted one.

Another image: *Know what day it is?* Robert asked when I answered the phone. He was calling from work, no particular reason.

No, what day is it?

It's Robert's Sweetie-Pie Day, I could hear his proud smile. Robert's Sweetie-Pie Day meant I, his Sweetie-Pie, was to take the day for me, no cleaning, no errands, no work. Just relax, go to a movie or to lunch, read a book, whatever I wanted. And every so often, he'd declare a day my personal holiday. It always brought me a smile just for the sweetness of it.

The memory of that call faded, replaced by the image of our living room years ago. Christmas music played in the background, but it did nothing to cheer me. I was tired and grumpy, fussing at the tree. The angel topper wouldn't sit straight, no matter what I did. I was up on a chair, stretching and tugging, but nothing worked. I grumbled, irritated with everything. Robert stepped closer to make a suggestion, and that irritated me more—what did he know?

"Here! Hold the angel," I snapped, handing her down to him.

He looked up at me and smiled. He reached out both arms and wrapped them around my waist. "I've got her," he said.

Sweet moments that seemed so far away now as I walked that Saskatchewan prairie. The July sun beamed down on the fields on either side of me. Dust swirled from a passing car on the distant grid road. I turned around and started back toward the office, so I wouldn't be late. Memories kept flooding over me.

Our home wasn't easy—whose is? Our first few years together were awful. Nobody knows some of the particulars of those years. I'd thought about leaving once or twice, and it was only the kids that had kept me there. I'd felt trapped and despised by my husband, and I'd come to despise him back.

Over time, Robert softened toward me. He grew more loving and thoughtful, and my despite turned to love. We put the difficulties of the past behind us and walked away from them together. Those were our best years, those when we both made an effort; what had happened to

them? Thankfully, we never slipped back to our horrible beginnings, but we slowly began to lose ground again, unnoticed.

I wish we both could have learned the full spectrum of a godly marriage: how a man should lead his family, put God first, then put his wife before all else on earth. Our story would have gone much differently. I longed for a godly man to guide us. A wife responds to her husband's lead; it's programmed in us. I needed his strength to fuel me. I needed a partner, a teammate—two cords wound together are stronger than one.

I wish I'd known the effect I had—how essential a wife's honor and respect is to her husband. I had the power to build him up or tear him down. If I'd used it properly, would he have been strengthened, spurred to love our family fully and lead us well? Was that why he spent so much time away from me? Was he weary because of me?

Different times I dug in, determined to make it happen for both of us because he was busy with work. I thought I could be a strong enough parent, a good enough wife, a solid enough spiritual leader to fill in the gaps for us both. I struggled to hold it together, but I couldn't do it myself. I faltered. I went about it all wrong. I wasn't looking to the right One for strength. I failed every time. I grew picky, grouchy, defensive, angry, unyielding. I became exhausted under the weight, and when I fell the last time, I gave up trying to get up again.

I sifted through those last months before Robert's proposal that I come west. We'd slipped back into detachment, but I hadn't thought about why. I don't think I even noticed till the very end. Had there been signs this was coming? These cycles were common for us—we'd do well for a while, feel closer to each other, a little more talk, a little more time together. Then distance, impatience, silence, harsh words (most often mine). Was this time any different?

Try as I might, all I could remember of those last few months was the pressure I'd felt to find a job, and then how Robert had cooled toward me those last few days.

Now, here we were in this weird whatever-it-was.

On the phone with me one day, Robert let slip a comment someone at his church had made about us, a comment that revealed a little too much. *How does he know about the divorce?* I asked in astonishment. *We weren't going to tell; that's what we agreed.*

Well, he asked me. Robert's matter-of-fact tone.

It struck me as odd that, after months of no one speaking my name—everyone avoiding all mention of us to Robert—this man had just walked up and out of the blue asked, *Hey, are you guys getting divorced?*

So you told him yes? I asked. *Why would you do that?*

Well, what do you want me to do, lie?

No, I didn't want him to lie. But he could have told the simple truth—*Sandra and I are not splitting; she's just away working. She's coming back to be with me, it's all good.* That was the bottom line, wasn't it? Why hadn't he said that to this man? Why was it so hard for him to protect us? Already, he'd told our black secret, had broken his promise. How did he expect to make this work, to fit back into *us* when I returned? We now had so much more to deal with. For me, the fact that he'd broken his promise was every bit as destructive as admitting our divorce to this man.

Divorce. Whatever his excuse for it, it was a wrecking ball. It sent me reeling, my feet knocked out from under me. Life turned upside down.

Who Gives this Woman?

August 2013

Back on May 16th, when I was still living in Moose Jaw, Shawn had proposed to Kimberley. They would be married in their church on August 24th.

I was thrilled. My beautiful baby girl, getting married!

Oh, how fun it would be! Family would come for the wedding! Robert, his parents, maybe his sister and brothers, my mother, and others. Already, I saw their smiling faces. I could picture us all walking in the downtown, chatting and laughing. Kimberley and I would point out places we knew and tell our stories. I could hardly wait.

But that was in May. How could I have imagined then all that would happen in the months in between?

By now there was no excitement about seeing family. Now I dreaded it. So much had changed with my visit home in July, and I no longer knew what to do with anyone, especially Robert. His actions when I was in New Brunswick had sharply contrasted with what he'd been telling me all along. He hadn't acted at all like a husband happy to see his wife.

What were we, the two of us? I didn't know anymore. Did I mean anything to him? Many emotions rushed in and out. Sometimes they changed from minute to minute. Sometimes they were all at once—at odds with one another. A little part of me looked forward to seeing him again, but most of me withdrew. Stress escalated till I was nearly sick.

Robert set his own itinerary for his trip to the west. He went first to Holly's in Grande Prairie and spent most of his vacation there. Then he and Holly drove to Moose Jaw to spend a few days with Kimberley.

On Thursday evening, August 22nd, two days before the wedding, Robert and Holly arrived at Cornerstone just at the end of my workday. They hadn't come in time to meet the staff or to see the place in action. If they'd only visited a few weeks prior, before my disappointing trip to New Brunswick, I'd have been proud to show them around. By now, I was just as glad I didn't have to. Was I wrong to feel that way?

I invited them into my office, and they waited for me to close out of my computer and pack up my things. It was a quiet few moments for all of us. No one seemed to know what to say.

We went out for supper in Shaunavon and for a stroll around the neighborhood, and I began to relax a little. We sat in my living room for the rest of the evening. Slowly, things began to feel more normal. Robert cuddled up with me on the love seat, and contentment filled me at last. So maybe things were okay after all.

Friday morning, we left for Moose Jaw and the wedding rehearsal. In no time, I found myself spouting off in my know-it-all tone, and Holly was sighing in the back seat. Why is it that I still slip back to that so quickly when I step into an environment from my past? Even now, years separated from that life, I've grown out of the person I once was, and in five minutes of exposure, I can be right back in the shadows of the old me.

Once we were in Moose Jaw, stress descended upon me in full force. As it happens, the only family that came for the wedding were Robert's parents and a brother with his wife. My mother couldn't make it. She didn't think she should leave my father at that time; his health wasn't good. There were guests from my church in Shaunavon and from Cornerstone, including my boss—who would perform the ceremony—and his wife.

It was weird to have *old world* meet *new world*. It was awkward introducing Robert. What was he? My husband? My ex? I couldn't make head nor tail of it, myself. What did they think of Robert and me? Did we appear natural in our interactions, or were we stiff with plastic smiles? Did they wonder what was wrong? Did they see the big scarlet letter?

At 2:00 on the afternoon of Saturday, August 24th, Robert walked Kimberley down the aisle. I met them at the front and stood on one side of her with Robert on the other. What an honor for me to be given this part.

"Who gives this woman...?" the preacher asked.

I think back now, and it seems out of place—

"Her mother and I do," Robert answered in front of everyone, like there was still an *us*.

Sunday, Robert and I went to brunch with Kimberley and Shawn and Shawn's parents. By then, with the wedding guests dispersed, the intensity inside me had eased somewhat. Scrutiny, whether real or imagined, was over, Robert's family was gone, and we were not on display anymore. With just the six of us at the diner that morning, I relaxed a little at Robert's side.

I wanted contact, to reassure him and for him to reassure me. As we all chatted, I reached under the table and rested my hand on his leg.

No response. No reach for my hand. He sat rigid. Resistant.

Later, he told me how hurt he was that I'd not shown more interest in him that weekend...that I hadn't been more affectionate. I'd treated him poorly, he accused.

I was baffled. How could he hold such a thing against me after the way he'd treated me in New Brunswick—his cool distance...his rejection? How

could he expect anything but awkwardness and confusion between us? He wanted closeness now, yet he hadn't scheduled any time with me on his vacation. He seemed to think I should slip into his life when it was convenient for him—the secret wife—then let him push me aside when he didn't want to acknowledge me, and there should be no consequences. My emotions were so battered and conflicted. He was full of inconsistencies and contradictions, both back in New Brunswick and now here in Saskatchewan. He seemed unable to connect the dots. I don't think he ever recognized the part he played in our destruction.

Yet it haunted me for weeks, seeing his slumped shoulders as he walked away from me that Sunday afternoon to catch his flight home. I heard his words over and over—how I'd mistreated him. Regret for not showing more affection weighed heavily on me. I ached over what I'd done to him, and I cried for days. I told him I was sorry. It made no difference, and he grew colder.

Crumbling

Shaunavon, Saskatchewan
October 2013

I couldn't believe I was sitting, pen in hand, across the table from a lawyer. I signed the papers—divorce to be finalized in December.

I ploughed through the week, forcing aside my feelings. I told no one what I'd just done. *It's not that big a deal,* I repeated to myself. *There are people with real tragedies, real divorces tearing them up. I've no valid reason*

for heartache, no right to feel the need to unburden myself to anyone. Mine is not a real divorce; I'm going back home.

But it was tearing me apart. The ache was almost more than I could contain. How I wanted someone to talk to, just to pour out the secret that kept me so bound.

It's not a real divorce. I'm going back...

Finally, I made up my mind. *Today, I'll talk to Kathryn,* I decided. *On the drive home from work tonight, I'll just spew it all out—my mess all over her car.*

That's the day she got a call from a friend whose husband had just walked out on her and their three little girls. He'd left them for another woman.

I stuffed my own small troubles back down inside.

I was a mess that fall. When I was distracted with my work, I did okay—no time to think. But when I wasn't immersed in a task, I couldn't hold myself together. I don't know how many times I sobbed through church or left before the sermon because I couldn't choke back tears any longer. I fought through every Cornerstone staff meeting to keep from crumbling. I don't like the rule that everyone has to pray out loud when they go around the circle, as we did every week. I think it's an unfair measure of spirituality. You just don't know what someone else is going through that limits her ability to participate. For me, it took immense energy to keep control just hearing others pray, let alone having to utter words myself. I couldn't do it without a fierce fight inside me. A fight that drained me. A fight added to all the other turmoil.

People told me to get out there—socialize. There were always things going on, lots of opportunities to make friends.

Group events could overwhelm me at the best of times. But now, I struggled more than ever to find things to say, and I couldn't stay focused on conversations. I couldn't put myself into the action because it took every ounce of energy just to keep from falling apart right there in the middle of everyone. What I didn't see for years to come was how deeply wounded I was—bleeding, crippled.

I saw their impatience with me—what right did I have to be lonely when I didn't try? they shrugged.

They didn't understand. Being alone isn't lonely. Being with people doesn't take lonely away. Lonely after divorce is a lonely all its own. It changes the rules. It's a constant—no relief. The more people, the worse it grips. It seizes without warning, throws you down, and leaves you writhing on the ground. It haunts with images of everything lost—home, kids, marriage, husband, friends, family Christmas. And every time you see those things in someone else, it cuts you up again.

And it went on for years. I live with it still, though it's not so intense.

Divorce is a trauma. When God joins two people in marriage, it's a mysterious, spiritual bond that can't be unfastened. Divorce rips those two people apart, tearing off pieces of each. It leaves gaping wounds that bleed for years, wounds that never go away.

The trauma takes over every part. The heart is ruptured; the mind's in turmoil; emotions rise, engulf, and sweep you under. Try as hard as you can, you can't force it away. You'll never be the same; everything's forever changed. No amount of faith or reliance on God fixes it, as people expect it to. He doesn't take scars away; He's not a magic cure-all.

People didn't know. All they saw was the newcomer who didn't talk and kept to herself. "She's quiet"—the worst transgression. They had no idea

how much I needed friends and conversation or that I was utterly incapable of achieving either for myself, I was so wounded.

I tried to be what they wanted. But I didn't work anymore; my wiring was cut and fried, and I couldn't fix me. Funny that all those years alone in Kenton, I'd longed for social interaction. Now I had all I could want at my fingertips and couldn't find a way to function in it. Life really had turned upside down.

I put too high an expectation on myself and ended up disappointing not only everyone else, but me, as well. If I'd recognized the catastrophe inside me, maybe I'd have backed off and allowed myself time and space without guilt.

Part of healing is recognizing loss for what it is: something that was, is no longer; it's taken away—gone. Don't try to minimize it; that won't help anyone. Face it in all its ugliness. Say it with raw honesty, what you think and how you feel. Tell it to God. Let yourself grieve.

But I didn't know this yet, and I pushed myself through like nothing was wrong. Toughen up, I told myself. Everyone else is.

I shouldn't have worried what anyone thought or have felt obligated to participate the way others did. There's no timetable on grief; there's no "getting over it" when it comes to loss. No one gets to look on someone else and decide what should be done or how. There would be a time to pick myself up and ease into life, but before that could work, I had to go through deep pain and a measure of healing.

I needed to wait on the Lord, the Great Physician, and rest in Him. He knew my injuries better than anyone and brought His loving healing in the time and method He saw fit. I relied on Him more heavily; my faith was strengthened. There was no relief for my pain, but there was solace for my soul in Him. He works on me still. In His wisdom, He doesn't erase all the scars. He leaves some pain and memories so I won't forget the lessons

and so I'll stay in His tender care. When I step from this life and leave this crumbling body behind, He'll make my healing complete.

A friend told me not long ago

> *Before my divorce, I was so unaware. I remember a lady in my church who was going through divorce. I'd ask her how she was, and she'd say she was doing okay. But she had the look in her eye... I just didn't understand what it meant, then.*
> *Now I know that look,* my friend said. *I have that look myself.*

You never know what load she carries, the one who stands just out of the way, who just won't enter the scene. The hurting heart makes no sense; it contradicts itself. It's lonely, yet it finds comfort in solitude. It needs solitude to rest and reflect and grieve, but it craves people. It needs to talk and laugh but can't come up with a thing to say and doesn't care. It needs human interaction, but isn't capable of initiating. It needs to unload but doesn't want to burden. It needs to speak the awful truth but instead minimizes the damage, so it doesn't sound needy or complaining. It needs to pour out its anguish, be real, and be comforted but feels obligated to display the positive attitude everyone pushes—after all, who wants to hear the depressing truth?

Please don't expect the grieving one to fit into *normal*. She can't right now. It's not that she's rude or uninterested. She's just not able to do the things you think should be so healing for her. She can't smile through the small talk or breathe in the crowds that you think should ease her loneliness.

Please don't give her the "It could be worse" speech. What *could be* does not lessen the pain that *is*; that's a silly notion. Her hurt doesn't mean she doesn't care about others or that she's self-centered.

Don't toss her "If there's anything I can do... If you need to talk..." She'll never ask. She needs you more than she even knows, but she doesn't have the strength to go to you. Go to her instead.

When she talks about her pain, she's not complaining or feeling sorry for herself. It might just be a cry for help she doesn't even know she's giving. Talking's an outlet she desperately needs to purge her thoughts and emotions. A friend once told me it takes speaking grief out loud at least thirty-seven times to begin healing. I joked, *Does talking to myself count?*

He chuckled, *I think then it takes longer.*

I don't know if that number's accurate, but I do know the truth of the concept—speaking fears, anxieties, grief, pain, and loss out loud to listening ears helps reduce the intensity of the emotion and heal the heart.

It hurts to care about someone who's grieving. It drains your energy. It strips little pieces from yourself.

But if you love with godly love, if God places her in your path, if He puts her on your heart, do it. He'll give you strength.

Do what she can't do. Put yourself into her life. Invite her to coffee (not a baby shower). Now. And keep inviting. Give her license to talk, however messy. Listen. You are God's arms to hug her and His voice to comfort. You are her steps to healing. Draw her to you and tuck her close to His heart.

Shaunavon, Place of Restoration

Mess Doesn't Scare God

I was unworthy, messed up, and broken. My failures were many; my sins were shameful.

Mine had been a life of struggling to live up to the standard. The *dos* and *don'ts* of my upbringing were severe, inconsistent, frustrating, unattainable. I felt looked down on by most everyone. I lived in the shadow of nothingness, unfit for service or fellowship. I didn't measure up.

No matter how close to God I lived, how deep my desire to honor Him, many of my efforts were ignored or met with criticism. I longed for approval, not the approval merely of men and women but the approval of godly men and woman, to reassure me I was on the right track. I needed support, mentorship, encouragement. I found little. I didn't know enough to seek out the right kind of person and ask for help.

I felt pulled apart and dragged down. After defeat upon defeat, discouragement began to win. I threw up my hands and walked away. I chose not to care. I never rejected God; I couldn't come to that. I still

believed in all that was written in His Word. I just put Him in a back corner of my heart and decided not to try anymore. No more putting myself out only to be hammered again.

How foolish.

Life declined. I stopped going to church, making one excuse or another.

Through my years of indifference, God held me. He kept me from straying too far. I can see now, His hand on me, directing and protecting. I'm so thankful His love never changes; He's always there no matter what I think or feel or do.

From the moment I first visited Cornerstone, He was working in me—melting my resistance; filling me with His love; making me pliable, compassionate, willing. Drawing me to Him.

I was in awe of the Cornerstone staff. They weren't superhuman, but they were heroes and warriors to me. I was humbled and honored to be among them, an attitude that never waned no matter our disagreements. I couldn't believe God had seen fit to place me there. Still, I didn't think of myself as being in ministry; no, I just worked there, just an add-on to do an out-of-the-way job. More than anything, I wanted God to find me worthy to serve, but I couldn't yet wrap my head around the possibility that He would use me after what I saw as a life of utter failure.

In the Shaunavon believers, I saw a new attitude. They didn't shun those who had fallen. With discernment, they gathered around them, cried with them, lifted them, mentored them. They believed in second chances. Third chances. Fourth. They saw their own frailties and weren't afraid to admit their brokenness. The broken were not less. The failed were not unworthy. This was so new to me, and I basked in the warmth and light it brought to my heart. Relief. Repentance. Restoration. New beginnings. For them. For me.

God brought a change in my thinking, not just an awareness of truth, but truth beginning to root in me. He's not interested in a list of rules; He doesn't measure me by them. My jeans and hoop earrings don't disappoint Him. He wants heart—a heart that beats with His Word, His love, His will.

When God saved me, it wasn't based on my performance. I'd done nothing to earn His favor; even the faith it took to trust Him didn't come from me but from Him. All that was in me was ugly and wicked, everything about me.

He knew my mess, all my mistakes and sin and guilt. He forgave me of it all. He made me beautiful. He arrayed me in a robe of righteousness in Christ.

And He didn't set conditions. There was no probation clause tacked on to His acceptance of me. See, it wasn't just my past that He knew when He saved me. He knew all the sins I would commit in future, too—every detail of every one to come. He knew I'd let Him down over and over. Yet He chose me anyway. He made me His child. He became my Father.

Even now, He doesn't wait with hand raised to strike me when I make a mistake. He doesn't throw me away when I mess up. I'm still His child, and my sin doesn't disqualify me from service; if that were so, no one could be used. He pricks my conscience and gives me opportunity to repent; then He chastens if I'm unwilling. True, there are some consequences to my disobedience that can't be undone. But just like He did for Moses and King David and Peter, He restores me and uses me.

What relief to rest in these truths and to put myself in God's hands! He knows me better than I know myself. He knows the end from the beginning. He does what's best for me when I would only mess it up.

I rejoiced in Him and all that He'd done for me.

The Potter

Our church secretary, Laura Dirksen, approached me that October and asked if she could interview me. You see, Laura wrote biographical sketches—inspiring little one-page stories—on some of the church folks and then printed them in the bulletin. What a great idea!

I was surprised to be asked since I was so new to the church and to the community. No one knew anything about me. I looked at my life and wondered what I could possibly offer.

But I'd read those sketches she'd written, and I'd noticed these were real people who fought their battles and leaned heavily on God and their church community. They talked openly of their failings and admitted where they still fell down, got back up, and fell again.

This was not what I was used to. I was used to testimonies that ended with huge breakthroughs followed by displays of pure, white righteousness ever after; that's how they seemed to me. Spiritual Christians were supposed to live victoriously every day. One who's close to God can't possibly have a heart that still beats with selfishness or a mind that wanders into unspiritual territory, right? He's not supposed to have doubts or fight ongoing temptations. And if that sparkling white faded, the person was no longer worthy. This was how the Christian testimonies from my past sounded. And if your story didn't sound like that, you weren't asked to tell it.

Laura was the first person in Saskatchewan to ask to hear my story, and I agreed to the interview. She cooked a fabulous meal, and we ate together with her husband, Graham. Then he went off to do other things while she and I sat in her living room. A fire crackled in the stove beside us, and that wonderful smell of wood smoke filled the room.

She started into her questions, and most of it was easy. But when she got to current events, I wasn't sure what to say. I was still reeling and was immensely embarrassed about being divorced. Though I longed for someone to talk to, I barely knew Laura. I just couldn't tell her everything; what would she think?

I answered carefully so as to be truthful but kept it vague on anything to do with my marriage and divorce.

She wrote the story and had me approve it. We did some tweaks to make sure we didn't misrepresent anything. Then she printed it in the bulletin and posted it to the church website.

What surprised me was that over the next few years, several people, even strangers, commented to me on how much my story had encouraged them. One man whom I'd never met called the Cornerstone office one day. He'd read my bio on the church website, he said. He spoke some kind words to me and asked if it would be okay to send me a DVD, something about a potter. I was touched.

It was in my mailbox not long afterward. I smiled as I pulled it out. The first chance I got, I sat down to watch. It was a beautiful commentary by a real-life potter. He demonstrated the process of the lump of clay on the wheel—the molding, the firing, the painting. He showed how pressure here or there would change the shape. He told about cracks and flaws. He talked about the severely high temperatures to harden the pieces, making them useful. And all along, he brought out the significance of Christ's being the Potter and us, the clay. How His molding makes us into vessels for His use. How the fire of trials refines us.

I was struck. Was Christ shaping me? Did He see something worthwhile in one so flawed that He would put His hands on this clay and shape it into a useful vessel? Was I being refined in His furnace?

How much better to be molded and shaped by Christ—to be tried in His fires—than to be thrown away, a life wasted, unwilling to yield to the Potter's hands.

Tumbleweed on the Prairie

Lots of new sights and new experiences greeted me in those first couple of years on the prairie. There were stretches of bright-yellow canola that went on as far as the eye could see. There were golden wheat fields and patches of soft, mauve flax under unending skies. Riding in a combine—I'd never before seen farm equipment so massive—harvesting durum till late into the night. And did you know, in small prairie towns, the computer store is also the pet food store is also the paint store is also the U-Haul dealer?

In my part of Saskatchewan, antelope are more common than deer. Sightings for me were almost weekly in rural areas, starting my very first visit to Cornerstone. They're a humorous-looking creature with their long, slender faces, multi-colored; ringed necks; and patches of white. They are the fastest land animal in North America, able to run 88 kilometers an hour. Most newcomers to the area are surprised to see them, proclaiming they thought antelope lived only in Africa. Have they never heard the song? Antelope thrive there in the fields and on the rolling prairie hills, and I've witnessed herds that had to be close to a hundred in number.

How beautiful is this country of ours—Prairies, Rocky Mountains, deserts, lakes, and forests...how vast and diverse its landscapes!

In time, Kimberley and Shawn moved to Shaunavon, too, and they bought a house just three doors down from me. How great it was to have her close again. Once a month or so, Kimberley and I would make the

one-hour drive to the city for groceries, window shopping, and maybe a treat at a coffee shop.

Have you ever seen tumbleweed on the prairie? It looks alive, like sentient creatures, advancing with purpose. While our little car headed east on the Trans Canada Highway to Swift Current one day, they came. One after another, they rolled across the field like soldiers on the mission. They bounced up the ditch and came straight at our car. A maritime girl, I'd never seen such a thing. Kimberley and I looked at each other, *They're after us!* And we hooted with laughter.

The march of the tumbleweeds.

Second-hand Treasures

In small-town Shaunavon, there was often not much to do on a Saturday. Most weekends I worked on Cornerstone documents. Being so new to the tasks, I worked at turtle pace, not accomplishing nearly what I thought I should during office hours. So weekends were a good time to increase my productivity, and I kinda felt like I owed it. Besides, I enjoyed the work.

Once a month, a handful of church ladies gathered for brunch at a little diner on Centre Street. Unlike events such as baby showers, ladies' nights, and small groups, the brunch was informal: come and leave as you please, no structure or topic or forced participation—this was more my style. It let me relax and learn names and faces and begin to see into the lives of the people and the heartbeat of the town.

And almost every Saturday, I ventured out to wander the shops, enjoying the sight of all sorts of lovely things I'd never buy. That's how I happened upon a spot up the far end of Centre Street one day—Larry's

secondhand/antique shop. I love those places! I tingled with anticipation as I pushed open the door.

What I stepped into was a frightful scene for one like me. Rows of shelves, stacked and crowded, closed me in. From front to back, the whole place was cluttered and dusty. I was having second thoughts.

From behind the counter, Larry greeted me warmly. I noticed he chatted with everyone coming and going, and they all seemed to know him. Swallowing my misgivings, I wriggled past customers and ducked into the bigger room beyond.

Knick-knacks, books, dishes, household items, furniture, tools—everything imaginable was piled upon itself in every nook. The deep corners were stacked high, not even accessible; I could only stand in the narrow aisles and peer over at them.

But this strange and disorderly place captivated me from that first day. There was more crammed into this shop than I could ever dig through. I found a funky old floor lamp with a weird, hairy shade. I looked it up and down. Couldn't decide if I loved it or hated it. But I needed a floor lamp, so this one was it. I forget what I paid for it—five dollars, I think—and I marched through Shaunavon, carrying home that thing like a torch in all its glory.

Larry's became my Saturday ritual, and by my second visit, he knew me. I'd spend an hour or more admiring antique furniture, picking through boxes and shelves of old dishes, gathering unique teacups and saucers. I'd lay them all out on the counter and Larry would look them over. *Give me five dollars for all of it,* he'd say. Or, *That cup doesn't have a saucer; just take it.*

What fun to arrive home with my little bag of teacup treasures. I'd get right to washing off the grime. I'd rinse and dry them and set them out on the deep window ledge above the kitchen table.

The weeks rolled by, and I'd collected up to a couple dozen sets when I saw that I was running out of space. And I had to stop going to Larry's.

Wheels

It was wonderful when I lived in Moose Jaw, not needing a car. But in Shaunavon, the absence of a vehicle wasn't so convenient. In this little town, far from everything, I was stranded. I couldn't afford car payments, just yet, or all the other expenses that go with owning a vehicle. So my only escape from the town was to hitch a ride with friends now that the STC had shut down our bus route. But most of the time, I got only as far as my little legs could carry me.

Then came a blessing I never expected. Laura and Graham Dirksen sold me their '95 Ford Explorer for a dollar. One dollar!

That thing had been around. They'd lent it and sold it and bought it back again several times. It was a work vehicle—a farm truck—and looked the part. It was the color of dirt, which was perfect for the muddy, dusty grid roads to Cornerstone.

And now it was mine! Oh, I loved that old SUV! I could haul anything.

And I had freedom!

One Saturday that September of 2014, heading home at dusk from a Cornerstone event, a dark form appeared suddenly in front of me. Before I could make out what it was, it slammed into my windshield, sending bits of glass all over the seat and floor, all through my work bag, and down the front of my blouse.

I skidded to a stop and stared at the shattered screen. A network of cracks crisscrossed the entire surface like half a dozen spider webs spun one on top of another. I took a moment to catch my breath and pick the glass off me.

Then I walked down the dark road till I came across a dead bird, a magpie from what I could make out. It was a safe guess this was the creature that had so abruptly halted my travels. And I his.

An auto shop in Shaunavon replaced my windshield. The business was owned by a family in our church, and they were always gracious to the Cornerstone staff. They gave me a good price, and they washed the vehicle all shiny and slick.

I could never find it in parking lots after that.

After a year or so, the Explorer wouldn't always start. I YouTubed how to change the starter solenoid and tinkered away till I got it. That did the trick for a while, but eventually, I couldn't coax it anymore. So, I kept a screwdriver on the passenger's side floor to make that under-hood connection that would spark the thing to life.

Then it wouldn't stay in park. I learned this new quirk when I backed into my driveway one evening, turned it off, hopped out, and shut the door. It jolted into motion, slowly rolling out the driveway toward the neighbor's garage across the alley. I did some fancy footwork and leapt back in to jump on the brake. After that, I always propped a rock under it or parked up against a barrier, so I wouldn't come out sometime and find it gone off without me.

Eventually, the repairs were more than I could do myself and more costly than I could afford. I put it for sale on Kijiji. I was brutally honest with the young couple who came to buy it. *I have to start it this way,* and I demonstrated my screwdriver skills. *And it doesn't stay in park; that's why I have the rock under the wheel.*

Nothing could dim their enthusiasm for my falling-apart Explorer. *Her dad's a mechanic,* the guy told me, big smile on his face. *He'll fix it up for us.* They happily handed over the $500.00 I was asking without any attempt to negotiate.

I'd see my Explorer around Shaunavon every so often after that. Far as I know, it's still cruising that town. What an amazing little Ford!

And I became owner of a cute little HHR, my new love on wheels.

Impossible is Easy

Our relationship deteriorated after Kimberley's wedding. Robert was brusque with me after the offenses I'd committed against him that weekend. We rarely spoke on the phone anymore, and our texting dwindled. When we did talk, we argued. His words were often cold; mine were heated.

I was losing him, and it was breaking me apart. At night, I feared going to bed—alone with my memories in a dark room, I would surely die. Instead, I'd curl up under a blanket on the love seat and let a DVD run itself out while my eyes grew heavy, and I slept. At some point, I'd awake and pad off to bed, finally too groggy for my tortured thoughts to invade.

That November, the need to rescue us was heavy on me. I wanted my home again, and I wanted my husband. I knew it wouldn't be easy for us. We had lots to confront outside ourselves and even more to confront between us. Whatever the fight would be to restore us, I was ready to go to battle. Together with him. For us.

I loved my job so much, and I wasn't ready to leave. I'd been hoping to finish my two-year work-away at Cornerstone. But the truth was, Robert meant more.

So on the phone one day I asked to come home. *I'll resign right now, if that's what it takes to put us back together. We'll work on this. I'll fight for us.*

No, came his instant reply.

My heart sank. I'd clung to his promises since the start of this insanity. I'd believed his words; I'd given what he'd asked. Weren't we still supposed to be together?

In December, I was homesick; I wanted to see him. I asked to go home for Christmas. *No, don't come.* Again, he didn't want me. Had he written me off? Was this the end?

All this time, I'd been praying that God would soften Robert toward me, that he'd accept me back. I believed in marriage till death. I believed we could repair us. I believed we should stay together, fix our problems, and grow together in God's strength. I wanted that for us.

But Robert had to believe it, too, for it to work; God wouldn't force him, nor could I. Simply going back and resuming our lives in that house was not enough to make it right. We both needed to be willing. We both needed to change our attitudes and our actions. We both needed to put the other ahead of ourselves.

Over and over, I gave my future to God. It was a lesson I was learning since I'd stepped on the bus in Moose Jaw and headed for Shaunavon that first time. I'd seen His plan unfold time after time; I lived in it daily and knew it was much better than anything I could have plotted for myself. Though I was nearly devastated at the realization that our marriage might truly be over, I knew God knew better than I. No matter how much I wanted to reconcile, He saw the outcome of that scenario; and maybe it was worse than what we were already living. I knew God had His hand on me. He'd take what seemed the worst situation and make it into His best for me. So I prayed that if Robert still refused me, God would help me be okay.

And I made a decision somewhere about that time that hinged on Robert's answer, a decision about my possible future alone.

In January, I tried once more. I told Robert again that I wanted to go home. I repeated my offer, *I'll resign my job right now. We'll work on this.*

Again, he refused.

Okay, I told him. *I have to accept that. But this, remember, is the choice you've made. Robert, I need a home. I've decided, if you don't want me to go back, I'm going to look for a house. Once I find one, I'm staying here for at least five years.* I don't know why I picked that number—five years—except that he'd know how serious his refusal was. I couldn't keep on in the uncertainty, letting him push me back and forth. My life couldn't hinge on his whims. I'd put down roots in Shaunavon for the time being. I wasn't giving up on us, but I wouldn't just flit back to him when he pulled the strings.

Nothing would change Robert's mind. He clung to his refusal.

So it seemed I would be in Shaunavon longer than the two years I'd first expected, and I was convinced it would be more prudent to put my money into a mortgage rather than a rental every month. I prayed about my job and a home. *I'm content in my rental for a couple of years, God. But if I'm going to be here longer than that, I'd like to have my own house, if that's in your will. I'm not in a hurry. I want the right one. You know what I need and what I can afford. I'll wait for you to bring me that house.* I was filled with contentment about whichever God chose for me.

Some of the Shaunavon houses I looked at were dreadful and falling apart. Almost all of them had basements with heaved floors and cracked walls. The water table is high in that area and causes much damage to the concrete.

As the realtor drove me home from another disappointing search one afternoon, she took a little jaunt out of our way—down First Street East. She came to a stop in front of a small stucco bungalow. *This one's going on the market soon. When it does, I want to show it to you. I think you'll like it.*

I peered at it through the car window. *Hmmm*... It didn't grab me. Awfully narrow lot. But it was kind of cute. Sure, I'd have a look, why not?

The kind of home that works for me is not what you might expect. It's not big or fancy or new or expensive. Small and old is great if it's got some character, an interesting layout, or a pretty nook where I can cozy up.

When I walked into that house a couple of weeks later, I fell in love. Every room wrapped around me like it was welcoming me home. The whole place was done in shades of yellow. The nine-foot ceilings gave an open, airy feel. There were still the original, hand-painted light fixtures in the living room. It had the cutest little hall running between the front room and back bedroom. The little bathroom had an antique clawfoot tub—my dream tub. The former owners had taken out a wall to combine two bedrooms into a studio—a happy bonus—the extra space I'd need not to feel cramped. A sunporch, full of windows and light, graced the front of the house, facing east. It was just big enough for a love seat and a lamp—the perfect reading nook. All the interior doors were solid wood, and the same skeleton key fit all their locks. The little round front doorbell looked and sounded just like the ancient doorbell on my grandmother's big, old house in Moncton, the bell I'd delighted in ringing again and again as a kid.

There hadn't been many updates done to this little house on First Street East, and I loved that the original character hadn't been lost. The house was solid, with level floors and square corners. Even the basement was better than the average.

Out back was a little garage with an old wooden, trifold, gliding door. The fenced-in plot was a good size for me, and I could see its potential. A beautiful big tree in one corner spread its bare limbs over the lifeless yard. How gorgeous it would all be come spring!

I wandered. I lingered. I dreamed. This was my house. I pushed my stay as long as I could, then, reluctantly, I let the realtor take me back to my rental.

For fun, I went to the bank to see what they'd allow me for a mortgage. As a starting point, I gave them the asking price of the house on First Street East—$130,000. They came back with approval, and I thought they were nuts.

So I did some calculations of my own and came up with $90,000. That's what I could comfortably handle and not put myself into financial handcuffs.

So I asked God for a house that would suit me for $90,000, one I wouldn't need to sink a fortune into just to make livable, a good investment house. Any more than that amount, and I'd know it wasn't the house for me.

I went back to the little place on First Street East twice with friends; I wanted other eyes to see it, other wisdom to assess it. Richard Williams' evaluation was super valuable. As a builder himself, he was quite knowledgeable, and he looked it over from top to bottom, climbing up to the attic and combing through the basement.

The two of us stood out front afterward, eyeing the tan-colored home. *They're asking $130,000,* I told him. *What do you think would be a reasonable price?*

He tilted his head back and forth a couple of times while looking over the building before us. *If you could get it for $115,000,* he nodded. *It's a good little house for that amount. What are you going to offer?*

I paused, *$90,000,* I said. I knew I sounded ridiculous.

He looked at me, brows raised. *Mmmm...* was all he said.

I went straight to the realtor's office, and I quoted her my price. She did a slight double-take, *Okay... I don't think they'll accept that. But I'll send it to them*.

I know they won't, I agreed, as she went to work at her computer.

In my office the next day, Marion Williams plopped herself down into the chair opposite my desk. *It's not enough,* she said. *Your offer for that house is too low.*

I know, I told her, smiling. See, I'd done the math...and I'd prayed.

Not long afterward, I got word from the realtor that the owners had rejected my offer. So I put aside dreams of my house on First Street East. *God, if this is the house for me, make them change their minds. If it's not and you have another house for me, bring me a good one for $90,000.*

A month later, I got a text from the realtor. The owners had dropped their asking price to $115.000, if I was interested. Impressive—the very amount Richard had suggested.

I held my ground.

Another month went by. I was hard at work at my computer when a text dinged. *If you resubmit your offer on the house, they'll accept it.*

A smile spread across my face. *I'll be in to sign papers tonight,* I texted back.

I flew out of my office, *They agreed to my offer!* I announced to Blake as I sailed by. I chased down Richard in the hall. *They'll accept my offer! If I resubmit, they'll accept my offer on the house!* I beamed.

Unlikely as it was, they'd changed their minds!

And right there, I knew God had picked this house for me.

Inspection, lawyer, mortgage, papers signed. I took possession on my birthday that May of 2014, and Kimberley spent the first weekend with me in my new home.

When God is in it, the impossible is easy.

A House Warmed

June 2014

When are you going to be ready for us to celebrate your new home? was Kathryn's recurring question. She was planning a housewarming party for me and was eager for me to set a date.

I don't know. My stuff hasn't come yet, was always my response.

Once I got my house, Robert had shipped my belongings to Shaunavon. I wanted to hold off the party till my things arrived, so I'd have something to fill the space.

The truck finally pulled up early in June. What fun to unpack and set up my things in my own little home!

Party at last! Cornerstone staff and residents and Alliance Church folks gathered to warm my house with me. I wound through clusters of people, parked in every available space throughout the living room, kitchen, studio—the place was packed. There were conversations, food, and smiles everywhere.

After some time, Kathryn got our attention and herded us all out into the yard. It was a beautiful, warm, sunny evening, and as we gathered there on my front lawn, Blake prayed a blessing over me and my home. What a glorious moment. No better feeling than to be surrounded by my brothers and sisters, praying there together.

We lingered after the "amen," enjoying each other, light chatter filling the summer air. A soft rumble added to the sound of our voices—a

motorcycle somewhere down the street. I barely noticed it, my attention focused on my guests.

But as the motorcycle rolled slowly up the street, I became more aware of it. Casually, I glanced over—*A little like my bike,* went through my head.

As it came closer still, I looked again. *A lot like my bike...the saddlebags, even!*

Familiarity struck, and I stared, unable to compute. It wasn't right; it didn't fit. The thoughts all came at once, and I couldn't untangle what I recognized from what simply couldn't be.

The rider turned the wheel and came straight up my walkway. He stopped right in front of me and took off his helmet. Aaron, from our church, grinned at me, swung off the bike, and stepped aside.

It was my bike! The little Suzuki Robert had bought for me back in 2007! Here in Shaunavon! I stood staring, jaw on the ground. I couldn't wrap my head around it.

"...A little something from home," Kathryn was saying to gasps and delighted laughter from the crowd. I stumbled forward, touched it, grinned like a fool, couldn't string two words together. How? When? Why? Everyone was smiling and talking; it was all a blur and a murmur.

Extraordinary! I'd mentioned my motorcycle to Kathryn at some point on one of our drives to work—that it was too expensive to ship and that I'd miss being able to ride this summer. That had sparked her plan. She'd made connections with Robert and had him send it. She'd collected money from those standing around us. She'd hidden the bike away, in her yard for days after its arrival, waiting for this night, hoping I wouldn't stumble upon it there in the meantime.

I was truly speechless, and I'm still in awe.

Many more people have blessed me in so many ways. God has been good, bringing His Church around me to encourage and lift me up, to

help me when I need it. I don't deserve this love, these gifts, their care and generosity.

I'm ever challenged to do the same—blessing others in some way, passing on Christ's loving kindness.

Cereal Parties

I think my favorite food in the world is cereal. Good cereal. Those with whole grains, flakes and nuggets, not too sweet. I combine two or three kinds of cereal then throw in a handful of my homemade granola, maybe raisins, nuts, coconut—the list is endless, really—delightful garnishes to enhance the cereal experience. Top it with almond milk and my homemade yogurt. Yummy! You can see why breakfast is my favorite meal.

Then at some point, it occurred to me that even better than cereal for breakfast would be cereal for supper. Genius! Come home from work...it's late...I'm tired. I don't want to cook.

I'd started the habit back when I was having problems with food. Cereal was just easier on the tummy that time of night than the usual suppertime meal. So I'd have my protein and veggies for lunch and nuts and fruit for snack. Even in Shaunavon in 2014, I was still working my way back to a normal diet.

Somehow my cereal supper habit got out to my co-workers. One suppertime, a day or two before my birthday and just before I moved into my house, I was packing up the kitchen in my rental when there was a knock at the back door. I opened it to find Hillary and Daniel, fellow Cornerstone staff, standing there with silly grins, holding out a box of cereal and a jug of milk. Without saying even hello, they broke into melody, "This is your birthday song. It is not very long..."

I waited for the next line. There was none. That was it. The end. Cut off mid-phrase, tune left hanging, their faces expectant as though ready for the applause.

In they came and put their gifts on the table. I pulled out bowls and spoons for the three of us and all my fixings. *It's not just cereal and milk,* I explained as I set down one item after another. *It's a creation, a medley of enticing tastes and textures, all the flavors together.* We scooped a little of this and a bit of that into our bowls, bringing together the most delectable ingredients for a gourmet cereal supper. Giggling and chattering, we raised our spoons to the first-ever cereal party, soon to be famous.

Before long, I was hosting cereal parties with one friend, three friends, ten. Everyone would bring a favorite cereal and toppings, and we'd lay it all out, potluck style. Help yourself, build your bowl.

I'd get a few raised eyebrows with my unconventional supper/party menu, like, *Where's my meat n potatoes? Where are my chips n salsa?*

But for the rest of us, it was a grand buffet, comfort food celebrated, a break from the ordinary, and lots of fun and laughter with friends.

Even now, they bring it up, *Oh, our cereal parties... Let's do it again!*

Blips

Home Again, Home Again

Sometime after I'd presented to him my plan to buy a house (in January of 2014), Robert and I resumed our communication on a better note. He became gentler with me. I don't remember just when or how it started, but slowly we made our way back to talking about us. Mind you, things had certainly become more complicated, as far as I was concerned, after all the difficulties that had come from my first visit home in 2013. But I began to believe we just might make it yet.

By the spring of 2014, I desperately wanted to visit again. I asked Robert a couple of times if I could go, but just as at Christmas, he refused. I didn't know why he didn't want to see me, but I conceded to his wishes, finally telling him that if he changed his mind to let me know. I wouldn't mention it again.

And one day, he gave me the okay.

When he met me at the airport, he was all smiles to see me. I was so glad to be wrapped in his hugs again. I slipped back into my house like a hand in a glove.

Robert and I did well. He seemed happy to have me there. I don't remember there being arguments. He spent each Sunday with me, and we went on outings. We slept in the same bed. We were still us, still married, just as he'd said a year ago that we would be. Maybe this was the start of our ascent back into some kind of normal.

Then came some blips. Just a few quiet words that echoed loud and long.

So you guys are still together? Like, married? my friend, Eileen, asked. She'd come to spend the evening with me.

Yes, of course, I answered, smiling.

You're just away working for a while? Then you're coming back to live with Robert?

That's right.

You haven't seen each other for a year, and now you're only here for two weeks?

It's been almost a year. Yes, that's right.

Then why is he out there and not in here with you? She nodded toward the shop where Robert had been hard at his welding almost every night since I'd arrived.

I shrugged, *That's just how he is,* I explained weakly. I had no real answer.

I told you before you came, I wouldn't have much time with you; I have a big job on the go, Robert defended himself when I brought it up. It was true, he had warned me before I got on the plane. But I'd missed him so much, I'd come anyway, set on soaking up whatever time he'd give me.

I told myself it was all okay, just enjoy.

One day Robert told me about a conversation he'd recently had. His brother had asked how he should treat me if he should happen to see me while I was home. *I told him, 'Treat her the same as you would any other of my friends,'* Robert declared to me. He seemed to think I should be pleased at that.

They rolled off his tongue so easily, but to me the words clanged like a gong—*any other of my friends...*

I overheard another strange comment when he was on the phone with a neighbor. I could tell by Robert's responses that the man was surprised to learn I was there, staying at the house. I heard Robert stumble over his answers, one and then another. It sounded like he was put on the spot...like he was uncomfortable with the questions being asked. And then I heard him say, *What...? We're still* ***friends****...*

'Friends.' There it was again.

Since I'd arrived, Robert had talked to me like we were together. He'd behaved as though we were a married couple. So I couldn't understand why he was presenting me to others as a friend and not as the wife he claimed to me that I was.

Then came a little bit of déjà vu, the one time Robert and I went to a family event that summer—a supper. As soon as we got in the door, he charged ahead, picked up his food from the counter, and took a seat at the table, leaving me on my own without a word. He didn't look at me. Didn't touch me. No hand at my elbow. No offering for me to go ahead of him in the line. It seemed that I was forgotten...like I'd turned invisible the minute we'd stepped inside the door.

It was awkward for me. I hadn't seen some of his family for a year and the rest of them, for even longer. After my last encounter with them, I really could have used his support. Yet he'd left me standing alone.

I took a seat at the table next to him... I stuck myself at his side all evening. Yet he ignored me throughout, just as he'd done a year earlier at Ian's wedding.

I was getting tired of being treated like a wife when it was just the two of us and like he wanted nothing to do with me when we were around family and friends.

The old shadows from a year ago fell on my heart again, this time, darker.

The Rumor Email

Moncton, New Brunswick
July 2014

Here's what I heard, a friend grinned. We were having lunch at The Rosebud Bistro, my favorite Moncton restaurant. *I heard Robert kicked you out because you were into weed and refused to quit.* The two of us hooted with laughter. We joked about it, back and forth, and then I brushed it aside for the rest of our lunch, it was so absurd.

But no matter how ridiculous, the rumor pricked me as I walked away. It came back to me again and again. I shook my head in amazement that anyone could come up with such a story and spread it. I wondered how far the lie had gone. Did anyone believe it? Surely not. But then as I thought about it, it sure appeared as though people from my Moncton life believed something outrageous. Was this what had them acting so strangely toward me?

Back in Saskatchewan, it festered. I grew angry, not just over this rumor but that I was being talked about with no thought for the truth and no conversation with me. Why had I let this go without addressing it? I vented my upset to Kathryn and Hillary on a walk around town one evening, but my frustration didn't go away. Maybe it was time I confronted gossip. Maybe I needed to try to clear up the misconceptions. I worked myself into a decision to act.

Unfortunately, my good intentions are often not coupled with a proper approach, and I make things worse instead of better. I didn't want to be hasty and shoot off words while I was angry. So I let it simmer for the next two months.

In September, I wrote an email. I wanted to confront the issue head-on, no delicate tiptoeing. At the same time, I didn't want to sound nasty, preachy, or presumptuous. I tried to be careful about jumping to conclusions and pointing fingers. I revised and tweaked and wrote again. In my mind, the writing I settled on called the gossip what it was but left open the door to restored friendships, my deepest longing with everyone.

I sent it to a few people to get their opinions. They responded favorably. I hoped that meant I hadn't crossed a line. So I nervously hit the send button and away it went to the handful of family and friends I thought might have heard this rumor. I imagine now that my approach was far too blunt. While I don't regret sticking up for myself, I do wish I had done a better job of it.

It was a little after five one evening. I had stayed late at work to finish up a few things. Then just before heading home for the night, I decided to check my personal email. There, in my inbox, was a recriminating email from one family member who seemed to rake me over the coals. Again, I was broken-hearted by the rejection.

First, the pain was almost unbearable—I feel things way too deeply. Next, I was so wound up, I was spinning. I called Robert—I'm sure I was frantic—and told him about the response. *For once, please be on my side; please support me through the misery I feel,* I silently begged.

He denied that the email was harsh toward me and defended his relative without even hearing the words that had been sent to me. That moment, it hit me hard. Though it was a silly rumor, it had hurt me. Though I didn't know why his family was treating me as they did, I was grasping at whatever I could find to mend things between us. Restoration was huge to me. I told

Robert I needed his support, that I needed him to believe me, to value me above his family. But he couldn't bring himself to do it. His dismissal of my attempts and my feelings was a sharper pain yet. I didn't know how he and I could ever survive, his disregard for me was so severe. More arguments ensued that would go on for months.

Stephanie saw my tears and came to my office, so I showed her the emails, mine and the response. She couldn't understand the person's reaction either. She wrapped her arms around me and broke into a beautiful prayer. Her quiet words soothed. What a wonderful gift of encouragement she has.

My attempt to reach Robert's family, as it turned out, wasn't a complete failure. In time, I got a positive response from one of his family members, and we went back and forth with a couple of emails.

One thing she wrote stopped me up short. Not long after I'd left the east for Moose Jaw back in 2012, she'd called our house for me. When she'd asked to speak with me, Robert had plainly told her, *Sandra doesn't live here anymore*. She'd hung up the phone, shocked, having gotten no more explanation than that.

I was shocked, too, to learn that was how he'd presented my departure. What happened to our agreement that if I stayed out west, he'd explain? What happened to, "I've let everybody know the truth"?

I got another response, a firm reply from one of Robert's sisters-in-law. Her letter was more evidence that not many people had gotten a straight account of our story. She wrote that she felt for my family—that it's hard and awkward when a family situation is torn apart and people are badly hurt. She told me I couldn't expect to walk back in and have everything be the same as before.

Her words hurt deeply. I'd only followed my husband's requests. I wasn't the one who'd torn apart our family. I was trying to put it back together.

A few months later, I was still so upset about her note, I called her. I wanted so much to sort things out and dissolve the tension between us. I heard disgust in her tone, even across the miles. "You need to get back here where you belong," she told me. These judgements were unfair. She'd never talked to me about my offence, whatever she believed it was, and had never asked my side.

We talked for a long while, and I listened to what she said. Then I explained some things. I told her that coming out west had been Robert's idea, and yes, I'd quickly agreed to it. But it hadn't been a break-up, we hadn't had a fight, and I wasn't aware of any issues between us at the time. I told her it was Robert who had divorced me, not the other way around—that he'd insisted on it. I told her I'd asked to go back to him twice, and that he'd refused my request both times. My words were met with silence. Then a quiet, "I didn't know that."

By the time we hung up, I felt we'd made progress. I was so grateful.

I tucked new hope close to my heart.

Silence

One day, there was no response from Robert.

I sat alone in my living room, phone in my hand, ache in my chest. The last few months since that rumor email had been uneasy between us. We were back to difficulty again, touchy with each other. I don't remember what we'd texted about that day, if I was nasty...if he was nasty. But I must have pushed too far, for suddenly, he wasn't there.

I was overcome with fear that he could be gone from my life for good. What would I do? How would I go on? I remember the darkness and my

dread. Looking into my future, where once I'd seen light and hope, there was now a heavy, black curtain.

I cried out to God. For help, for peace, for comfort. Please bring him back. Don't let him be gone forever. I need him, even if only to reach across the miles with a few words of friendship in a text. But whatever happens, God, please get me through it.

And then it came. At last, a ding on my phone. A note from Robert, as ordinary as ever, that filled me with relief and reassurance.

He was still there. I was not alone.

Never Green Tree

Kenton, New Brunswick

Circa 2000

Believe it of not, a true story[1]

It was a drizzly Saturday in mid-November when her husband breezed into the kitchen, swept her up in a hug, and announced, "Guess what! I found us a Christmas tree! Brought it home today."

"Already?" she asked, unable to mask her surprise. Seemed to her a little early to cut a tree.

"Don't worry. It'll be fine," he assured her.

The fact that her normally capable husband had completed this one dreaded annual task without a word of urging from her and with time to spare was somewhat of a gift in itself. She decided not to push the issue.

So that was the end of it... Until a month later.

"Hon, where is our Christmas tree?" she asked one morning. "I'd like to set it up today."

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1. "She" in this story is me. The "husband" is Robert.
   The key elements are not exaggerated; however, minor details were added in order to make it a third-person point of view story.

"You haven't even come out to see it," he skirted the question.

She paused from her sewing. "I haven't, no... But, where is it? It's in your shop, right?"

"Uhh... well, not exactly."

She crossed her arms and looked him squarely in the eye. "Where, then?"

"It's, ah...outside."

"I knew it. It's that heap out there in the mud, isn't it?" His sheepish expression was all the answer she needed. "You just left it lying in the dirt all this time?"

He was getting irritated with all her questions. "Don't complain to me about the tree when you're not even interested enough to come look at it." He stalked off.

She didn't see what visitation of the tree had to do with anything.

Minutes later, she heard the door being thrown open, followed by the clomp of her husband's work boots down the hall and into the living room. He plopped the mud-encrusted tree ceremoniously into its stand. "It's a fine tree," he announced.

"It's dead." Anyone could see.

"It's not dead! Look!" And he waved his hands at the upper branches that still boasted a hint of green.

"The whole bottom is brown!" she argued. Indeed, a third of the tree.

"No one will notice once the ornaments are on," he insisted.

"But the needles are falling off. It sounds like it's raining in here!"

"It just needs watering. It will be fine." And he actually believed it.

"It's tilted," she pointed out. "It's going to fall."

"It won't fall! I guarantee it! This tree will never fall!"

So she bit her tongue and vowed to say no more.

She spent the next afternoon going through the motions of decorating the pitiful tree. Several times she paused to gaze at the thing and shake her

head. Usually, she at least felt sorry for her bedraggled Christmas tree. Not for this one, though. Nope. Not a bit.

She went back to her work. The mini lights just wouldn't sit right. She heaved a sigh as she reached out to tuck them into the obnoxious branches...

Just one touch—that's all it took. Slowly, her Charlie Brown tree started to lean and... Uh-oh! Oh, no!

TIMM-BERRR!

She lunged; she grabbed; she braced. But there was no stopping what comes naturally to dead things. Needles showered down, rivers flowed from the freshly filled tree stand, and with a CRACK, that "just fine" Christmas tree split in two, right down the middle, rotten to the core!

She called her husband at work. "Hon, ya know that tree—that fine tree—the one you guaranteed would never fall?"

"Yes..."

"It fell!"

"I'll fix it when I get home," he sighed.

Enough was enough. "Darling, if you can't bring us a respectable tree, I'm going to get our Christmas tree from now on."

"Good idea!" he declared.

"Starting this year."

"We have a tree this year. It's a fine tree."

"It's not fine. It's dead! The tree is dead!"

"All right, then. *You* go search through the woods to find a Christmas tree." *That'll teach her* sounded through the phone.

"I will." She hung up the call.

There were so many gorgeous trees in Jack's Christmas lot. "This one!" the kids called. "No, this one!" Finally, they chose one they all agreed on. "How much?" she asked, though she really didn't care.

"Ten dollars," Jack replied, smiling as he stepped forward with his saw.

Ten dollars? She watched her husband hand over the crisp bill.

Ten dollars!! All the Christmas tree wannabes that had been carted in and out of their living room over the years when for ten dollars they could have had this: a dense, shapely tree, fully branched...fully needled!

Ten dollars.

The new tree—the lush, green tree—stood straight and tall, twinkling brightly in their living room. She smiled and sighed...satisfied.

Her husband winked at her and nodded from the doorway. Even he had to admit that, yes, this was, indeed, the most beautiful Christmas tree they'd ever had.

But he couldn't keep from muttering one last—

"The other tree was fine."

Changes

Love a Duck

Cornerstone
2014

Our darling cook, Joanna, left our Cornerstone kitchen to marry Carl. They're an adorable pair, both of them pranksters, both of them in love with the Lord. This was Joanna's first marriage but Carl's second—he was a widower. It was a beautiful May wedding in 2014. Joanna glowed in a long, white gown, absolutely lovely. The ceremony was in both English and German, a new experience for me. The reception was elaborate, for the bride and groom had many relatives and friends. We celebrated joyously with Carl and Joanna but mourned in our hearts that we were losing her.

Cornerstone needed a cook.

For weeks, Stephanie and I scrambled to find volunteers to feed us. Some wonderful ladies stepped in, taking turns, but it was still a real headache to fill the position each day.

Elizabeth Walker was our answer to prayer that June. Her husband, Daryl, had been a youth care staff for only a few months, making the long drive from their hometown weekly. They and their three girls planned to move on site as soon as their house in Outlook sold. It just made sense for Elizabeth to work at Cornerstone, and cook was our only opening.

I'm not a cook. I force myself to do it in bulk once a week and throw it into the freezer in single-serving portions to be taken out, one at a time, for the next seven days. My meals are quick, basic, no fuss. So I could never have cooked for a place like Cornerstone. Once or twice they stuck me in last-minute to prepare the lunch because the cook was sick or delayed. Absolute terror! And it was only soup and grilled cheese sandwiches, for goodness sake!

So I had utmost respect for our former Joanna and now for Elizabeth.

We initiated her in full-blown Cornerstone style. Her first day on the job she contended with, not only the regular kitchen and meal prep duties, but an evening graduation as well. We threw her into it with hardly a thought; we had our heads and hands full of all the other Cornerstone goings on. I felt for her, but this was the Cornerstone way. Sink or swim.

Elizabeth brought with her, her big bag of skills—she was organized, thorough, intense, driven, dedicated, and expected it done right. She followed rules to the letter, which caused some contention with some people.

She'd stick in her earbuds and clatter away out there, her sweet voice carrying through the hallway as she sang to music only she could hear. Some days, she needed solitude to deal with whatever was weighing on her, and she'd close up the kitchen doors and pull down the window screen to shut herself in.

That girl dug into the job like nobody's business, cooking for eight or ten youth, twelve to fifteen staff members, sometimes staff families, and

often guests. She put in long hours. She cleaned and organized the kitchen and set up procedures. She took over grocery shopping and recycling. She made wonderful meals, always on time.

Then after she'd put in a full year as our cook, Blake decided to make a switch—he made Stephanie an assistant cook to our new head of food services, who would soon join our Cornerstone staff. And he transferred Elizabeth to the office next to mine.

Elizabeth became Cornerstone's administrative assistant and bookkeeper. That's when I learned how much she'd hated the kitchen...hated cooking—every day, every minute. Wow! My respect for her swelled, having seen her servant heart in that job for a whole year.

Again, she dug right into her work in the office. My love of teaching had me looking forward to training her, but I discovered on day one that she was already capable and needed little from me. I kept my head in my own work and let her have at it.

Elizabeth was smart, creative, resourceful, and fast. She set up spreadsheets and got some of our records organized for the first time. She created procedures I'd never thought of. She organized her office and our stock and knew where everything was all the time—she could hand staff what they needed in a heartbeat and have them on their way. I soon came to know her softness for people, her sweet spirit, her love for the Lord, her keen awareness of her own shortcomings, and her yearning to know God deeply.

But something in me resisted, and I kept her at arm's length. I waited for contention. There wasn't any. She was accommodating and respectful. I watched for her to mess up. She didn't. When she did make a mistake, we'd all hear, "Love a duck!" and she'd work to correct her error, whatever it took.

I was more and more impressed but reluctant to admit it. For six months, I just couldn't bring myself to accept her fully.

The Teacup

December. Christmas. Giving.

I love to shop for gifts, to find just the right things for those on my list. That makes the giving even more fun than the shopping. The problem is, I'm terrible at figuring out *what* to give. I want to give gifts that are meaningful but have little imagination for it. They say you should choose things that you, yourself, like—that you should pick a gift of such value and purpose that it would please you, and then it will please your special someone.

They also say it shouldn't be at all about what you like; you should choose something your recipient likes. That shows you know the person and you've worked to please her.

I don't know which "they" to listen to.

That Christmas, I found a nice coffee mug for Kathryn. I liked its shape and color; I'd enjoy sipping coffee from that mug. I knew she liked coffee mugs—she had a collection of them in her cupboard. I'd paid attention.

But what about the other girls I worked with? I hemmed and hawed but didn't know what to do.

Then an idea came to me. That silly teacup in my Moose Jaw apartment had meant so much when I was starting out with nothing. It represented hope that better things would come, and I would one day have *familiar* around me again.

I dug through my kitchen and assessed my lineup of teacups from Larry's secondhand shop, each one a small treasure. I chose carefully, trying

my best to match the cup to the person. Some I chose for the color, some for the pattern or shape, some for the story behind it. I picked out a cup and saucer set for each lady on staff.

The first one I gave away was to Marion, and it was that very same Moose Jaw teacup. Her hospitality and friendship had been a special gift when I was still a stranger and working to make Shaunavon my home. When the moment came, though, and she opened my gift, my idea suddenly seemed silly. I never did tell her the story of why the cup meant so much to me and why I was giving it to her.

But I got better. One by one, I carried my boxed treasures to the Cornerstone ladies and told them my teacup story.

The last one was for Elizabeth, and it was a tough one for me. The little green cup looked old and well-used. It had no saucer—lost or broken somewhere years ago. On the inside of the cup were little painted roses. The sides were straight and were marred with a fine crack all the way down.

But the crack gave more than it took away—it made it unique, it spoke of usefulness and of trying, of mistakes and endurance. It was unexpectedly beautiful, that plain, ugly cup.

I told Elizabeth that that teacup was me, deeply flawed, broken, and missing some parts. But I was still willing and would do my best to serve with her, she and I, a team.

That teacup changed everything. All my hesitations with Elizabeth fell away. Oh, the laughs we shared in the office after that! The blunders of both of us! We just took turns from one silly mistake to another. Then we doubled over in giggles at ourselves and how much we thought alike. "We share the same brain," she'd say. "Which one of us is using it today?"

That beautiful, ugly teacup began a friendship that has grown deeper through the years and heartaches that followed for both of us.

Stranger on the Steps

Cornerstone
January 13, 2015

I was about to go into a meeting one afternoon when a text dinged.

At Cornerstone, staff are all required to monitor their phones at all times in case something urgent comes up and they are needed by another staff member. So having my phone and looking at texts were not violations of any Cornerstone rules or ethics.

Glancing at the screen, I saw that it was Holly. *So sorry, Mom,* she wrote. *Are you okay?*

I like to know what's going on before I panic over an evocative message such as this one, so I asked what she meant.

Grampy MacPherson, she explained. *He passed away*. She'd figured I already knew and was now sorry I'd found out by a text from her.

The messenger and the means made no difference to me. It was the message that brought me up short. I paused at my desk. The news wasn't a shock. My father hadn't been well the last few years, and he'd been in a care home for some time. Still, it gripped me to learn that someone close to me was gone.

I shuffled off to my meeting, but once there, I couldn't keep my mind on the agenda. When my phone rang in the middle of our discussion, I stepped out to answer it. In the hallway, I listened while my mother repeated to me the same news that Holly had sent. She went on with details, but I didn't take in much. The funeral would be Monday, January

19, she told me. She didn't expect me to go, given the distance and the expense, but she'd wanted to tell me what had happened.

I didn't say much during that call, and I never indicated whether I'd be at the funeral or not. As my mother's last words faded, I pressed the *end call* button, then returned to my meeting without explanation, and I sat in silence.

I didn't know what to think or feel. I'd lost a parent. I'd never been in that place before. I tried to absorb it.

How do you mourn a father?

Elizabeth had dreams. Not like regular dreams—those little moving pictures that most of us view in our sleep and often forget five minutes after waking. Elizabeth's were deep meaningful ones that could stop you in your tracks. *You don't want to be in one of Elizabeth's dreams,* one staff member chuckled.

The first time she started to relate one to me, I groaned inwardly. They are so senseless and strange, listening to somebody tell her dream is worse than hearing a movie plot recounted in detail.

But I would soon find out that Elizabeth's dreams weren't like most people's. And the one she was about to share rattled me.

Here's how it went:

Elizabeth was leaving Cornerstone one evening. She had started down the exterior steps when a man she'd never seen before approached her and inquired, "Does someone named Sandra Glenn work here?"

"Yes, she does," she told him.

"How is she?" he asked, his eyes deeply searching, his face intent.

Elizabeth responded, "She's good. She has her ups and downs, but it's obvious she loves the Lord and wants to serve Him.

"The man's face softened as it broke into a beautiful smile, and a look of great peace came over him. He nodded slowly, gazed up into the sky, and closed his eyes. "Mmmmm..." was all he said.

Elizabeth demonstrated this as she talked, tilting her head back, closing her eyes, and nodding slowly. "He was so pleased," she told me, "like they were the best words he could ever hear." She sat in silence, eyes still closed, and I waited. Something was coming, I could feel it.

Then she opened her eyes and looked right at me. She spoke very quietly, "It was your father," she said.

It hit like a slap. I'm sure my heart stopped, and all the blood drained to my feet. I couldn't move. I don't think I said anything as I stared back at her before finally shuffling away to my office.

It was just a silly dream, I knew; it shouldn't have mattered.

But it did.

I saw it in my head, the image of that man and his smile. I saw it all that day and for many days following.

It struck me that my father, now perfect with God and free from his earthly nature, knew no regrets from this life. His wrongs were erased, he was so thoroughly renewed in God. His life on earth could no longer hurt him; the parts he remembered would bring no pain. He saw failings and trials in light of their fruition. He was finally happy, finally content and filled with compassion, holiness, wisdom, and truth.

I don't put a lot of stock in dreams; we should look to God's Word for guidance, instead. Yet this one gripped my very core. It grips me still. I couldn't shake the feeling that God was trying to show me something. My first thought was that my father was making sure I was okay—a father's deepest yearning for his children. But I don't think God allows the glories

of Heaven to be marred for its human inhabitants by concern over the happenings on Earth.

The next thought that struck me was, *Does this mean I am forgiven?*

Growing Up

The Muddy Bog

Moncton, New Brunswick

At five years old, I sat in one of those little Sunday school chairs every week and listened to my teacher pray for us kids. She would pray, *God, if there are boys or girls here today who have not asked Jesus into their hearts, please save them.*

And with those words, my soul would be pricked for all the wrongs I'd done. My most shameful sin would take shape again behind my tightly closed eyes—horrible, ugly mud all over my white leotards.

I think my mother had visions of my being a little lady. She dressed me for church in white hat and white gloves with smart little purse in my hand. I was very small back then, but I remember standing between the pews, preoccupied with my grown-up accessories, which I loved, while voices from the platform droned on with things I didn't understand.

Mum must have expected the sweet little lady in church to extend to little girl at play. She put me in patent leather shoes, white leotards, and a skirt to send me out into the neighborhood. For a while, I think it worked.

I remember being horrified the first time I saw children jumping in muddy water. I couldn't comprehend why anyone would do that. My cousin told me years later, "I had to teach you to play in the puddles."

But when I got old enough to make friends, I learned the joys the mud and the puddles could bring. On the fateful day in question, one of the neighborhood kids happened by when I was at play in the driveway. He was on his way to so-and-so's house, a boy who had a huge mud puddle in his backyard. Everyone was there, this kid told me; I should come too, he figured.

I wasn't so sure about that. I knew my mother would not be happy if I got myself in a mess. On the other hand, this backyard bog did sound appealing. All the kids having a good time... I wanted to have fun too. If only I had my rubber boots, I thought. That would make it all okay. Rubber boots would keep me clean.

But the boots were stored in the garage, and I was too small to pull up the huge, heavy door. And if I went for them in through the house, my mother would want to know why I needed the boots, and she'd kibosh the fun right there.

The kid was still waiting for me, urging me to come. The draw was great. Maybe, just maybe, the garage door would be agreeable this time; I'd try it and see. I wrapped my hands around the handle and gave a good, hard pull. To my surprise and delight, the door slid upward with my first effort. Well, look at that!

And there were my boots, waiting for me and my day in the mud. I changed into them quickly and scurried off with my friend.

That puddle was huge! I'd never before seen such an expanse of mud! It was ugly and beautiful and enticing. I stepped in slowly, testing it out. I smiled and glanced back at my friend. This was okay; hey, what a good thing that I'd come.

The water came higher as I made my way through. I got out quite deep and stopped. The mud beneath me grabbed and stuck and wouldn't let go. A tinge of uncertainty crept up through my tummy. I looked around. My friend lingered at the edge, watching my progress. I wondered why he wasn't in here too.

All the other kids were playing; they paid no attention to me. Well, I couldn't stand here forever, could I? Go ahead or go back. I gave a heave to take the next step. My foot came up, forward, and down...

And the boot stayed behind, stuck in the mud.

I stumbled and sloshed. Ugly brown water splattered up on my clothes while my white leotards slogged through the thick, wet goo. I made a little laugh and went back for the boot, but the first horrors of my predicament began to take hold. My instigator friend disappeared about then, and I was now on my own to face the consequences.

It was a long and dreadful trek home by myself. I don't remember if I was able to get the boot back on or if I carried it all the way up the hill.

I stood on our front doorstep and rang the bell. I can still see my mother's shock when she opened up to find her little lady there all splattered with mud, both feet soaked, and leotards stained from the knee down.

The backyard bog didn't seem so fun anymore.

So when I sat there in my little Sunday School chair, hearing my teacher's prayer—*If there are boys or girls here who have not asked Jesus into their hearts*—I felt the guilt of my sin and the weight of my disobedience.

But then, as every week, she finished with, *Please save them today*. And, as every week before, I breathed a sigh of relief. Whew! Now I'm saved! I reassured myself and put it out of my mind.

Except that the very next Sunday, I'd be right back in that chair, hearing that prayer and feeling my guilt again.

One Sunday after church, my mother and I got talking about Jesus dying for our sin, and she asked me if I was saved.

I told her, *Oh, yes! I'm saved!*

How do you know? I don't know what prompted her to ask that question, but it was a good one.

My Sunday school teacher asked God to save me, I replied confidently. Funny how the most innocent things can cause the gravest misconceptions.

My mother explained to me that no one else could ask God to save me. I had to be sorry, myself, for my sin. I had to ask Him to forgive me; no one else could do that for me.

That brought me up short. It was the missing piece for me. I already understood all the rest, as much as any child can. I went straight to my bedroom, knelt by my bed, and asked God to save me.

And right there, He made me His own. This truth solidified in me even that very moment. Through the years since, no matter what, even when I went my own way, I've always known that was the day I became a daughter of the King.

Imprisoned

That same fall that I was five years old, my parents, Douglas and Grace MacPherson, moved our family from the subdivision with the muddy bog to the country. (I'm pretty sure, though, the move had nothing to do with the dirty leotards or my caper through the mire.) I spent the rest of my growing-up years on a small hobby farm with my sister, Rachel, just us two girls. Our beloved dog, Duchess, grew up with us and went with us everywhere.

The little lady who crinkled her nose at puddles and dirt became the girl who waded through ponds, played in the fields, and explored the woods. I rode my horse bareback and barefoot. I made cabins in the trees and learned to swim in the frigid waters of the brook down the road. I loved life in the country. I didn't mind the isolation then. When I went out, I was still a girly girl—skirts and ruffles. But there in the fields and the trees, in my element, I was a tomboy—frayed jeans and sneakers.

People told me I was bossy as a kid, but even now, I can't put my finger on those instances, though I've no doubt they were real. I don't recall social problems in elementary school. As best I can remember, I was outgoing and confident. I had lots of friends.

That changed abruptly when I switched schools for grade six. It plunged me into a struggle that lasted for years. I remember it so well; I can put myself right back into it...can feel it again as fresh as when I lived it.

I went from fitting in easily, comfortable with myself and my peers, to being so shy, it was physically painful. All through middle school it crippled me. I see now some of the causes, but back then, I didn't recognize them. They were just the stuff that life threw out there, and some of it happened to land on me.

I was an odd kid, and many of my peers didn't much like me. (To be honest, looking back, I don't think I'd have liked me, either, then.) I heard the taunts and whispers in gym class. I felt them. And it made me all the more awkward.

I couldn't look anyone in the eye, not even my best friend. I didn't want anyone to see me, I thought I was so ugly, everything about me. I kept my eyes down. I slouched, curled up inside myself, hidden from view.

I couldn't talk to people. It wasn't that I didn't want to; I just couldn't. At times, I'd find myself trapped somewhere—in a car, say—with another human being who would attempt conversation. My mind would freeze. As

hard as I tried, I couldn't come up with a single thing to say. Completely blank. Nothing worked.

A guy in my high school, a couple of years older than me, would try to chat with me from time to time. Not many kids did that. But this guy was courteous, even to me. I was mortified every time he approached. What would I say? I'd break out in a sweat, and my kneecaps would shake. I'd stare at his mouth, concentrating. *Focus, Sandra! Lis-ten!* I'd command myself. I'd see his lips move; I'd hear sounds come out, but panic would render me mute and near deaf. I couldn't understand a word he said, and I'd be incapable of uttering a single syllable. As he'd wait for me to respond, my breath would catch in my throat. The silence would double, triple, rushing past my ears, a raging ocean, the sound of nothing, so loud it drowned out everything else.

I was told that being shy is selfish, even a sin. Some people made comments as though to shame me out of it, like they might open my eyes to my offence and bring me to repentance; I'd flip the switch and become just like them.

Instead, I wanted to disappear, vanish right there, never again to be seen or remembered, and I withdrew more. I wonder, now, how they could not see the effects of their words. I wish they knew the power they held. Power to hinder. Power to enable.

Nobody chooses this. I wasn't shy because I was selfish. I wasn't trying to hoard the best of me inside myself to keep the treasures of my heart and mind from others, as was said. What they didn't know was that I was imprisoned in a very small box of impenetrable glass. I could see them and hear them. I longed to join them but couldn't break free.

Shyness takes a process to overcome, and each person moves through it at her own pace. I couldn't force it, and no one could force it for me.

I got over being shy when I became an adult—it seemed to be a natural course. But I'm still often labelled "quiet." It's rarely spoken in a favorable way.

But I'm not offended by quiet; it's perplexing to me that so many people are. Maybe I've become more comfortable with myself and with life than they have, and I don't have to hide behind noise. I can enjoy being next to someone and not have to fill the space with chatter.

Quiet and shy are not the same thing, though they sometimes go hand in hand. Those who possess these qualities are not depressed or sad, necessarily. They're not looking for attention. They don't think they're better than anyone else. They're not worse, either.

Being quiet or shy is no more wrong than being talkative or outgoing. All these characteristics can be strengths and weaknesses. No one has a right to dictate the personality God has given someone else; He distributes as He chooses, for His purpose. We're each required to work on what attributes hinder us as God reveals them to us, not as others think we should.

Shy people often have lots to say and are dying to be heard. Many are deep thinkers. They watch, listen, and process to gain understanding and find solutions. Some are lonely; they may be aching for friendship, but they don't know how to begin. They long to be included, but they won't force themselves on anyone. Getting to know them takes time and effort. They'll say the wrong things and might even seem a little odd because they're nervous.

Patience. Like a flower that opens slowly to the warmth of the sun, if you wait, you'll see they're worth it.

Sisters

My sister, Rachel, is five years younger than I and the opposite of me. She's blonde and green-eyed where I'm dark and brown-eyed. She was a pretty child and a delight to everyone while I was awkward, unattractive, and unpleasant.

She and I got along fairly well, despite our age difference. In our younger years, we spent hot summer days in the brook and rode double on our horse. We played in the barn, building cabins out of the bales and jumping from the high, wooden beams into stacks of hay far below. We caught frogs at the pond down Gillespie Lane and brought them home in plastic containers, only for our father to release the poor creatures secretly back to a swamp somewhere, after we'd gone to bed.

When Rachel was still small enough to be gullible, boy I took advantage. I used to mix up all kinds of concoctions and bribe her to drink them—orange juice, milk, ketchup, chicken fat, molasses, anything I could find in the fridge, all put together and blended in a smoothie. *I'll give you a nickel,* I'd coax. I could almost always get her to do it, and then I'd "forget" to pay the nickel. I'd get away with my cons three or four times till she'd clue in and demand payment up front. Worth it for me just the same—I got a lot of mileage out of one small nickel. (How is it she even speaks to me now??)

When I was eight years old, our cousins lived with us for a few months. Jodi was a couple of years older than I and Charlie, just a few months younger.

One evening, my mother dismissed Charlie and me from weeding the garden and sent us in to bed. We weren't keen on getting ourselves tucked in just yet; it was still daylight out there. We sat in our pajamas, in the hall

outside our bedroom doors, spinning tales to one another. At last, bored with our stories, one of us devised a plan.

We slipped into Rachel's room where she was sound asleep. *It's morning. Come on. Time to get up,* we shook her awake.

She was only four years old, but she was sharp; she didn't buy it easily.

Yeah, yeah, it is, we persisted. *Look outside. It's daytime. Mum and Jodi are already working in the garden, see?* The scene through the window was powerful evidence.

It took some doing, but at last, we had her, and we felt pretty pleased with ourselves. She got up and got dressed and was at the kitchen table chomping down her cereal when Dad walked in and caught her. Upstairs, our celebration came to an abrupt halt when we heard him bellow, *What are you doing out of bed??*

Oh, oh, we were goin' down!

Rachel stammered out her explanation since we were too cowardly to face the music with her. Dad shooed her back to bed, and Charlie and I didn't find ourselves so clever anymore.

But maybe my parents got a chuckle out of us after all, though they didn't ever admit it. We never heard another word about it, and they never did reprimand us for our prank.

But childhood flees and things change. When we got a little older, Rachel played more with the kids next door than with me—perfectly natural for her to prefer friends her own age. I spent a lot of time alone after that; there were no kids my age nearby.

Then at eighteen years old, I went away to college, and by the time I came back, she was on her way to college herself. She's lived in the United States ever since, married with five children. Our trips back and forth are short and sparse.

Rachel's still a beautiful lady, still delightful, with a quick humor. We've both grown up since we lived on that acreage all those years ago. So much of life has intervened…so many changes. I wish we knew each other better. Wish we could spend more time together.

Family

Moments

Images play through my mind—flashes of family moments, happy memories of time together:

Falling asleep in the backseat of the car on Sunday-evening drives. Waking up in the darkness. Soft murmurs from the front—Mum and Dad talking quietly.

Trips to McKay's Dairy on Elmwood Drive for ice cream on hot summer nights, Rachel and I with kittens in tow. We'd drip our treats on the ground on purpose, and they'd scurry in to lap up the spills.

Always, sit-down family suppers together when my father wasn't at work, a priority that carried through into my own home, one that's sadly lost in many homes now.

My father loved all things Scottish. Bagpipes sounded throughout our childhood from the turntable in our living room, one vinyl record after another. Rachel and I grew up with an appreciation for that enchanting Highland instrument and the beautiful, haunting songs of Scotland.

Dad's hobby was woodworking. He fashioned many of his pieces by hand without electric tools. He'd disappear into the basement, to his

workshop where he'd labor long over every tiny component, intent on getting each piece perfect. He created beautiful, intricate gifts for friends and family and toys for my kids. Treasures and heirlooms are these things now.

I remember Mum tobogganing with us on the hill across the road from our house. We couldn't wait for her to try out one of our Crazy Carpets, they were so much fun. *I can't get this machine to work,* she giggled as it blew up in the wind every time she tried to get on.

I remember those times we gathered around the dining room table—my mother, her Aunt Helen, Rachel, and me—joking and chortling over game after game of Aggravation.

Aunt Helen accompanied us on many family outings. I can still see her and Mum bent over with laughter inside a human-sized hamster wheel at an amusement park. The two of them tried again and again to make it turn, stepping out of sync, losing their balance, and landing in a heap, only to erupt in greater laughter. Aunt Helen always brought loads of giggles and fun.

Christmas morning was about family, not diving in to rip open packages, oblivious to everyone else. We would gather around the tree and read the story of Jesus' birth from the second chapter of Luke. Then someone would pick a gift and hand it to the person named on the tag. We'd all pause to watch and enjoy the moment together. Then another gift would be passed to someone else. The gifts, the baking, the dinner, the traditions... I don't know how they managed it, but my parents always put on a most elaborate Christmases for us.

My parents taught us and loved us well and took very good care of us. They took us to church and instructed us in the Lord. They poured everything into us to give us a good childhood and prepare us for life. I always knew that but sometimes resisted it. I misinterpreted their

intentions and resented the structure in our home, as many kids do. I often reacted severely to things I didn't understand. I was not grateful to them for a long time.

My perspective changed as I raised my own family and in the years since my kids have been grown. Funny how that happens, when we're slammed in the face with reality.

In June of 2017, our mother gave us a wonderful gift.

I made the nearly five-hour drive from Shaunavon to the Calgary airport where I was to meet her and Rachel. It was my first experience there at Arrivals. I was all eyes as I rolled slowly by, trying to take in the instructions on the various signs and searching for a place to pull in and collect my passengers, all while trying to avoid mowing down pedestrians. Security waved me off a couple of times for some transgression I'd unknowingly committed, and I had to circle and make another approach. I finally located an approved spot that was empty, and I pulled over.

Rachel and Mum appeared instantly. You're barely permitted to stop in the pick-up zone—it's patrolled like Fort Knox. I dashed out of the car, and we all stuffed suitcases into the hatchback. We didn't have time to sort the rest of the bags, just threw them into the front seat. *Get in, get in,* I called, and they flew to the nearest doors. Mum piled into the back; Rachel climbed over the mess in front and parked her feet up on the dash, the only space available with all our flurry. I peeled off before security could lead us away in handcuffs for stopping in the sacred space too long. But they might still have our mugshots, taken from the surveillance cameras, wouldn't surprise me.

We headed for the Rocky Mountains. Mum had rented us a suite in Canmore, and we spent five nights in the gorgeous Solara Resort & Spa. This suite was bigger than my house and far more luxurious.

From there, we did day trips. We picked a destination each morning and went off, never in a rush. We stopped when we wanted for as long as we liked and changed up the plan as new things presented themselves.

Our drives took us up and down winding narrow roads with incredible views. We went to Spray Lakes, Banff, Lake Louise, Emerald Lake, and the Columbia Icefield where I saw my first glacier. Rachel was baffled to see patches of snow still on the ground. *It's June!* she exclaimed.

Yes, it is—June in the Rockies.

Each evening, Rachel marveled at how long it stayed light. In the southern United States, where she lives, even in summer, it gets dark early. Out on the balcony of our lovely little home in the Rockies, at 11:00 p.m. it was still twilight.

What a wonderful vacation it was. We had the best time! One of my favorite trips.

My parents sold our family farm in the fall of 2010. My mother still lives in Moncton by herself in a comfortable apartment with enough space for her things. She has neighbors and friends who check on her and help her out when she needs it. She's strong, courageous, faithful, and forgiving. She has a keen mind and a memory like an elephant—she can tell you even the weather for most any day that bears any significance for decades. She has a sense of humor and loves to tease. She stays active, travels, and keeps

busy with her church and her friends. She has a love for God and a desire to serve Him. She puts into practice her love for others.

She's an amazing and elegant lady.

Things are good between us after years of struggle that I'm quick to admit is mostly my fault. We've worked at it, both of us. I worry about her just the same. I wonder if she lives in hurt over stupid things I've said and done, for I've sure been stupid. I worry that she's lonely with Rachel and me so far away; I don't want her to be lonely. I wonder if life will ever bring us all near each other again.

The House on Pleasant Street

I don't know a lot about my family—my parents or grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins. It was my father's sisters who were the family historians and loved to give accounts of who was who and what had happened to them. As a kid, I took them for granted, these synopses of my relatives. I couldn't keep straight the names and faces in the old photographs they'd show me, and the narratives refused to stick in my memory.

Who will be the story-keepers now, now that they are gone?

My grandfather, Alexander MacPherson, died in his eighties when I was only seven years old. I barely remember him; I can no longer picture his face. My grandmother, Gwendolyn, who was blind since before I was born, continued to live in their house with my two aunts, Dorothy and Jess, and my cousin, Wade. They spoiled me just a little—*Take a second cookie, one for the other hand,* they'd tell me. Still, they made me behave and use my manners.

My grandparents' house, a big, old, gorgeous two-story on Pleasant Street in Lewisville, was my favorite place in the world to be. It was a duplex—the main floor was a two-bedroom suite; the second floor, a four-bedroom suite. But my family owned and used the whole house.

Intriguing nooks and corners drew me to explore and daydream. Most enticing of all was at one end of the upstairs kitchen. There stood an ordinary door that concealed an extraordinary secret—an ascending staircase that begged me to follow.

When I was very little, I wasn't allowed to climb those stairs by myself; they were too steep and dangerous, I was warned. One of my aunts would take me by the hand and go up with me, but we never stayed long enough in that lovely upper room. When I was older and more sure-footed, I'd sneak alone up the stairs, still feeling a little like I was breaking the rule.

The dusty attic was home to old trunks and books and long-forgotten items. I never did learn the treasures buried inside those trunks—I knew better than to snoop into things that didn't belong to me—but oh, what the imagination could conjure!

At one end of the attic was a cozy room with large drawers built in under the sloped roof. This was my father's old bedroom. How lucky he was, I thought, with that hidden little room! Then he told me, once, that he used to wake on winter mornings to see icicles hanging from the nails overhead. Lucky is a relative thing.

Under this marvelous attic staircase was a small door to a tiny cubbyhole, and I loved that little space just as much as the mysterious attic above it. If, as a very young child, I'd had an imaginary friend—not saying I did, just if—I'd have given her some made-up name that I no longer remember, and that little cubbyhole would have been her home.

War Hero

My father was the youngest of eight children—five brothers and two sisters. All of his brothers fought in WWII, and I think as a boy, he was in awe of them—his heroes.

Only the oldest brother didn't come home—Roland, the uncle I never met.

On July 9, 1943, at 2241 hours, according to the information I've gathered, Handley Page Halifax bomber JB 922 left the Leeming Royal Air Force station in North Yorkshire, England, headed for Gelsenkirchen, Germany. There were seven crew members on board: Flying Officer T. R. MacPherson (pilot); Flying Officer E. Crouch (bomb aimer); Sergeant G. S. Pickering (flight engineer); Flight Sergeant W. R. Prentice (air gunner); Warrant Officer 1 A. N. Pixley (wireless operator/air gunner); Sergeant W. G. Willis (air gunner); and Sergeant W. H. Plewman (navigator). 5800 lbs. of explosives rested beneath their feet.

What sort of conversation accompanied their journey over those long, dark miles? What thoughts went through their minds? What resolve...what fears...what regrets took hold? Did they have any inkling of what was to come?

Approaching their target, they were met with heavy flak from below. Nevertheless, they dropped their bombs, accomplishing their mission. Then just as they were heading out of the target area, enemy artillery found its mark. The Halifax was on fire.

MacPherson put the plane into a dive to get the fire out. But barely had he succeeded when they were hit again. Flames were streaming out past the tail of the plane. The interior filled with smoke, and the flight engineer, Pickering, was having trouble reading his instruments.

Suddenly, a piece of shrapnel tore through the fuselage, barely missing Pickering. "Are you hit?" he called to the pilot, seated just ahead of him. "No," MacPherson answered. But Pickering was never sure.

This time, there was no saving the Halifax. MacPherson fought to keep the plane steady as he gave the order to his crew to bail. Methodically, the men performed the movements that were so well rehearsed. The escape hatch was flung open. The first form filled the 2' x 2' hole, then disappeared into the blackness. The second man jumped; then the third. The fourth man dropped quickly through the hatch. Next...

Boom! The fireball lit up the sky, and the blast sent pieces of the plane in all directions. Flaming debris rained down as the crewmen floated silently to the ground. Pickering was the last to jump.

Just four of the crew were spared that night. Four out of seven.

MacPherson, Crouch, and Prentice went down with their plane in the early morning of July 10, 1943. They rest now, side by side, in Reichswald Forest British Military Cemetery in Germany.

Pickering, Pixley, Willis, and Plewman were captured. Pixley died in April of 1945 while still a prisoner of war.

My Uncle Roland was 28 years old when the Halifax went down. He left behind a young wife, two small daughters, and a host of kin who would never forget.

MacPherson Island is a small spit of land in an Ontario lake, named in honor of my uncle, Flying Officer Pilot Thomas Roland MacPherson.

An Old Photograph

I don't recall anyone telling the family history on my mother's side. She didn't talk much about her childhood, not that I remember. She had a

sister and two brothers. The older of her brothers was killed when he was only five years old—he was electrocuted when he touched a downed power line. My mother and her sister were there when it happened; all three of them had been out playing together. I don't know how old the girls were, but they were just children. How horrible a thing it must have been for them to witness. How tragic for their family. I marvel that the little boy was the only one of them to touch the wire that day.

My mother's parents were divorced. I don't know the story or how old she was when it happened. She has three more half-brothers from her mother's second marriage. They always seemed more like cousins to me than uncles, they were so much younger than all my other uncles. One of them taught me to mush my ice cream, and to this day, I still like to crush it with my spoon to soften it. The same uncle strung me along, when I was very small, that he and I would run off to live in the Big Rock Candy Mountain. I made a list in my head of my toys and treasures that I would take with me, and I think I even started to pack once. I'm losing hope of that trip, now. I don't think he intends to keep his promise.

When we visited my grandfather, my mother's father, it was an occasion. I remember Mum and I going there together even before I had a little sister to take with us. Grampy Bissett, we always called him, and his second wife, Aunt Ruth. They had a tiny house at the corner of Killam Drive and Pacific Avenue. My grandfather seemed a little reserved, but there was something about him that intrigued me. Aunt Ruth was quiet but elegant, at least in my little mind. I loved those times with them; they were too rare.

One thing, though, I didn't like about those visits. Every trip, I dreaded that it might happen.

Their only bathroom was an outhouse in the barn, and I was always scared of falling into the deep black hole over which I perched, clinging frightfully to the cold seat under me.

Grampy Bissett and Aunt Ruth both passed away decades ago, and their little house is long gone now.

I spent a lot of nights at my maternal grandmother's. At bedtime, she'd scrub my face and hands and get me into my pajamas. She'd take out my toothbrush, and I'd stand at the sink, head tilted back, mouth open. Throughout the procedure, she'd recite a poem that I only ever heard from her and only when she brushed my teeth. The story began in a nursery chamber and told of little white-robed Katie kneeling down to pray on Christmas Eve. Katie tells Jesus how lonely she is since little Gracie died, and I always wondered who Gracie was and what had happened to her. Katie asks Jesus for a companion, a sister—she's so tired of boys. And when she wakes the next morning, she finds her Christmas wish come true—a new baby sister waiting for her under the tree.

I still remember that poem, most of it, word for word. It made the dreaded toothbrushing ordeal into a special event and a little less painful.

My grandmother's name was Hope. She had a sister Helen, three years older, and several younger siblings. My mother once told me that Hope had had a hard childhood. Her mother, Clara Powers, was a "mean" woman, to use my mother's word. The girls' little sister, Hazel, was their mother's favorite, and she didn't care that they knew it. "My little lady," Clara called her. At just eight years old, Hope and Helen had to make bread and keep the house while their younger sister never had to work.

One day, their mother abruptly took Hope's only doll and gave it to Hazel. *You don't have time to play with dolls,* she told Hope. On another

occasion, she gave away the family's dog, without warning, without a reason.

In 1918, the Spanish flu hit, the deadliest pandemic in history. Somewhere between seventeen and fifty million people died. Many in the Powers' neighborhood were sick. Each day, Clara cooked and packed up food, left her house and her children, and went from home to home to aid those families that were afflicted, an act of compassion that brought with it great risk. I wonder at how the Clara of such selflessness with her neighbors could be the same Clara who so treated her own little Hope and Helen.

Incidentally, Clara never got the flu.

I have a photo of that family, my great-grandfather, David, in his army uniform, seated, my great-grandmother, Clara, standing at his side, a hand on his shoulder. What was he like, David Powers? Was he gentle and kind? Distant? Cold and severe? I don't know a thing about him.

Hope and Helen are just little girls in the photo, before the younger ones came along. They're wearing white dresses and hair ribbons. Their faces are solemn, all four of them, as in all old photographs. I look into the eyes of Clara and wonder what drove her. I look at the two little girls and try to imagine how it altered and shaped them to grow up in that home.

A Little Girl and Her Dad

There's a picture that hangs on the wall in my mother's apartment. It hung on the wall in the house I grew up in all the years I lived there; I remember it beside the telephone.

In the picture, is a man and a little girl. Though the picture is black and white, I know that the thick, pile coat that the little girl is wearing is red. I

know that because the little girl is me. I think I was three. I remember that coat.

I'm standing on the ice in front of a hockey net. My father's behind me, crouched down for the photo, his smile handsome, as it always was. I think it's real joy in his eyes as he poses there, genuine pride in his little daughter. He's dressed in his uniform—baggy jersey, black skates, big goalie pads—his stick resting on the ice in front of us. I'm not smiling, my face tucked into the hood of my coat...chubby cheeks.

It's intermission, or maybe pre-game warm-up, and pucks are flying past us. They don't show in the picture, but I remember them. I'm terrified. My father's many warnings to stay away from the pucks are all I can think about. I can't understand why he's brought me down on the ice, right into the danger. I remember my fear, that day, and his reassurance that this time it would be okay. He was all around me, my guard, my protection. And I was safe.

In my earliest memories, he was my rescue when my mother was upset with me. It sometimes worked the other way, though. Which parent was that shelter varied with the situation.

I remember those nights when, as a tiny girl, I wouldn't eat my supper. I didn't like peas—the way they squished and mushed in my mouth. The look and the feel of them made me sick.

Gruff words from my father—*Eat your supper!*—and I pick at another small bite. My potatoes are cold as I push them around my plate. They stick to the roof of my mouth.

The words get louder—*Eat, Sandra!* My father slaps the table... Dishes clatter.

I'm terrified, sobbing. I force in another bite, the lump in my throat making it almost impossible to swallow.

By now, my parents are angry...at me...at each other, their voices raise in argument. These times, it's my mother who intervenes for me.

There was the suppertime that ended with my father walking out. He'd had enough of the fights, of us, and wasn't coming back. Or so I believed.

I remember the two of us in my bedroom, my mother in tears, trying to console me as she helped me into my pajamas. I remember my confusion, unable to understand what was happening, and my fears for my father. I couldn't grasp the idea of not having him there anymore.

I don't know how long he was gone. Hours? All night? Days?

But my father did come back, and I don't remember his ever leaving us again.

They're lodged in my memory, these instances—the feelings, the sounds, the images. They were conflicts such as all families experience. But I was so little, they were probably much bigger to me than they were to either of my parents...my fears, probably greater than warranted.

There was a time, I think, when we were close, my father and me. "A little girl and her dad," they tell me I used to say when we walked hand-in-hand. I have flashes of memories from when I was very small—memories of him that are warm and good. I can't quite make them out. Can't quite get hold of them. I want to grasp them; I want to see them clearly, yet they are fleeting and dim.

Some nights when I was a little older—six or seven, maybe—I'd wake up and hear my father puttering in the kitchen, home from his late shift at the airport. I'd sneak down the stairs and crouch behind the railing to peek between the spindles. He'd be pulling out bowl and spoon. Then he'd

"discover" me in my hiding place, just as I'd hoped he would. He'd invite me to come down and have a snack with him. Shreddies never tasted better than when I was perched at the table in those secret late-night lunches with my dad.

My father didn't hunt much, and I don't think he ever brought home more than a few partridges. But one summer evening he took me with him. I was maybe ten. I don't remember if we even saw anything that moved, but we tramped around the woods and had a good time.

As we walked back through the field toward home, the sky turned grey and the rain let go. How good it all felt—the cool drops on my face and my arms, the crash of thunder, the flashes of lightning. What did we talk about, my dad and I? I can't recall.

We returned to an empty house, my mother and Rachel gone out somewhere. My father made us hot chocolate or a can of soup; I don't remember which. These were the best times, just the two of us. The warmth of the bowl on my hands, the soup in my belly, the simple little meal, those moments together.

Hayfield on an August Night

Even now, one whiff of freshly cut hay, fragrant and sweet, and I'm back in that field across from our house on an August evening. I'm ten years old, heading home to get ready for bed, the first one to be dismissed from the work.

It's cooling off, the air is damp, and the sun is starting toward the horizon. Crickets chirp—the song that means the end of the day and rest and home. I walk through a haze of dust that seems alive in the fading light. Little insects hover just above the field, and bugs jump through the sharp stubble left after the cut. I'm terribly scared of anything that creeps or crawls, but out here, it's okay. The pleasure in everything else around me on these magical evenings cancels out my fears.

On these nights, my job, most often, is to drive the old Massey Ferguson. I try not to jolt as I work the levers and let out the clutch. My father tells me I'm doing a good job, but it's hard to get the speed just right. I do my best to keep a nice steady pace while the men pick up the bales and load them onto the wagon that I tow behind me.

When it's my turn on the ground, I struggle to lift the bales, they're so heavy. I tug and grunt. The twine digs into my hands. The men tell me I'm strong, but I can't throw the hay the way they can.

When I've had enough of the heavy work, I climb up onto the wagon—my favorite part. Those on the ground toss the bales to the men up here who pack them in tightly, making sure the load is balanced.

I perch on a ledge several tiers up and survey the field, my hand raised to shade my eyes. A hundred yards off, I can see my dog, her tail wagging in furious delight. She sniffs at the ground, darting after mice that scurry for new shelter now that the crop is cut.

The wagon sways on the bumpy field. Someone calls to me to get out of the way, and I dart to the other side while they fill in the spot I just left. I watch the stack grow, the blocks fit together like a jigsaw puzzle.

The tractor and wagon are behind me now. The men are throwing on the last few bales before calling it quits. I trek home alone—dirt in my hair...sweat on my neck...itchy arms and legs. The slanted evening sun

kisses my face. A familiar warmth fills me, though I don't know where it comes from. I'm happy and satisfied at the close of another summer's day.

I think my father liked those evenings making hay, in spite of his sneezing and itchy eyes. Was it working with the men? Being outside? Was it the field, the smells, the sounds of summer?

Or was it that we did it together, he and I, father and little girl?

Maybe that's why it's one of my best memories.

My father and I outgrew these times. I don't know when things started to change or why. By the time I was a teenager, he was often distant, gruff, rigid. His words sounded harsh to me, like reprimands for things I hadn't even known about. I remember my resentment and frustration. There were no more sweet moments of us.

When I became an adult, his words seemed harsher yet to me. Whether they were directed at me or not made no difference; they cut me just the same. I couldn't stand the noise and chaos that seemed to surround him. Whether it came from him or from the tension inside me, I don't know. Most of the time I endured in silence, but sometimes I fought back, exploding in a mess of frustration and hurt. When I was finally stretched to my limit, I'd say things every bit as harsh as he did.

For a long time, I'd stay away, determined not to let these difficulties into my life. Then I'd decide to put myself aside. Just go, listen, smile, and brush it all off when I walked out the door. But it was hard. I'd leave feeling battered and weary.

I waffled between the two—visiting and avoiding—till something finally put me over the edge. I was furious. And I was done.

I think I only saw him one more time after that—Thanksgiving, I believe, in 2012. My mother cooked an elaborate, delicious dinner for us all. I didn't speak to my father; I avoided him as much as I could.

Two months later, I came west and didn't have to worry about it anymore. I came without telling them. On two visits home, I never went to see him. My third trip was for his funeral.

The full impact of my actions didn't hit until 2016 when my mother visited me in Shaunavon. We got pounded with a storm on Thanksgiving Day, so we sat in my living room while the wind and snow blew past the window.

I'd been hoping for a chance to explain to her what had happened between Robert and me, so I finally spit out the topic in the midst of the silence. For once, this day, I didn't bumble and make things worse (that I know of). I told her of Robert's suggestion that I go away to work and of his insistence on a divorce seven months later. I told her things he'd said and done and things I'd said and done. I think it was the first she knew of a lot of it, and at times, she seemed surprised at what I said.

Then came her words that haunt me still, about the day they'd learned I'd moved away. My father had called our house in Kenton, asking for me, and Robert had told him I'd gone out west. That's probably all he'd said, just as he'd done before.

I can picture my father's look as he put down the phone and turned to my mother. He sat there, slumped in the chair, broken. "My little girl left me," he told her, "and she didn't even say good-bye."

Lace

Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan
2013

How special are those intermissions from life that come out of nowhere...those intervals that are infused with a beauty you didn't expect...the ones that make you forget your worries for just a moment so you can soak in their magnificence.

It was Monday night, April 29th. I was on my way to my tiny attic apartment on Ominica Street in Moose Jaw after another long shift at the spa. I was eager to get home, weary with the familiar aches and stiffness that came from scrubbing showers.

I stood alone on the sidewalk at the corner of Fairford and Main, waiting for the walk light. The streets were empty at that hour, and it was as if the whole city belonged to me. The darkness of approaching midnight wrapped around me like an Angora shawl.

On the opposite corner stood City Hall with its clock tower. The building always reminded me of the old post office on Main Street in Moncton, my hometown. As always, I gazed, captivated by its marvelous stone blocks, smooth pillars, and regal dome.

As the hands of the clock ticked away the last few minutes of the day, huge snowflakes drifted slowly, silently to the ground. There before me, the streets transformed into an enchanting fantasy as nature draped its finest lace over the downtown. The intricately woven covering, fresh and white, sparkled in the light like a veil of tiny diamonds spread out across the ground.

I forgot how tired I was; I forgot my hurry to get home. Slowly, I turned to take in the scene from every direction—Winter's encore, interrupting the Saskatchewan Spring. Smile growing ever bigger, I breathed in the cool, pure air and reveled in the quiet stillness and splendor of the night.

The beautiful, ordinary *everyday*...often the source of your most tranquil moments and uplifting memories...the small respites amidst your cares.

Hope and Loss

Absent from the Body

Moncton, New Brunswick
January 2015

Funerals don't scare me. I'm not afraid of death. I know where I'm going. Absent from the body is present with the Lord.

When I was first told of my father's passing, I didn't think I'd attend the funeral. We'd had our troubles, after all, my father and I.

And I'm awkward around sensitive situations. I don't know what to say or how to show my feelings; sometimes I don't even know what I feel. I worried I wouldn't look sad enough…that people would think me callous. I'd surely offend with something.

My limited finances were a legitimate reason not to go, I reasoned. I could skip it, if I wanted to, stay in Shaunavon, and justify it to myself.

But as I battled over the decision, I came to realize something: this wasn't about me; it wasn't even about my father. This was about my mother. I knew it would mean the world to her for me to be there. I needed to do it for her.

So in January 2015, I went home for my father's funeral.

I walked into the church, just minutes before the service began, with a calm I hadn't expected. I ignored the casket at the front, went straight to my mother, and sat down beside her. She took hold of my hand and squeezed, a grip that begged support, cried of loss, and sighed with gratitude that I'd come.

And I knew I'd made the right decision.

It would be nearly two years before I'd let myself think any more about my father.

In the weeks just prior to my homegoing, Robert and I had been doing better again—our conversations had been gentler. Again, hope began to spring in me that we were on our way back to each other.

Everything was different that trip. He spent more time with me, and he didn't seem to mind being seen with me.

His family, too, had changed. It was after my long call with his sister-in-law, and she seemed more open to me. I spent an hour or so at her place one afternoon—no deep communication, but it was comfortable. I hoped it was the beginning of rebuilding. Robert's mother invited him, our girls, and me for supper one night. She hugged me when I arrived, and both Robert's parents seemed pleased to see us looking happy together.

The funeral brought all four of our kids to Robert and me again, sweet moments so rare by then. It gave me cuddles with little Ethan and my first meeting with sweet Wyatt, Ethan's three-month-old brother, our second grandson.

It felt so good—this new atmosphere, reminiscent of our old lives together, before I'd moved away. We might just be starting to make real progress. Everything in me relaxed into the very real possibility of *us*.

So it was time to confront a big problem.

Robert had never believed me when I'd told him that our friends and family in New Brunswick didn't seem to understand the purpose of my stay in Saskatchewan...that their reactions to me seemed, instead, to betray resentment or at least discomfort with me. He'd always denied there was anything wrong. He'd insisted they knew the whole truth, and my concerns were completely unfounded—*Nobody's upset with you, Sandra*.

I'd wrestled with it a long time—how to approach this problem. I'd thought about writing to everyone myself and explaining why I'd gone away. But my last letter to clear up a rumor had bombed badly. And though in that email, I'd offered an explanation to anyone who wanted it, only a couple of people had responded to me favorably. The rest, apparently, weren't interested in hearing me. Perhaps another letter was not the way to go.

I'd considered talking with each person one-on-one since face-to-face is best to deal with misunderstandings. But I wouldn't be home long enough to get around to everybody. Besides, I suspected that, being absent all this time, I wouldn't carry enough weight to debunk their sympathies for Robert. Most of these people were his friends, family, and neighbors, loyal to him. I figured they weren't likely to accept my explanations, which showed his responsibility in the circumstances that, it seemed, they held against me.

I knew they had to hear it from Robert. But, like me, addressing issues was not his strong suit. I'd seen his approach before—a look that seemed to say, *My wife is making me do this.* Naturally, in these instances, it was hard for anyone to believe he stood behind his message. Instead of solving

the problem, all I'd hear were accusations aimed at me for causing the rift, whatever it was.

But I knew he could do it. I knew if he truly cared about me and believed in his words, he would be able to speak with sincerity. He could say, *Hey, it was me. I did this, not Sandra.*

So I pulled out my laptop and the two of us stretched across the bed while he read my email correspondence with his sister-in-law. The things she'd written to me when I was in Shaunavon, in response to my rumor email, were in sharp contrast to what Robert had tried to convince me everyone believed. Her letter was a clear indication that she didn't have our story straight. Here he was, now face-to-face with proof. At last, he couldn't deny it.

Concern spread across his face. For the first time, he seemed to believe me. *I'll go talk to her,* he stated. *I'll straighten it out with everyone. But I don't want to take time away from you while you're here; your time is so short. I'll wait till after you leave.*

Not take time away from me...? How could I disagree with that?

Marion's Words

My return flight landed in Regina. I rented a car and drove into the wee morning hours to Richard and Marion Williams' place. They had moved from Cornerstone months before and now lived in Herbert, Saskatchewan, about an hour-and-a-half from Shaunavon. I let myself in and tumbled into bed in their guestroom.

The next morning, Marion and I sat with coffee, and for the first time, she asked what the situation was with Robert and me. I was bursting with excitement over what I'd just experienced—the whole week had been

only positive. So I rattled off our story with smiles and hope for the future—why I'd left New Brunswick in the first place and why he'd had to divorce me.

She listened quietly from her place on the couch until I finished. Then she looked me straight in the eye and said, "Sounds like he wanted out."

I was taken aback. No, that wasn't it at all! *No, no. It's all good,* I rushed to defend. *I understand his concerns. I know, I know it sounds weird, but I get why he did it. We're still together; we are. I'm going back. We're going to keep working on things; we'll sort it all out, and I'll go home again.* These were the words I told everyone who looked at me like I was crazy every time I attempted to explain Robert and me.

For I'd heard it straight from him. I knew the real story. He'd reassured me we were fine, and he'd straighten out the problems.

I pushed aside Marion's bold remark and pulled the joy of progress with Robert back around me.

It was a couple of months after I'd returned to Shaunavon, and Robert had still not talked to anyone as he'd promised he would. Even worse, he no longer sounded concerned. I held the phone in my hand, wondering what was going on and how he'd so quickly changed. We argued again about these misunderstandings and their damaging effects. He flatly denied it all.

I couldn't wrap my head around his thinking. He wanted me, he said. Yes, we'd resume our lives together as soon as I moved back, he kept telling me. In his mind, it was seamless. To me, it was a mess of broken pieces that would take years and great care to put back together. Reality was probably somewhere in between.

But the crucial difference between us was that I was willing to do what it took to mend things, yet I saw no effort at all in him.

Other than his brief moment of concern to me when confronted with his sister-in-law's email, he refused to acknowledge a thing—not how he'd treated me and not how his family had acted toward me for so long. His denial of problems was, itself, one of the biggest problems for me. Maybe that sounds petty. But we had enough to repair just in our marriage. Fighting the attitudes around us and sorting out the misunderstandings was an extra pressure. I t was true that Robert couldn't control what people thought, but he could do his part to set the rumors straight and lay the groundwork now for when I'd return.

More importantly, I needed a man who would own up to his actions and admit when something was wrong, even if it involved his own family. I needed my husband to believe me, support me, defend me.

At last, exasperated, I threw out two ultimatums if he wanted to be with me. The first was to keep his promise: go to our families and clear my name.

All right, I'll talk to people, he surrendered.

I took heart. I couldn't wait to hear how these conversations went.

It surprised me that the first person he spoke with was my mother. He said he'd spent two hours with her, and I was impressed. When I asked what he'd told her, all he said was, *I just told her what happened*. I'm an advocate of a word-for-word conversation recount at times like this. But that's about all I could get out of him.

After that, Robert went to his brother and sister-in-law, the same sister-in-law I'd talked to on the phone. I thought this would be an easy fix since I'd already made some headway with her.

What did you tell them? What did they say? My usual questions.

I just told them what happened.

This was not good enough. I dug for details, and when he couldn't dance around it any longer, he threw out to me, as though proud of all he'd achieved, *They said, 'Maybe someday people will get over it, but not yet.'*

The words hung between us, and for a moment I didn't know what to say. What did that mean? I hadn't done anything for them to get over. The comment didn't fit. Again, there was no further explanation from him.

Even some of my kids couldn't make sense of our situation. I'd mention some sweet text Robert had sent me, or I'd comment on how we looked forward to my moving back home with him. They'd shake their heads, *I don't understand. That's not what Dad's telling me.*

The stories didn't add up.

But whenever I confronted Robert about such discrepancies, he denied them or claimed, "I don't remember that."

What I didn't know yet then, that day on the phone, and not for a long time afterward, was that he'd already written me off. *I'm done with her*, he'd exclaimed to one person right after I'd left Moncton that January following the funeral. I'd never learn his reasons or why he didn't discuss any of it with me.

Now's Not the Time

Things between us unraveled even more following that phone call, and our interactions deteriorated again. Was there no end to this rollercoaster ride? Robert was cold toward me. I grew angry and frustrated. Our words were harsh. Neither of us would yield. He was done with me, it seemed, and I was crushed once again.

There was no way to fix our problems, being so far apart. I knew our best chance was away from the mess and interferences in New Brunswick, in a

place where he could clear his head and allow for a deeper grasp of people, life, God, marriage, and love. So I asked him several times to come west with me, to spend a year and work with me on our marriage. There was so much we needed that he'd never get while immersed in his limited surroundings, separated from me. To let go of his need for his family's approval and to put our family first were two big ones.

My request might seem extreme, but the harder he'd pushed, the deeper into difficulty he'd sent us, and the greater the steps we needed to take to get back out. If we could just get our feet under us for a few months alone, we might be able to stand strong together back in Kenton; this was how I saw it.

Tell him to come out here, one friend agreed, recognizing our complicated situation. *If he wants you back, tell him he has to come here!*

My idea wasn't just a crazy notion without basis. It was my experience. I'd come to this town with open mind and open heart, and Shaunavon had poured in all its treasures in greater abundance than I'd thought possible. I'd gotten to know God better than ever before and to see myself for what I really am. I'd learned to better understand people and relationships. If Robert allowed himself, he'd experience the same.

Now that Richard and Marion Williams had moved to Herbert, Cornerstone had been months without a maintenance man. I knew Robert was a good candidate since he was capable at many things. He'd said more than once that he was unhappy in his job. Why not try something else? I thought I should let him know about the maintenance position.

When the idea first came to me, I immediately had second thoughts, I admit. Did I really want Robert at Cornerstone, invading my sanctuary, and bringing with him all our problems? I battled it out for several days. But I felt a tug at my heart from One who knew better, *I want you to be willing, Sandra*.

My wants began to change. More than anything, I desired God's best. If this was His will, I had to yield. How wonderful it could be, this opportunity for Robert and me to learn together and come to understand each other better.

And in no time, I wanted it too. I recommended Robert to my boss, and Blake contacted him with the job information. I prayed Robert would accept. I waited excitedly.

I dreamed of walks through Shaunavon together, of talks in coffee shops, of laughing, of sitting together in church and visiting with friends. In my dream, he started to see me again, we got to know each other, we stopped arguing and started listening, I learned to honor him, we put each other first, we grew in one another.

But it was just a dream...

The salary wasn't enough, he said. And he couldn't part with the property in Kenton and all that was there. He wouldn't take the job.

My hopes deflated, and I had to adjust my wants again.

I dropped down my request: come to Saskatchewan for six months. I sent him an ad from a welding shop near Shaunavon for a job that paid well. Why not give this one a shot? I suggested that he wouldn't have to give up any of his things. Jack could live in his house and take care of everything in his absence. Jack was responsible and didn't have his own place at that time. All Robert's stuff would be kept safe and waiting for him when he returned—maybe the two of us together. He had nothing to lose and much to gain. I held my breath and prayed that he would come.

He wouldn't hear of it.

So, my second ultimatum was this: If you want me, come visit me for two weeks.

He flat-out refused. "Now's not the time."

I felt time running out for us.

Then one day, it happened.

Out of the blue, Robert asked, *If I came to Shaunavon for a visit, would you let me stay with you?*

A visit? Robert wanted to come visit me in Saskatchewan? At last! I could hardly believe it. He was finally coming! My breath caught, and I brightened at the thought.

Then I realized what he'd asked—*would you let me stay with you...?*

Wait! Back it up...! That wasn't so simple anymore.

By now, some time had passed since we'd last discussed a visit, and a lot had changed over those intervening weeks of dispute between us. When I'd first invited him, of course I'd expected him to stay with me. But he'd refused—not just once, but over and over again. I'd argued and pushed. He'd reasoned away all my points. He would not yield. The conversation had heated, and even now, we'd still not recovered from the contention that had followed.

Stay with me? We'd sunk too far for me just to hand him that privilege.

When I was last with him, he'd seemed to want me next to him. Now that I was gone and there were tough things to face on his own, he showed apathy and disregard for me. I was tired of being fit in when it was convenient. I felt used and tossed aside. His right to call me his wife had expired.

So I told him no, and I waited to see what he'd do with that. Would he still come even if he didn't get what he wanted? For me, a lot hinged on his decision. I needed to know he valued time with me, not sleeping in my bed.

So are you still coming? I asked.

"Now's not the time," he told me again.

On my fiftieth birthday, Robert called me. I thought it was to wish me well. But I heard no tone of well-wishing or of missing me. *I was gonna go visit and surprise you for your birthday. I had it all planned,* he said. *But then you told me I couldn't stay with you, so I changed my mind.*

My heart sank. I wanted so much for him to come. It was all I'd thought about since January. Through all our arguments, I'd held to the hope and kept the invitation in front of him.

Now this—*I couldn't stay with you, so I changed my mind...*

I held the phone in my hand as the sound of his words faded and my dreams slipped away. I didn't tell him that, of course, I would have let him stay with me if he'd just come, for it didn't matter now. I had my answer. His decision told me he wasn't interested enough in me or in restoring us. He would never come. He would always have an excuse.

Marion's words came rushing back: *Sounds like he wanted out.*

At last I released my hold.

Beauty on an Unexpected Path

Phoenix, Arizona, USA
March 2020

In heartache, God wraps with comfort. With loss, He adds His riches. When betrayed, He gives security. Through uncertainty, He is stability. This is the God I've come to know.

I wait for my friend, Melody, while she shops. I stroll through the store, up and down aisles filled with home décor—coffee mugs, silk flowers, ceramic vases. Like stepping back into my own home, there's a welcome familiarity here. I used to browse like this for pretty things to bring color to my world. But it's been a long time now. Life's brought many changes, and I've no room for this kind of thing anymore.

The wall hangings draw me in. I move slowly between the stands and read quips about home and family, love and laughter...

And suddenly, I'm struck—out of nowhere, without warning. I gulp back tears. I scurry to another department to get away from the scripts and the sentiments, but it's too late. In every direction are reminders of the

past. They reach up with cold fingers and grip my heart. They choke off my air. I want to run. I want to fall apart right there in the photo frames and the throw pillows. I wander, seeking relief and feeling lost. The tears keep coming. Silly.

After all this time, the simplest thing can trigger the memories. It can still hit like a slap, that ache in the heart that renders me a sniveling mess. I miss what once was. Nothing can replace it. I don't understand why some things happened as they did. Time doesn't always heal. There is no happily-ever-after.

I'm not alone. Most likely, you know just what I'm talking about—the tragedy that's left you scarred and limping. Like me, you can probably be taken off guard by fresh waves of hurt, brought to tears in an instant, standing in line at the bank or sitting in a church service. And I've not gone through nearly as great difficulties as so many others have. You may be much better acquainted with sorrow than I.

I wonder why God doesn't just fix me, so I'm no longer crippled by this pain. So I can go on in strength, conquer life's problems, and come out victorious.

Then I realize He's done something better.

Because of adversity, my path was altered. My new path took me into places I would not have otherwise gone. Desert places. Mountaintops. There, God showed me beauty I'd not have seen if I'd never lived the difficulty—a beauty that fills me with warmth and worship at just a glimpse of it. He taught me. He strengthened me. He expanded and enriched me. He drew me into His arms. He loved and protected me. And I wonder, would I have come to know God this way if He'd left me where I was? Would I be who I am today?

I cling to a beautiful promise in Romans 8, "And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love

God, to those who are called according to His purpose." (NASB) How precious this truth. No matter what comes at me—what tragedy, mistakes, weaknesses—He'll turn it into my good, for His glory.

And here's the icing on the cake: Though time doesn't heal, eternity does. After this life, God will wipe away all tears and sorrow and pain—sweet promise.

My happily-ever-after is Him!

Fingerprints of God

Tornado

Cornerstone, Saskatchewan

Because Cornerstone's a non-profit Christian charity, finances are always a little tight. But in 2016, we went through months of greater-than-usual difficulty. Elizabeth was sometimes in tears as she pored over the books, fearing she'd caused the dried reservoir herself since she'd taken on the bookkeeping.

I had a dream last night, she began one morning. This time I knew to sit up and pay attention.

In her dream, Elizabeth, Blake, and I were working in the office together when something outside the window caught her eye. She turned to give it her full attention and gasped. "A tornado!" she exclaimed with horror. "It's huge! Look! It's coming this way!"

"There's no tornado," Blake responded quietly, without looking up from his computer.

"Yes, there is! Look!" Elizabeth told us. "It's right there! We have to go now! We need to get to safety!"

I saw it too, approaching fast. "There is a tornado, Blake. She's right. It's coming right at us. We need to go, now," I confirmed.

Yet Blake wouldn't budge. Again, he never took his eyes from his work. "There's no tornado," he told us.

Each time we looked, the tornado was closer, bigger, fiercer. Elizabeth was near frantic. Fear was building in me, as well. I couldn't understand how Blake could be so sure that what we were seeing wasn't there without even looking outside. Elizabeth and I both tried again, pleading with him to come with us before it was too late.

Blake didn't move. He never looked at us. One final time, he calmly stated, "There's no tornado." Somehow, he was convinced, and there was nothing we could say to change his mind. Elizabeth and I gave up our attempts and turned to the window again, knowing our time was surely up.

And there, the sky was bright and clear, the winds were still, and there was no tornado.

Again, her silly dream got my attention for the undeniable illustration behind it. While dreams are certainly not a promise from God, to me, this one pictured God's faithful care for us through the storms and Blake's unwavering faith in Him. Though things looked impossible as we gazed at our dwindling finances, Blake knew God would provide for Cornerstone.

The staff never went without a pay cheque during that financial drought, and the residents never missed a meal. Jehovah Jireh!

There were many other times I saw God's hand on our organization and its staff. These were the good days at Cornerstone. I loved my job and the ministry. I remember thinking how heartbroken I'd be if God asked me to leave.

Funny how He adjusts our wants for us, sometimes.

Idaho Peak

By 2017, I had a lot of banked hours and vacation days saved up, so I went on a few excursions that summer. I took a jaunt south into Montana for a few days by myself in the gorgeous city of Great Falls. Later, I went to Kerith Retreat in Priddis, Alberta for a week of recharge and counselling for people in ministry. What a blessing to me, that place and its staff.

Then in September, I drove out to Nakusp, British Columbia. It was my first time in that part of Canada, but it was about to become one of the highlights of my explorations in the west. Bright and early the next morning, I met up with a friend, and we spent the whole day exploring that beautiful area—Silverton, New Denver, Nelson, Kaslo.

What was to be, for me, the most momentous part of that trip was a mountain hike. It started off with a drive on a winding road up the base of the mountain. The sharp turns and sheer drop-offs were reminiscent of the mountain roads I'd driven in the Andes of South America many years before. It hadn't occurred to me that there might be the same kind of unprotected cliffs and curves right here in Canada. But these were the Rockies, after all.

We left the vehicle in a parking lot two or three kilometers up and, from there, took a footpath the rest of the way. It wasn't a difficult trek, so there was no need for special gear, just good walking shoes. The day was sunny and warm enough that I soon removed my jacket and tied it around my waist. Each turn in the trail presented another gorgeous vista, and we paused, many time, to snap pictures.

Eventually, the path narrowed to single file. A wall of rock crowded on one side while the other side fell away into bottomless valley. I hesitated, contemplating the steps ahead. It seemed as though a mere stumble would

plunge me over the edge. My breath caught in a shiver, and I thought about turning back right there.

But it was all so captivating, I didn't want to miss it. Wildflowers grew down the slopes; they nodded in the breeze, an invitation to keep going. I found that if I just put a foot forward, one step and then another, there was enough room for my safe passage all along the way. My courage increased, and the walk got easier.

With the last few steps of the climb, the steep, rugged trail fell away behind me, and at the top of the mountain, my fear slipped away. In rushed a wonder at the majesty stretched across the horizon like a painting on a vast canvas sky. North; south; east; west... What splendor displayed in every direction! Peak after peak reached up to touch the clouds. Dark-green forests carpeted the mountain slopes, and far below, a river flowed along their bases.

At an elevation of over 7300 ft I stood spellbound. What magnitude of height and sky and valley! This was why we had come—what had spurred us onward through the challenge.

Let its glory fill the heart. Let the mountain breezes caress the soul. Feel its breath on your skin. Hear its sigh...

Idaho Peak.

Letting Go

Saskatchewan
2017

For three-and-a-half years in Shaunavon, I looked forward to each new day. I was so excited about life and my work at Cornerstone that sleep became a chore. I'd wake at three...four in the morning, *Can I get up now?* and be disappointed that there were still hours of night yet to go.

On the surface, it seemed odd—a contradiction—that I could be so happy while going through the biggest heartaches of my life. Yet, it was God who gave me His joy amidst sorrow. It was God, too, who had brought me to this place and to this job that suited me so perfectly.

Cornerstone. I'd entered it as a recent college graduate, brand new to the business world, an outsider, naïve and alone. Back then, I knew nothing, and I knew I knew nothing. I kept eyes and ears open and mouth closed. I soaked in everything like a sponge in the rain, intent on learning all that I could. I poured myself into every task, everything in me, my heart and soul.

Slowly, I began to speak, my thoughts, my ideas craving an outlet and someone to hear and consider them. My colleagues, even my boss, were there for me. They listened. They accepted my insights and let me try my ideas. I gained confidence and stepped into bigger undertakings. When I found gaps, I filled them; when I saw procedures that weren't as efficient as I believed they could be, I improved them. I wasn't brilliant by any means; some things I tried didn't work and others were a process to bring into their best.

Persistence. Hard work. Results. Bit by bit, I earned my place, and my co-workers came to believe in my abilities.

Cornerstone. I grew in it and it in me. My haven. My support. My passion. My home. My place of belonging.

A fun part of my job was to assist in a new department. It started out not long after I first came to the organization, and my place was very small in the beginning—just a look at a project here and there to give my feedback. I loved that sort of thing with the creativity it allowed me to exercise. Over time, I was put into more tasks in bigger capacities. I was wide-eyed and eager at those opportunities to stretch myself.

By September of 2016, we had a small team in place, and we dug into developing and expanding this department—bigger, better, with greater impact. It was all very exciting.

But I never considered what this reshaping would mean for me. Perhaps if I'd been more experienced, I'd have known. As it was, I plunged into my work as usual, heedless that many changes had been made, and it was weeks before I started to realize that I wasn't meeting the new expectations. By the time it was explained to me, I'd already caused difficulties for our team. I was deeply embarrassed, and it was hard for me to recover. I wanted to fix things, but coupled with my excessive need to rescue myself, my efforts only made matters worse. I went about it all wrong, getting hung up on details and side issues that didn't matter.

The problem soon overflowed into my Head Admin role, and I no longer understood some of the expectations there, either. I really did want to serve to the best of my ability, yet I was confronted again and again with how I'd let down those around me. It wasn't long before the tension I felt in the office was a constant. It seeped into me and filled me; it put an intensity to my words and my tones that I never wanted, and that only increased the pressure inside me.

For a year, I floundered. I sorted through conversations and events, but I couldn't pinpoint the real obstacle that hindered us. What had gone wrong? When? How? Why? They swirled inside me, questions that would never be answered. Sometimes anger would overtake me—that things were broken and I couldn't fix them, that I'd been left behind. Then would come confusion. And finally, a longing for restoration, stronger still than the anger. I ached to return to the laughter and camaraderie we'd once shared; how had it been so quickly lost? Frustration flooded—the searching and never finding...the not knowing what to do.

Slowly, I came to learn how the changes to my role were necessary. It's just what had to be for us to progress. That was all okay once I understood it, for then I could guide my involvement accordingly. I worked to set aside my disappointments and focus on my tasks. I still had a necessary job to do and wanted to do it well.

But that obstacle—the one I couldn't pinpoint—was still there, blocking our progress, tripping us up. We'd move forward without interruption for a while then crash into it again.

Then one day I was called into a meeting only to be chastised again. This time, as I listened to my latest shortcomings, I deflated. Again, I'd missed a mark I hadn't seen. How long could this go on? How long could I keep feeling my way around in the dark, trying to do a job without knowing its parameters?

In that moment, I faced the inevitable. The end came screaming at me like a train wreck in slow motion. I heard it then; I saw it, and there was nothing I could do to stop it. I sat motionless as my fight slipped away, my determination, gone. Heartbroken, I realized we'd reached an impasse. For whatever reason, we could not restore the understanding that had once guided our team so beautifully.

I felt like an utter failure, a feeling that would haunt me for a long time to come. It was as if my loyalties, my passion for Cornerstone, my contributions, and all that I'd invested had been thrown away, meaningless. What was to become of me, now, in this place that I loved so much?

My eyes were dry that day as I listened; I'd already cried all my tears in the months before. Resolve settled over me, then a calm. And at last I accepted what had been so long and so painful in coming:

Another divorce, a ripping and tearing, a part of me gone.

Sometimes, God plucks the feathers from our nest to get us out of our *comfortable* and into His new purpose. It made no human sense that honest attempts on both sides could not mend something so simple at Cornerstone, yet here we were. I loved this ministry and its people; they held no ill will toward me either, I'm certain. But something had to be done. It was my nest that had been plucked clean. The only out was me. I had to let go.

Three days later, in October of 2017, I handed in my resignation.

Cornerstone. My place of belonging...

Another loss. Another grieving.

Another good-bye.

Just Happened

The days that followed were a mixture of uncertainty and relief. I'd cut the cord...taken myself out. My time at Cornerstone was quickly coming to an end. What was ahead for me? Would I find work in Shaunavon, this little town? What about my lovely house? Would I have to leave it? Where would be home? ...That feeling of being ungrounded...uprooted...of belonging nowhere...

Yet, surprisingly, a weight had lifted. The tension had eased, and the issues that had hindered for a year no longer mattered.

I talked with Elizabeth, one day, about where I might go and what I would do with the next years of my life. It was good just to speak it out loud—my disappointments, my misgivings—to put into words my hopes, my ideas, even ones that seemed farfetched. I bravely voiced to her a dream I'd held for a long, long time—to live in another country for a year. Somewhere in our conversation, I mentioned, too, that I wanted to write a book. A lot of people say that, but I had one in mind.

She listened quietly till I was done, a hint of sadness in her eyes. *Sandra,* she said. *I don't want to lose you here, but I think you've gone as far as you can go. You're meant for big things.* Through the sadness shone her hope and belief for me.

It's time for you to move on, she added. *You need to go soar with the eagles.*

Notice a pattern? I do things backwards—resign my job before I have another one to go to. I fear one day God will throw up His hands and quit bailing me out of the fixes I get myself into.

I'd set my last day at Cornerstone for the end of January, 2018, three months away. That's a bit outside the usual two weeks' notice, I know, but there was reason I offered to stay that long. The student life director would be on leave for the month of November, and Blake would be gone for all of January. I didn't want the place to be short-staffed while these essential directors were off. It also left me lots of time to find another position.

Where to go? What to do? I felt drawn to Calgary, Alberta for some reason. It was a nice area, a big-enough city; there should be opportunities

for an admin assistant, I figured. But how to make it happen? How to find that job that's waiting there for me in another city, five hundred kilometers away?

It was Saturday, just two days after submitting my resignation. I was texting with Melody Livingston, a Moncton friend who was by then living in Arizona. It had been a while since we'd last caught up, and we kept at it all day in spits and spurts, updating each other on what was happening in our separate worlds. I let her know I'd resigned my job. *By February, I might be living in a cardboard box, begging on a street corner*. We joked about that, talked about my plight, and then moved on to other topics.

Into the afternoon, the tone of her messages abruptly changed to business. She said that while we'd been texting, her husband, Cliff, had been on a call with Dennis, his brother. Just as they were finishing up the conversation, Cliff happened to mention that Sandra Glenn was looking for a job, that if Dennis knew of anyone hiring, to please pass her name along.

I'm hiring! Dennis had told him. *Have her send me her resumé.*

Dennis owned a brokerage—Livingston Insurance—in Stoddard, Alberta, about forty minutes' drive outside of Calgary. We'd met as university students, back when I was fresh out of high school. I never knew him well, but we remembered each other.

Isn't that something! Cliff and Dennis hardly ever speak on the phone! Melody told me. *You're going to see God's fingerprints all over this, if this is where He wants you*.

Before noon on Sunday, I'd emailed Dennis my resumé. On Monday, he called me, and we both tested the waters. Then he sent me a message:

> *Hi Sandra,*
> *Nice talking with you today. If you're ever in our area, we'd like*

to take you out for supper and catch up a bit.
Take care,
Dennis Livingston

I wrote back that I'd love to go, and I made a couple of suggestions about dates. Then I got:

How about the end of this week? We'll put you up in a hotel and show you around the town and the office. Let me know if that works.

I dashed off a response that afternoon to thank him and to confirm that, yes, the dates worked; I'd be there. Wednesday, he sent me the details, and Thursday, October 26th, I was on my way to Stoddard.

I had a lot on my mind on that five-hour drive to my Alberta destination. The scenes and voices of the last year played over and over. I waded through a lot of *if onlys*... Many things I should have said and done differently.

And I wasn't sure about this move to Stoddard or about Livingston Insurance. It had all happened so fast, I'd hardly had time to think it through. It meant another new place, new job, new people... And trying to fit in all over again.

That evening, Dennis and his wife picked me up at my hotel in Airdrie and took me to dinner. We caught each other up on kids and families. We reminisced about our university days, way back in the eighties. He told me the story of how he'd bought his insurance business almost ten years before, and he filled me in a bit on the reception job. They were a friendly couple and easy to talk with. It was a very pleasant night, good food and reconnecting.

The next day, I left my hotel, butterflies in my stomach, and drove to Stoddard to check out the insurance business. I quickly found the building, but it was noon—lunch hour—and the front door was locked. The office would reopen at one o'clock, so said the sign.

I had almost an hour to kill, so I went back to my car and set out on a reconnaissance mission. I had to know more about this place. I steered my car slowly down the main street, looking left and right, taking in everything. The little town in late-October garb did nothing to relieve my misgivings. The sun hid behind grey cloud; the bare trees stared back at me coldly. I wound through the side streets, searching the neighborhood for something to latch onto, but every turn just increased the ache in my heart. Every building, every avenue represented loss—a job I loved and a home, gone; a relocating that never should have been.

I looked up and down, *This is going to be my home*. I let it sink in. Loneliness flooded through me like never before. Sadness hit with a force I couldn't defend against, and I pulled the car to the curb and cried.

At one o'clock, I walked through the door of Livingston Insurance for the first time. I met the staff and then spent the afternoon at the front desk, observing the work scene. Clients came and went; phones rang. I tried to picture myself there on the job every day. Could I come to know it and love it?

I looked out the front windows to the street beyond. I knew my first impression of Stoddard wasn't a fair one. The town looked like every other Alberta town in October, yet I knew it would be beautiful come spring. Could it become home to me like Shaunavon had?

Maybe.

Dennis and his family took me out to dinner again that evening. He told me he was confident that I was a good fit for the job, and it was mine if I wanted it.

I told him I'd have an answer to him by Tuesday.

Livingston Insurance had been without a receptionist for a long time, and Dennis was eager to get someone hired. I knew he couldn't wait till my end-of-January final date at Cornerstone.

I wanted to take the insurance job—I needed a job. But I wouldn't just walk out on Blake and leave the staff there high and dry. When I returned to Shaunavon, I talked to him about it, letting him know the situation at Livingston but that I would still keep my promise to Cornerstone if they needed me to stay.

I won't hold you back from another job, Blake told me, and he gave his blessing for me to leave at the end of November.

So I called Dennis and told him I'd start work December 11th, which would give me a week-and-a-half after my last day at Cornerstone to move to Stoddard and settle in.

I shopped for an apartment online and signed the lease without even seeing the place.

And even with the challenges of Cornerstone's remote location and unique type of ministry, Blake had my replacement there in time for me to spend my last week training him.

It all fell into place within a couple of weeks. From my living room in Shaunavon, to Arizona, to Stoddard, the message had bounced that I needed a job. It just happened that Cliff was talking to Dennis at the same time I was texting with Melody. It just happened that Dennis needed the very thing for which I was trained. Just happened I found an apartment I

could afford. Then a replacement for head administrator at Cornerstone... Blake's blessing...

God's fingerprints all over this...

A truth I clung to fiercely for the next two years.

Daughter of the King

The day I resigned my position at Cornerstone, Elizabeth told me a story. *Last night, I saw this picture in my head,* she explained—

I saw a king on a beautiful throne, wearing a beautiful crown. At his feet, in a heap, lay a child, heart-broken and sobbing.

The king looked lovingly on the child, his face twisted in anguish as her pain gripped his heart. He took off his crown and set it aside. He reached down and scooped up the child, his arms encircling her close to his chest. She wrapped her arms around him, her face buried in his neck as she wept. A shield of light surrounded them both, protecting them; no harm could come to either of them.

Tears fell from the child's eyes—black tears; they hit the king's chest, each one electric with her pain. They pierced his heart, yet without wounding it. He held her tightly and whispered, "Daddy's here... It's okay... Daddy's got you... Daddy loves you... I know it hurts right now, but Daddy's here...it's going to be okay..."

As he spoke, his own tears flowed down his cheeks, golden, like liquid light, falling on her, penetrating her heart. His tears gave her comfort, and they brought to her healing, deep within.

Elizabeth's description finished, she sat quietly for a moment, her face earnest. I waited, expectantly.

Then she looked at me. *The child,* she told me, *was you, Sandra. The King was God, the Father.*

And I was struck yet again by Elizabeth's story of a father's love. See, she knew my anguish over my job, that I ached for things to be set right. She knew how hurt I was to leave Cornerstone. She knew some of my struggles within myself. She knew my heartbreak over Robert, divorce, and many other things. She hurt for me through my pain. This story came from her heart.

I don't attach a lot of spiritual significance to dreams and visions. We should not go chasing after deep meaning in them or dissect and ponder or look to them for guidance. We should look to God's Word and meditate on it, instead. In it, is everything we need. It's not that God can't tell us something through a dream, but it's dangerous to hold dreams and visions even close to the same degree of authority as the Word. The Bible, itself, warns that God's revelation to us is perfect—complete—in the pages of Scripture, and we're commanded not to add to or take away from it.[1]

But I believe there are times when God paints a picture in our minds to reinforce a truth. In that respect, I love this image of God that Elizabeth shared with me because it balances both sides. The throne, the crown, the light that emanates from Him shows His kingship and holiness, the child on her face before Him, giving Him the reverence He deserves. Then His laying aside the crown to take her in His arms shows Him as the Father, reassuring her of His love, comforting her, healing her. He is still the king on the throne while being the loving, protecting Father who cares infinitely about His hurting child.

It made a deep impression on me, this image of the Father King. I'd always had a hard time seeing God as my loving Father. It was much easier

1. Revelation 22:18 & 19

to see Him as a stern judge, watching my every move, ready to punish with life-long consequences the minute I stepped out of line. Yes, God is King, and He is my judge. I'm accountable to Him. He is holy. He will deal with sin. It would be irreverent to diminish that.

But He is just as much my Father who protects me and loves me. He knows my sorrow and feels it with me.

He is both. Judge and Father.

I'm the much-loved daughter of the fierce and gentle King.

Untethered

December 3, 2017

I spent a somber morning with Kimberley and her little one, Thomas, my third grandson, just one year old. The familiar ache of good-bye filled me as I gathered them into hugs. Oh, how I was going to miss this—this little boy with big, blue eyes and white-blonde hair. I'd been in the delivery room when he was born, had seen him take his first breath, had heard his first cries. With their home just three doors from mine, I'd envisioned him in a few years, trotting down the sidewalk to Nana's house. But now, instead, I'd be so far away he'd soon forget me.

I walked through my pretty little house one last time, my footsteps echoing in the empty rooms. One last lingering look at the home that had been such a joy and comfort to me. Would I ever know again a place that suited me so well?

And with that I drove away.

I was heartbroken to leave Cornerstone, my lighthouse, and Shaunavon, my place of restoration. My last look at that tiny prairie town was with mixed emotions—deep sadness, loss, regret, failure, resignation, relief.

After nearly six hours on the road and then seemingly hundreds of trips up and down too many stairs, my things were at last unloaded into my new apartment in Stoddard late that night. I walked to the door with my Shaunavon friends who'd come to help—Elizabeth and her daughter. *Please don't leave me here,* I begged. Already, my air was choked off amid the stacks of boxes that filled the tiny rooms and the looming walls that cut up the space. Loneliness and fear reached around me, even before my friends were gone, and threatened to suck me under. This town, this job, this apartment...nothing fit me, I was certain. Just that first few hours there and already I wondered how I'd ever be okay.

But God had brought this job and this apartment together for me, I reminded myself, and He wouldn't let me fall. "Like an eagle that stirs up its nest, that hovers over its young, He spread His wings and caught them, He carried them on His pinions."[1]

Livingston

Stoddard, Alberta

All I remember of my first day on the job at Livingston Insurance was how lost I felt. I didn't know a thing about insurance. But it wasn't just that. Everything about this position was so different from what I'd been doing for the last four-and-a-half years. At Cornerstone, I'd spent most of my workday alone in my office, plodding systematically through tasks. Here I had to be the front-line person, always on, bouncing from one thing

1. Deuteronomy 32:11 (NASB)

to another and back again...phones ringing non-stop...clients coming and going one after another. This job took multi-tasking to a whole new level. My introvert self was depleted of every ounce of energy by the end of each day.

The insurance terms and jargon were foreign to me. Many times, I didn't know what clients were talking about when they called. Over and over I had to put them on hold to ask for help from a broker.

And people's names... It was something I'd never thought of all the years that I'd lived in Moncton. But different areas have their own collections of unique family names. We had ours in New Brunswick—Bastarache, Boudreaux, Robichaud, Melanfant, and Vautour. I came across some of these names again from time to time in the French communities in Saskatchewan.

When I went to Cornerstone, I learned a bunch of new family names—they popped up regularly in my interactions.

But here on the job at Livingston, I was bombarded daily by names I'd never heard before. Clients would call and introduce themselves, and I couldn't make out what they were saying over the phone. I felt foolish, asking them to repeat it over and over and finally resorting to, *Could you please spell that out for me?*

Every difficulty put me behind in my tasks, and that just added to the pressure. Stress over the consequences of potential mistakes hit in that first week and only intensified with time. It got me off on the wrong foot, and I was never able to set myself right again.

What were challenges for me were all pretty standard for an office such as ours. It wasn't the job, the staff, or the clients that made it so hard.

It was me.

I wonder now if I was truly unsuited for the job or if the circumstances of my life at that time—finally facing that the divorce was real and losing

my place at Cornerstone—had just taken too much out of me to allow me to think and function well.

I'd come to Livingston with a determination to stick with it for at least a year; I owed it to myself and to Dennis, and I was just stubborn enough to do it. We had a terrific staff team, and our boss and his wife were exceptional to us. I hung on, and in time, things did get better. We had wonderful clients, I discovered, and serving them was where I found joy in my job.

I gave everything in me—learning, adjusting, rushing to keep up, striving for excellence...

Yet feeling kicked again with each mistake.

I wish I could say I found my niche at Livingston—that I came to fit in it and it suited me well. But I couldn't quite bring it together.

Why couldn't it have worked, something that should have been so right?

Escape

An immediate bright spot after my move to Stoddard that December was our upcoming Christmas break which I would spend with Holly. It would be my first trip to Peace River, where she now lived. How I looked forward to those few days with her and her darling little boy, Eric, nine months old. I'd seen him only once before, the previous July when she'd brought him to Shaunavon. Couldn't wait to cuddle that little baby again!

The annual office party was scheduled for Friday morning, December 22nd. Livingston Insurance would be business as usual but with staff in our ugliest Christmas sweaters and on constant parade to the kitchen for refills of all the tasty dishes spread out back there on the table. We'd eat lunch together when we closed at noon and then exchange gifts. Then, Dennis had already let me know, I could leave for Holly's before the office

opened again at one o'clock. He was concerned about my eight-hour drive and wanted to give me an early start.

I think it was only two or three days before that Friday party that I got back the report from my out-of-province inspection on my beloved HHR. The diagnosis was not good. It was all jibber-jabber to me—I don't speak mechanic—but when I set the report in front of Dennis, he looked up at me with concern, *You can't drive this car way up there to Peace River. It's not safe.*

He went through the list of problems, and my heart sank. Repairs would be extensive and costly. I'd already put a chunk of change into my little buggy, and it wasn't worth any more. My trip was in a couple of days, and I had no way to get to Holly's.

I'll make a few calls, Dennis told me. *We'll find you a good car.*

In no time, he'd located a 2009 Ford Escape about to go on the lot for $9995.00. Dennis wielded a killer deal—he knew the guy—and got it for me for $5000.00. He handed over to the dealer the cash for the full amount, then helped me out with a monthly repayment plan. Not that I was special. He just did that sort of thing for people.

I whizzed off to Peace River in my pretty, red SUV. Dennis called me a few hours into the trip to ask how it was going and if the car was handling well, giving me the chance to try out my first ever Bluetooth.

It was a wonderful holiday with my girl and my grandbaby, a much-needed escape—a respite from the new job with its pressures and the new town where I didn't yet fit. And Dennis helped make it happen.

Thus, my third vehicle came into my life, and with it, my first-ever monthly car payment.

I had it paid off in seven months! Again, how God took care of me!

Undone

The task of setting up my apartment had overwhelmed me that first night in Stoddard. Visions of boxes and furniture stacked to the ceiling, barely a pathway between, had haunted my dreams. With everything Robert had shipped to me, I'd had too much even for my house in Shaunavon. Yet this new dwelling seemed half the size. There was a second bedroom, thank goodness; I'd stuffed in a cabinet, bookcases, treadmill, and my extra bed.

The apartment was fine, really, but to me, the layout was an inefficient use of space. There was nothing attractive about the design, either—no cozy little nook...no pretty woodwork...no lovely old hardwood floors.

But I pulled out all the "Sandra" touches I could muster just the same and went to work. I arranged the furniture and hung up curtains and pictures, determined to make it homey and pretty. Then, task completed, I felt it out.

I walked around...

Looked it over...

Curled up on the couch...

It didn't work.

I couldn't relax. I could not cheer the dark, galley kitchen or the stark white paint that was everywhere. The walls closed me in. Nothing could open up the box and make it breathable.

Within weeks, an unreasonable feeling of isolation took hold and wouldn't let go. It gripped me, not only in the apartment, but everywhere I went in Stoddard.

The stress of work increased daily and never left me. At five o'clock every afternoon, I scurried home, seeking sanctuary. I breathed a sigh of relief every Friday evening, savouring the weekend ahead; but by Saturday,

tension increased again, anticipating the coming Monday. Sunday nights I was almost sick. I was wound so tight, my insides buzzed all the time. There was no release. More than ever, I was desperate for my recovery time. But my home wasn't the reprieve I needed. It didn't welcome me; it didn't soothe.

On weekends, I went to the nearby city of Airdrie just to escape. I picked up my groceries and sometimes splurged at a coffee shop or wandered the mall to lose myself in the crowds. In Calgary, I attended church or met with friends. I tried to forget reality and pretend I was okay.

Those times away let me breathe again. But they were always overshadowed by my impending return to Stoddard and that apartment. As those sweet hours wound down, uneasiness took hold and my stomach tightened.

At last I'd climb into my car and head north on the highway. The closer I'd get to Stoddard, the darker the night, with each familiar landmark a symbol of my isolation. I'd pull into town and slip the last few inches back into the pit.

I began a downward spiral into a depression I didn't even recognize. I didn't have the strength of spirit to create a social life for myself. I couldn't think anymore and couldn't even carry on a reasonable conversation. When people talked with me, I stared back at them blankly. I couldn't absorb their words or sort through the meaning. Those who met me during those months never saw the real me. I must have seemed an empty head, void of personality. I didn't recognize myself anymore.

My house in Shaunavon had become a liability. I couldn't get a tenant. I put it up for sale but never got a bite. I watched my bank account begin to dwindle—another thing that held me captive. I might have looked for a cozier place to live, but I couldn't afford it. I was trapped. No way out.

There was nothing wrong with the components of my life, I knew. Stoddard was a lovely town filled with friendly, wonderful people who welcomed me. I had a solid job in a good company with terrific co-workers, and I brought home a good income—God's provision. My apartment was a safe place, warm and quiet, with good neighbors. I had health and food and clothing. I lacked nothing physically. For all appearances, I should have been thriving.

I tried to shift my thinking and looked for the cause of my troubles. Surely, I was doing something wrong. I searched my attitude—that's always the problem, right, when things aren't working? *Just put your trust in the Lord... Be positive... There's always somebody worse off than you...*

In truth, I was grateful for what God had given me, and I thanked him regularly. I was ever conscious that He was all that was holding me together, financially, mentally, physically, emotionally.

But none of this lessened the misery. Misalignments were not the cause, nor was addressing them a cure. Not that I don't have wrong thinking and wrong attitudes—I do. They were just not the case this time.

I sat in my living room, time after time, and came undone. My body tensed; my head pounded with my pulse. I swirled in the current, round and round. I sobbed and clenched my fists. I didn't belong. Nothing fit. I was alone with no place, no roots, no solid ground. I was hopeless and helpless. Untethered.

How much longer could I go on like this? Surely, I would crash.

If it weren't for a handful of friends who let me pour myself out to them in texts, I don't think I'd have survived. Elizabeth, Stephanie, Joy, Melody. They were my therapy, my salvation. Melody once wrote:

> *At the moment, there is no way you can see a sunrise. But that's okay because it isn't your problem to solve or control. God will*

orchestrate it, and you will see His fingerprint; that will be your comfort, confidence, and security. You just wait. I will keep praying.

I clung to these tender messages. They were my lifeline.

Blessings

Stolen

Stoddard, Alberta
June 2018

Walking home from work the last Friday in June, I tapped the voice message that was waiting on my phone. It was the local motorsports shop, letting me know that my motorcycle pants were in. Yay!!

I still had my very first pair of leather riding pants, the ones I'd bought in New Brunswick when I'd first gotten my license. But they were way too big for me now since I'd lost weight with all my food issues back in 2010. I had to hold them up, in fact, if I didn't want to walk right out of them—not such a cool look. Since I wouldn't ride without full gear, a new pair of armored denim pants, a few sizes smaller, was my replacement choice. They were in, the message told me, and waiting for me at the shop.

Wonderful! I would have them before I headed off to Peace River the next morning to visit Holly for the July long weekend. I booted it the rest of the way home. I would just drop off my bag, grab my car keys, and hurry

to the shop before they closed. I should have plenty of time if I didn't dilly-dally.

I rounded the corner just before my building, stepped into the parking lot, and... Stopped dead in my tracks.

Gone!

My parking space was empty!

Somebody stole my car! My jaw hit the ground, as the truth knocked into me.

My gracious! How had this happened? I mean, I was hearing of stolen vehicles in Stoddard and surrounding areas, but I'd never expected it to happen to me. To *me!* Why me? Why... Oh, how am I victim of this heinous crime?!

I have to call police!

I need to let Holly know I won't be coming this weekend after all!

I have to inform my insurance broker!

No time to waste. I raced inside and up the stairs and changed into jeans. Maybe, if I acted fast, I could still walk to the sports shop in time to get the pants. Then that one chore would be taken care of. I could confront the mess of the stolen car and all its procedures and reports when I got back.

Hurry, hurry! Jeans zipped up. Out of the bedroom, down the hall, hand on the doorknob, pull...

Wait...!

I halted, door half opened... Slowly, it seeped into my thoughts... Is it...?

I dashed down the stairs and back outside and hoofed it down the sidewalk, all the way back the way I'd come. The picture in my head was slowly coming into focus... I reached the edge of the lot behind the insurance office and...

Yup, there it was. My Ford Escape...

...parked behind Livingston Insurance...

...where I'd forgotten it...

Yesterday...

George

And there was George—

George was a seventy-plus-year-old gentleman who lived in apartment 10, right across the hall from my number 9. I'd met him first thing, the day I was moving in. He'd been out in the hall, all smiles, upon hearing our racket, introducing himself, watching us come and go with boxes, his curiosity mixed with welcoming spirit.

I soon learned that there never was *George* without laughter. What a character! He was sharp and quick-witted. He loved to joke and tease but was always gentle in his humor toward me. He'd regale me with stories of the pranks he'd pulled and then throw back his head and laugh, thoroughly delighted with his own humor.

He'd ring my bell, bringing me my weekly paper. It was never just about the paper, though, with George. He'd linger, make small talk, any excuse to chat. *I've got something to show you,* he'd say. And he'd take me to his studio where his latest painting waited on the easel. He'd talk to me about the colors and the background and ask my opinion, *Should I make this shadow deeper? Should there be a cabin right here under the mountain?*

My first Valentine's Day in Stoddard, I got home from work to find a little gift bag outside my door. In the bag was a Caramilk bar and a potted silk African Violet. The note read,

Sandra,

A girl should not go without flowers and chocolate on

Valentine's Day.
George

Made. My. Day.

Another night, I trudged up the stairs after work, eager to kick back on the couch. There stood George just outside his doorway, smiling, towel neatly draped over his arm like a waiter in a high-end restaurant. He nodded politely, *Your dinner is ready, my lady.*

He ushered me to his table, already set. He pulled out my chair. He brought out the food and the wine. He told stories and chortled at his own punchlines. He insisted I take his most comfortable living room seat while we watched a Bee Gees concert on TV. He made us tea.

A sweet, unexpected evening.

Sunshine in my dreary world, this George!

Lee

That Christmas of 2017 with Holly, my first Christmas in Alberta, had been one of my best. For those few days, Stoddard and Livingston had slipped from the forefront. It was pajamas and morning coffee in the living room, chats and giggles and movies, and hugs and cuddles with little Eric. They were treasured moments when I needed them most.

Those precious days flew by. Then reluctantly, I'd said good-bye and climbed into the Escape for the long drive back to Stoddard.

When I'd stepped back into my apartment, utter loneliness had engulfed me. It was so hard to move to a place and not know anyone. Stoddard seemed so small to me and so far from everything, how would I make friends? Where? Anything beyond the edges of this little town meant

driving on cold, dark nights over winter highways. The thought only made me lonelier.

But then it occurred to me that I had one avenue for making connections right at my fingertips—my online dating account. I'd signed up for it the previous July but had been away from it for the last three months. I had a six-month membership, though, so there were still a few days left. Maybe this was a way to get to know people in the area. Though it seemed like a long shot, I decided to give it a try.

I signed into the account and typed in a search of the Calgary area, hoping to find someone who'd be willing to meet for coffee and maybe lead me to friends and laughter and life outside of Stoddard.

I reached out to some people who seemed to match my beliefs and interests, and a few struck up conversations with me. We continued with lighthearted discussions for several weeks—these people were a real bright spot for me in a difficult time. But they lived too far away for us to be any more than online acquaintances. My few days on the site yielded nothing useful in the area. My membership expired, and I gave up hope of socializing through that route.

Somewhere near the beginning of February—maybe I was bored—I got curious about what had become of my expired account. So, I hopped back onto the site to check it out.

Look at that! Someone in Calgary had viewed my profile! Even without renewing, my information was still there. I hadn't expected that. People could still find me, go on my page, and I'd get notifications that they'd seen it. I could go on their pages, too, to read what they'd written about themselves.

I don't know why this Calgary guy piqued my curiosity, but I snuck a look right back at him. Interesting. He spoke of God and of his faith in a

concrete, personal way; not everyone does that. He wrote well, and I saw we had some things in common.

But we couldn't exchange notes, I learned. Messages wouldn't go through, not unless I renewed my membership.

Oh well, doesn't matter. I'm off of here, account closed, no way to get in touch. I tinkered around, trying to delete myself so no one else would attempt to contact me and think I was a snob for not responding. Click, click, click. *Yup, that should do it. Account deleted. Done.*

A day or so later, I went back in to make sure I'd succeeded in removing my profile, and...

Nope, it was still there. Big and bold as ever.

And lo and behold, I had a message!

From that same guy from Calgary!

February 10, 2018

> *Hi, Sam, (My dating site handle)*
> *I saw your profile a while ago but don't believe I had written you. Thank you for viewing my profile, BTW.*
> *I invite you to think and pray about opening a conversation with me. Whatever you decide, I'm sure God will lead you to what He has for you. Take care, please.*
> *Sincerely, Lee*

I sat up in my seat. How did that happen? How had the message come through?

Well, turns out, subscribers can purchase extra membership privileges that allow communication with any members, even those who aren't active, like me. So that was how—he had one of those special "plus" memberships.

The guy impressed me, and I wrote back the same day. I told him, yes, I'd like to start a conversation. I told a bit about myself and asked some things about him.

Another message came from him soon after:

> *February 11, 2018*
> *Hi, Sam,*
> *Thank you for writing back. It was great to hear from you and to see we have so many common interests. I'll try to answer some of your questions.*

It went on with much about his kids, his interests, his relationship with God, and more. A lot of things about this guy I already liked. What I saw fit my criteria. Yes, I had criteria:

> Must love the Lord above all else;
> Desire to serve Him and others;
> Share some common interests with me;
> If he touches me once in an inappropriate way, he'll get no second chance;
> Play guitar and sing (that last one was an extra, less important).

As it happened, Lee was a high-school band teacher turned college music teacher, now retired. He was a former symphony member, sang and played guitar in jazz and folk bands, was a Christian song-writer, and played piano and tuba. *Huh.*

And so it began.

Lee and I went back and forth with emails, and before long, he suggested we meet.

> *Good Morning, Sam. May I take you out for supper? Why don't I come to Stoddard?*

We set it up for February 20th. We agreed to meet at Reilly's restaurant, just down the street from my place. I planned my departure carefully that Tuesday evening. I would take all the time available to get ready—old face, much work—but I wanted to get to the restaurant ahead of Lee. I'd much rather be the one at the table watching for him than walk in while he was at the table watching for me.

I walked the two-and-a-half blocks in the cold and the dark. I was bundled in my puffy coat, gloves, and scarf with hood up in the minus-seventeen temps. The cold makes my nose run, so right inside Reilly's door, I stopped to fish in my pockets for tissues—get the nasty stuff out of the way before meeting the cute guy.

As I fought to get out of my gloves, I noticed a man, seated at a table and looking my direction. Was that Lee? Was he here already? I squinted across the room. It could be him...maybe... I tried to match the face to the pictures on the dating site. It was hard to tell from this distance...did he even see me?

No, no, it seemed he was looking at someone else out of my view on the other side of the wall that ran beside me. He gave a little nod and grinned, responding to something the person had said. Nope, not him; I still had time, oh good.

My purse kept falling off my shoulder, my nose kept running, my gloves kept refusing to go into my pockets that the tissues were now hanging out of. I forced and fumbled but was losing the fight.

In the midst of muttering to myself, movement caught my eye. My attention whipped back to that same man who was now getting up from the table.

What? Oh, no! He's coming this way! It is Lee! It's Lee after all! It was me he was looking at all this time, not some guy behind the wall, and was witness to my awkward contortions in the Battle for the Tissues.

Abort mission! Abort mission! Forget the gloves! Catch the drip! (For heaven sake, be discreet!) Stuff those tissues back into the pockets! Stand up straight! Put yourself together, woman!

I think I managed to get out of my hood, at least, as I made my way into the dining room. His eyes shone as he greeted me. He had a gorgeous smile that lit up his whole face. A shock of white hair rose just above the centre of his forehead and fell perfectly into the brown hair that swept around it. He had a habit of running both hands quickly through it as he talked, I couldn't help but notice.

I don't remember a lot of our conversation that night. Even though the restaurant wasn't busy, it was loud and hard to hear. I strained to catch his words more often than not.

Lee talked briefly of his marriage and of his divorce a few years ago. He told me about the months he'd just spent in a cabin in Montana, soul-searching and reconnecting with God. I saw how he cherished that time and the reverence and yearning for God he'd come away with.

He talked about his kids—his love for them, difficulties in their relationships with him, and his desire for them to live for the Lord.

He spoke of his youngest daughter, lost to cancer at just five years old. I couldn't imagine the pain to their family, but I saw a hint of it still in his eyes.

At the end of the night, he offered to drive me home, and I was grateful to be rescued from the cold. Stopped outside my apartment, he came to

my side of the car, opened my door, and walked me to my building. I was impressed with this man, and I hoped, somehow, I'd made enough impression on him that he'd ask to see me again.

I'm rather independent. I'm quite good at being alone, and most of the time, I don't mind it. But there's a deep part of me, way down in my soul, that longs for a good, godly man to share my life, to talk and laugh with me, to take walks hand-in-hand, to sing and dance, to love and serve our God together, to fold me in a hug and kiss me goodnight.

And it came.

A second invitation from Lee—to bowling and then a cheese board and live music at Gravity café in Calgary. What I remember learning that night is...

I. Do not. Like. Blue cheese.

Lee and I planned our third date for conversation and dining. We'd already spent two evenings in noisy settings; this time he chose a quiet Indian restaurant in Calgary, so we could talk easily and get to know one another.

He pulled out my chair and helped me get settled. After we'd ordered, he slipped an envelope across the table. I lifted the flap and pulled out the card that was inside.

> *Hi, Sam,*
> *You'll notice that this card starts empty and clean. Much like every day of our lives, we are free to write on it as we see fit. We can fill it with whatever we like.*

Today, I'm very happy to fill my evening enjoying time with you.
Thank you for being here. Thank you for being cheerful, thoughtful, and...just a little bit goofy!
And the rest of this card is blank. Do with it what you wish.
—Lee

Next time I saw him, I gave back the card, my own note written under his. It became a thing for us—a card back and forth, adding our thoughts for each other till we filled it, then one of us would start a new card.

How sweet they are, those notes. How many times I've pulled them out to read them again. They're now in my box of treasures, carefully tucked away.

Over the next couple of months, we saw each other two or three times a week. Lee even took me dancing. I have always wanted to learn to dance; it looks like so much fun. But I'm a klutz, I can't get the rhythm. I go left when I should go right.

There on the dancefloor, I'd blush and apologize. Lee, ever gentle, would tell me I was too hard on myself, that I was graceful and beautiful. I can still see his smile as he spun me on that floor, his delight in my laughter... Captured my heart.

He invited me to a weekly singles group at his church. It was there that I met Joy, and Joy introduced me to her friend, Kristen, both of them put into my life for God's purpose. At times when I hit rock-bottom, these wonderful ladies helped pick me up and put me back together.

Lee and I went to church together. How good it was to have him at my side. We walked the trails in Nose Hill Park; enjoyed Japanese, Indian, and Ethiopian cuisine; and we talked of many things. We grew closer.

I had no reservations about Lee. No question, God had orchestrated our unlikely meeting. Lee was sweet, caring, and always treated me like a lady. He guarded me. He had a good sense of humor but never at my expense; he would not speak a word that might hurt my feelings. When I said something stupid—*There's always a cushion of grace for you, Sam. You don't have to worry about your words with me.*

I relaxed knowing he would never act inappropriately toward me. He took good care of me, noticed things I might enjoy, and brought them to me. He was honest and open. He spoke of his dreams, his uncertainties, his successes, his weaknesses and strengths, his mistakes and regrets. He studied the Word and was discerning and careful to stick to the truth; He wasn't interested in a feel-good message that told only one side of the story. He asked my opinions, listened to my insights, and wanted to know my heart but never pushed for more than I was ready to tell. I was thrilled that we shared a real love for God.

Lee seemed to fall quickly. My only worry was he might go too fast and stop short when hit with a reality neither of us yet saw.

Olive Tap

Lee was part of the Medicine Hat JazzFest that June. He drove out on Monday to play guitar in different bands, eight or nine performances scattered throughout the week. For his last performance, he would accompany his friend, jazz singer, Nadia. Their event would be held at the Olive Tap where they would be the entertainment for Saturday night's six-course dinner by a red seal chef.

Lee invited me to go, and he bought me a ticket.

Excitedly, I drove that Saturday afternoon from Stoddard to Medicine Hat, Alberta. I followed Lee's directions to the motel where he'd booked

me a room. Lee wasn't there when I arrived, so I went to the office to get myself checked in. The man at the desk looked at me, *Your friend has already paid for your room,* he said.

Lee lives on a budget. He's set up adequately but does need to take care with his spending. So this weekend—my ticket, my room—I knew he'd made a sacrifice in order to give me this special gift.

Lee met me at my motel room later that afternoon, handsome in his vest and matching dress pants. I wore a simple, long navy dress with tiny flowers and a matching sweater.

We arrived at the Olive Tap lots early so Lee could set up. The owner of the venue seated me at the front table with Nadia's boyfriend. I was excited to see Lee in action and couldn't have had a better spot.

For two-and-a-half hours I was captivated. The chef produced one exquisite dish after another, course after course. I don't think I've ever tasted food so delicious.

And while we ate, Nadia sang, her soft, lovely voice filling the room, accompanied by Lee on guitar. His fingers moved deftly over the strings, releasing the most beautiful melodies. He looked so content, perfectly at ease. This was where he belonged—making music for an appreciative audience, like those of us gathered there that night.

The music...the meal... What an evening!

Lee and I finished it off with a moon-lit walk on the hill overlooking the city, then down along the river. I couldn't get over all that he'd done for me. *I wanted you to feel special,* he told me when I thanked him.

It was one of the most special nights of my life.

Lee and I spent my birthday together in 2018—the whole day, hiking and talking. A young man walking by took a notion that we should have a picture of us. "You two look so good," he said. I handed him my phone, and we both smiled into the camera.

In that photo, we're sitting on a large tree trunk that grows out sideways, a few feet off the ground. The Bow River's behind us. Bare branches reach up to the sunlight, the early May warmth having not yet tempted out the leaves. Lee has his arm carefully across my shoulders.

How many times have I picked up that frame and touched fingers to those faces? The hopes and dreams, the love and joy reflected in those smiles.

The Incident

Calgary, Alberta
June 7, 2018

My beloved 250 Suzuki, my housewarming gift, was still in my garage in Shaunavon. As the weather got warmer that spring of 2018 and motorcycles began to appear on the roads, I started to think about bringing mine to Stoddard. Lee had a sleek, 1100cc, matte-black, Indian Scout, and we were eager to cruise together.

By that time, though, I'd driven around those Alberta highways enough in my Escape that I had some reservations. Traffic was merciless—big trucks, congestion, cars darting in and out, frightening speeds. All that with the steep mountains and fierce winds meant my little bike was much

too light and powerless. I'd get thrown all over the place and wind up jam on the pavement.

So I went shopping on Kijiji. And on June 7, Lee came with me to Chestermere to pick up my gleaming, blue 2006 Suzuki Boulevard, 800cc—a beautiful bike. It was big! It had the power and weight I needed to be steady and safe. And so comfortable to ride with its floorboards and wide, cushy seat.

My Boulevard needed a new battery, the seller let us know, but we'd take care of that tomorrow. I donned my gear, we boosted the bike, and I nervously set out for Calgary and into rush-hour traffic on the Deerfoot. No tip-toeing into this bike's initiation.

It was a Thursday evening, our singles' night. We went straight from Chestermere to the church, Lee in his "Little Red" Entourage, keeping a close eye on me and the Suzuki.

Right after our group that night, Lee had a worship practice. He came with me to the parking lot to boost my bike again and see me off. *Will you let me know you made it home safely?*—his usual request. Then he went back into the church, and I set out.

Just a short run up the street, I stopped at a traffic light on the McKnight overpass, waiting to make a left turn onto the #2 highway, going north. That was the moment the Boulevard chose to stall. I figured I must have mishandled the clutch or something, and I pushed the ignition switch again.

Nothing.

The bike would not start, no matter how I coaxed.

With its massive front end, the bike was much too heavy for me to push up the slope to get it out of the road. I was in the middle of the lane, blocking traffic, and cars were steadily pulling around me to be on their way.

One man stopped and helped me push the bike to a small dead space at the side of the lane, which put me out of the chaos. He didn't have booster cables, though, so that was all he could do for me. I thanked him, grateful for the help he'd given. I texted Lee and hoped he'd see it before he started for home, the other direction.

Before long, a car headed the opposite way came to a stop alongside me. A young woman rolled down her window and offered to help. When I told her the problem, she swung her car around and pulled up tight behind me. Her name was Kelsey, she said, and she always carried booster cables.

We got the bike started, but it stalled again before we could get the seat back into place. Over and over we tried, but no way would it keep running long enough for me to get on it. All the while, I kept calling Lee and leaving messages on his phone. Eventually, I gave up hope that I would reach him in time.

At last, he appeared. He'd left his phone in his car during practice; that's why he'd taken so long to get my message. He was so relieved to find me and to see that I was okay. He tried his hand at the finnicky battery but had no more success with it than I'd had.

What to do? It would soon be dark. We couldn't leave the bike there on a hill on a busy overpass.

Let's get it to a parking lot, then we'll figure it out, Lee suggested. He turned the bike around, and I hopped on. He pushed me out into the lane toward the crest of the hill, back the way I'd come more than an hour before. Kelsey, our Good Samaritan, followed with her four-ways on, to keep motorists from slamming into us.

Lee held the back of the seat, keeping me upright. He pushed, and I started, wheels turning slowly, over the crest and then downward. The bike picked up speed. Lee jogged behind, clinging to the seat. Faster and faster I went.

Put on the brake! he yelled, breathless. *You're going too fast! Slow down!*

Why do I need to slow down? I called back over my shoulder.

Because I can't keep up!

Why do you need to keep up? I laughed.

Oh yeah..., it dawned on him. He let go of the seat and jogged to a stop, watching me coast down the hill.

Gravity took me to the bottom where Lee pushed me again, around the corner and into a parking lot across from a Denny's. By that time it was dark, and Kelsey drove him back up the hill to his van.

That's when I realized our solution.

I called AAA.

Upon Lee's return with his van, he and I wandered over to Denny's for some food and chit-chat and a few laughs at the night's events. We kept a careful eye on the bike through the window.

AAA finally came just before one a.m. We helped the guy load the bike and secure it. We unloaded it again at Lee's in the north end of Calgary, a disturbance that might not have been so much appreciated by the neighbors at that hour.

At two a.m. we were back on the highway, cruising toward Stoddard in Little Red. We chuckled again about how he'd run so hard to keep up to me, so intent on taking care of me and the bike that he'd forgotten to let gravity do its job.

You know, Lee said, *This was a really fun night.*

I agreed.

Ever after, Lee referred to this event as "The Incident." We still smile at the memory. We had a lot of good times together, and The Incident is still near the top of my list of favorites.

I think he'd say the same.

Gone

Stoddard, Alberta
2018

Lee was there for me through one of the lowest periods of my life. He encouraged me, supported me, and challenged me. He brought me humor and conversation.

Then came the day that something changed. I knew it as soon as he walked in the door. For the first time, when he greeted me, Lee's smile didn't reach his eyes.

We had a very long conversation. Not an easy one. He told me of his inner turmoil. He was unsure of us. Unsure if we were right for each other. Unsure if he should marry again. Unsure of himself, if he could love someone enough and be the right kind of husband. He was afraid of repeating his mistakes; he feared he'd fail again.

I knew it was more than just his own struggles that bothered him. My shortcomings were a concern too. I wasn't willing to settle for less than my standard, so I understood that he didn't want to settle for less than his.

His words were like a knife to my heart. He cried as he talked. It was tearing him up, too, but he believed he had to end it.

And when I closed my door that night, my Lee was gone.

He Directs My Steps

Kenton, New Brunswick
Early 2000s

As a teenager, my son, Ian, did frequent campouts with his friends in a pretty spot they called Rusty's Bend (Rusty was our dog). They often invited me to hike to their campsite with them, about a kilometre from home. We'd trek across the field opposite our house, and I'd follow them through the woods on a path that I never could see. We'd have lunch around the campfire, then before evening, Ian would guide me out again to the edge of the field. That's why I never had to learn the way.

One November afternoon, after Kraft Dinner and hot dogs that the guys had prepared on an open fire, we left the camp together, Ian and me, and set off toward the field that would take me home while his buddy stayed back at the site, setting up for their weekend. We talked as we went. We weren't in a rush, but we couldn't dilly-dally, either—he had to get me out and get back to the camp before dark.

Distracted with our conversation, I'd picked my path just a little way off from his, I noticed. But I didn't correct my steps. It was okay. I could still

see him and hear him. We continued walking parallel with one another, neither of us concerned—there were only a few feet between us...

I passed behind a tree...

And he was gone.

I stopped in my tracks and looked over to where Ian should have been. He wasn't there. I peered through the trees again, stepping forward and backwards, searching for movement. There was no sign of him. How could he have disappeared? It was like I'd slipped through a portal into another dimension.

I called and called. No answer. Nothing.

But he'd have noticed by now that I wasn't with him anymore. Surely, he would call out to me. I listened...

But the only sound was the rustle of trees and the sigh of the woods. It whispered out an eerie welcome, *I am vast and beautiful; I will swallow you up, and you will wander me alone.*

Reality slammed hard. *I'm alone in the woods with no idea how to find my way out.*

For those on the prairie, it's hard to imagine the scope of a New Brunswick forest. People don't find their way once they're lost; they don't come out, not without some skill or a compass. I had neither. All directions look alike, and one can go round and round in circles. The lost can wander for days, become disoriented, even emerge and cross paved roads without realizing it and lose themselves in the woods again on the other side.

I breathed in sharply and scanned my surroundings. I'd never seen this part of the woods before. Where was I? These trees...the underbrush...the ground... It all looked completely different from anything I'd ever encountered on the trail. My stomach tightened. How did I get here? Which way should I go?

I took another breath and forced my fears away. I'd never get out if I let panic take over. I prayed for God's guidance; He was my only hope.

I hadn't yet changed my course; I was still headed the direction Ian had been taking me. I stood on my spot and looked straight ahead, *This is north and home is east.* I raised my right arm, straight out at my side. Then I turned my head to find a landmark beyond where my outstretched fingers pointed. I picked a distinctive tree in the distance and then a second one beyond that. Slowly, I turned my body till I was lined up with them.

I figured if I kept picking two points, aligning them one with the other, and walking straight for them, I'd eventually come out at the edge of our road, across from our house. This was my mission.

I started forward—first point reached; pick a new point; walk. Second point reached; pick the next point; walk. And so I plodded.

Frightening thoughts invaded. I had nothing in my pockets to eat. It was already afternoon. Night would soon come and blackness would envelop the woods and the sky. I imagined hoots and howls and snapping twigs coming ever closer to me in the dark. It was a warm day for November, and I was fine now, though wet to the knees by this time from wading through swamps. But it would be cold tonight, and I had no matches or lighter to start a fire. How would I keep from freezing?

How many days would I wander...?

Not now, I chided myself and pushed the thoughts aside. *Focus on the tree ahead.* Walk, tree, focus, walk. I stumbled onward. Every time I reached an impasse, I charted an alternate course, choosing my markers carefully, before leaving my path. The afternoon wore on.

Without warning, I stepped onto a logging road. It could lead out, I knew, if I chose the right direction. I looked up and down. Go to the right or to the left? The road probably intersected other logging roads, too, and

it would be impossible to know which ones led out and which only led deeper into the maze.

So... Right? Or left?

There was no way to tell.

I went left and walked up a gentle slope, all the way to a bend in the road. But something made me hesitate. I stopped. Was this the right way? I looked ahead, then turned to look behind. I didn't know. Daylight still shone down, but I had to hurry. Make a decision.

For reasons unknown, I thought I should go back, and I began to retrace my steps. I was about a third of the way to the point where I'd entered the logging road when, up ahead, two large black balls tumbled out onto the road, bounded across, and disappeared into the woods on the other side.

Bears.

No mistaking them.

I froze in my tracks and stared after them. They'd been far enough off and were in too big a hurry to notice me, thank goodness. I smiled as relief washed over me. I paused there a moment to steady my heartrate, then I made my way forward again—past my point of entry, past where the bears had crossed. Onward and onward.

A footpath branched off the road and over a hump into a little hollow. Without knowing why, I followed. I waded through more water and skirted some debris to what looked like a shallow ditch. I traversed the ditch...

And stepped up onto a road.

Not just a logging road; a real road. Two lanes. Cars and trucks.

And I knew I'd be okay.

There were no houses in sight. I didn't recognize my surroundings at all. It was odd, but the scene before me didn't add up to what my head had calculated. *Which way's home? Where am I?*

I picked a direction and started walking.

In minutes, I reached a sign—Jarvis Road it proclaimed in white letters. Finally, I knew where I was. It wasn't our road, the one I'd thought I was headed for, but it was close.

Just as night fell, I turned around and, picking up the pace, headed for home, the opposite direction. A few more kilometers to go.

I was sure I'd kept a straight course, I mused to Ian later. *How did I end up on Jarvis Road?*

But we weren't headed north, like you thought, when I lost you, Mom, he explained. *We were going east.*

East! We were already going east!

I'd lost track of our direction way back at the beginning of our day, shortly after we'd entered the woods. And once surrounded by tall forest, it was impossible to see the sun on its low, westward course. So when I'd lined up those points that I thought were eastward, they'd led me southward instead. That's how I'd come out on the wrong road!

But the mistake that could have been disastrous hadn't turned out wrong. My misdirection had been made right by Someone who knew the way. As I'd stumbled through the forest that day, the God of the universe had commanded my steps. He'd kept me from panicking and running in circles. He'd brought me to the logging road. He steered me on a straight-enough course to get me to a place I knew, just at nightfall.

He'd brought me home, my Father, my Guide.

I know today's no different. He still directs. He knows my way. He corrects when I misstep. When I'm afraid of what's ahead, He takes my hand and leads me through, onward on the path He's chosen...

Ever closer to home.

Bridge of Tears

Lee and I endured our separate agonies. I played over his words, again and again. I was so sure we were meant for each other. Yet, I didn't want anything that wasn't right for me or for him. I shuddered to think I could end up the wife he came to regret.

Then one morning he sent a brief note, wishing me a good day. Just those few words from him were like a cup of cold water to a thirsty soul. How I missed him.

That led to longer letters. We poured out our feelings for each other, our fears, our pain. He talked of maybe trying again, but he needed to go more slowly. He was afraid of plunging ahead too fast, blinded by what we wanted, unable to see what was right. He needed time to be sure.

He asked to see me. No promises. *We don't need to solve our whole world, just enjoy each other for a time,* he said.

He picked me up and took me to Airdrie for dinner, an evening of sweet togetherness. Such sadness came over me as he drove me home. Would there be another night for us like tonight? He walked me to the door and pulled me into a hug. He held on just a little extra. Then we said good-bye with no promise of *again*.

A few days later, He invited me to church. Slowly, we eased back into dating. I hoped that our more-careful approach would give Lee the

assurance he needed. I soaked up every minute with him, always afraid it might be our last. I never could relax, and we never settled quite back into what we were before.

For the next year, we were on-again, off-again. Lee battled the same tug-of-war in his heart—he seemed to want to be with me, but something kept bringing him back into turmoil. I can't speculate about all his conflict, for only he knows it.

I could always see when he'd slip again into the torment, and sooner or later, one of us would confront it. He was always honest with me, even when it meant dashing my hopes. He was gentle with my heart, worried about what he was doing to me. I told him I believed in us, that I went in willingly, and I knew the risks. It might not work out, but I wanted to give it every reasonable chance.

Those months gave us wonderful times together—hikes and talks and bike rides and many laughs. I still cherish the memories. Through it all, we both ran our own careful assessment. I faced that we couldn't keep repeating this cycle. We'd given lots of chances for fears and uncertainties to work themselves out. By now Lee would have gained assurance if it were ever going to come. This was a bigger issue. I had to accept that this kind of relationship wasn't for him; I'd never want to force it.

The next time we hit that wall, it was the last for me. I hated what it was doing to him, and I'd gone as far as I could go. We both needed to be set free. I think he'd come to the same decision.

We said good-bye again.

That last break-up was a new beginning. We took some time apart and limited our communication. It was hard at first, but gradually it got easier. I knew we'd done the right thing as much as I knew we couldn't go back.

But something kept us knit together. We still missed each other. I'm so happy we were able to go on from there into friendship. I wouldn't trade a thing, not even going to Stoddard, if it meant I'd not have known him.

Incredible, isn't it, how lives intertwine to become forever woven together in heart and memories? Yes, we went through some tough stuff at times, Lee and I. But we found our place with each other. And a wonderful place it was.

He told me once, he was sorry for the tears he'd caused me. True, there were tears. But they were a necessary bridge to the beautiful friendship that followed. I'm thankful for him. I'm thankful for all of it.

But not even Lee could lift the darkness. My life, my world was all wrong. I was so deep in a black hole, I couldn't even see the sky. For thirteen months, it took everything in me just to survive. I vented my feelings into emails to myself:

> *November 16, 2018*
> *There's nothing normal, nothing right, nothing that fits, nothing that works. Nowhere to retreat from the attack, no haven, no family, no home, no place of comfort and recharging. I feel like all the mess is building, pressurizing, and I'm about to blow, shooting pieces of me everywhere. I don't know how to find an outlet, a way to keep from being destroyed.*

January 4, 2019

I don't like the person I am now. I rarely laugh, I have very little sense of humor, and can't carry on a reasonable conversation. I'm wearisome to everyone around me. I cry frequently and almost have a breakdown at the thought of having to continue this way. I'm so off that I'm tense and anxious and exhausted all the time. There's no break from it. All of life is draining with no refilling.

Even now, when I look back, I shudder, the blackness was so heavy. I couldn't understand why this was all so hard for me, and I had no idea how to fix it.

Relief was in God, pouring out to Him in prayer, being encouraged in His Word.

Then one day, the answer came...

Dark Curtain

Purpose. Meaning.

For today. For tomorrow. For life.

Purpose is wired in us by God. An innate human need. We have to have something to live for, a reason for doing what we do.

Purpose keeps our minds active and focused; less negative; less centered on self. It brings a sense of achievement and competence. It keeps us living, working, hoping.

We look for purpose in the happenings that interject into our lives. Especially in the tough stuff, an explanation makes persisting a little easier.

But what about when we can't see the purpose? When the days ahead look dark, like a black curtain hangs across our future? We search. We ask. But there's nothing there. No answer. No reason.

We've asked for God's leading. We've not pushed our own agenda. We've done what we're certain He's shown us. Yet it seems to have come out all wrong, we can't fix it, and there's no way out. It's hard not to question, did God really orchestrate this? Did I misread the signs? Miss a turn somewhere?

I spent days and nights staring at that black curtain, dreading, fearing it would never lift. I wanted a reason to hold onto for why He'd led me into

this darkness. Someone I might help…a lesson I might learn…the making of a better me… But weeks and months slipped away, and nothing happened.

A friend looked straight at me one day and said, "It might not have anything to do with you." In the moment, it hit hard. Could all this be happening for a purpose completely separate from me? For a mysterious someone and I'd never know who or why? Just a shadow to cross my path someday. Unseen. Unheard. Unfelt.

Reassurance, however weak, came from knowing God makes no mistakes. He knew I wanted what He chose for me. He'd never have let me make a wrong choice, believing it was from Him, and then chastise me for it. He'd planned this for me whether or not I knew why. And He enriches and strengthens through every circumstance, even when I don't feel it.

My situation wasn't right for me, I knew, but it was right for me for the time. One of those perplexities, at odds with itself, yet in harmony—God masters in them.

Sometimes God puts us into difficulties and leaves us there just long enough. No great experience comes from it, no amazing revelation.

Then He urges us to act. "Why are you sitting in the mess? Do something! What are you waiting for?"

And, like that, it's over.

That's how the curtain lifted for me. One day, I knew it was time to take action. Where once I was trapped, there were now opportunities. A decision, a change, momentum, release.

And God removed obstacles, one after another. He worked out unlikely details while I was still baffled as to how they could come together. Then, there I was, peering down a bright new path, taking that first step in a new direction.

I still don't have any answers for those dark months. But it's not for me to know what God chooses not to reveal. He's just as right and just as good. And He will accomplish with it whatever He will.

Perhaps... Might those difficult days have been a stepping stone to what was coming next?

Maybe I'll never know.

And that's okay.[1]

1. Psalm 142:3. "When my spirit is overwhelmed within me, You know my path." (NASB) Proverbs 3:5 & 6. "Trust in the Lord with all thine heart and lean not on thine own understanding. In all thy ways, acknowledge Him, and He shall direct thy paths." (KJV) Romans 8:28. "And we know that all things work together for good to them who love God, to them who are called according to His purpose." (KJV)

Lifted

Wings

Though most birds take refuge from a gale, did you know eagles fly right into the storm? They spread their wings to let the winds carry them, lifting them higher, above angry clouds. Up out of the storm's reach, they glide on gentler air. Beyond the raging tempest, eagles soar unhindered.

When I trust in God, He strengthens me. With His power, I'm able to face what comes, to rise above the storms of trials and heartaches. "They who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint."[1] Beautiful promise!

One day, it occurred to me, why did I have to wait for the house in Shaunavon to sell before looking for another place to live, a home that suited me better? Why couldn't I do something right now? I no longer had a car payment; with that money freed up, I should be able to afford a place elsewhere if I were careful. I assessed my finances again and realized

1. Isaiah 40:31 (ESV)

the numbers in my bank account were going back up, not down. Maybe there was a way out for me.

It was time for action. I gathered my courage and opened up a search of apartments for rent.

Time to spread my wings and rise above this storm.

Airdrie's a lovely little city situated just north of the Calgary limits, right on the QEII. I found a beautiful apartment on the west end. Spacious kitchen and dining area, in-suite laundry, nine-foot ceilings, two big bedrooms and a master en suite. Patio doors opened up to a tucked-in balcony with a view to the west, overlooking a big pond and fields and farms. A walking trail wound past, right below the living room. Just up the knoll was a splash park, playground, baseball fields, volleyball, and more. Then, just the other side of the building, was full-blown city life.

It would be an easy route from Stoddard. I could leave work behind at the end of each day, and with a short drive, I'd be home in a whole new surrounding that suited me well—people, shops, parks, trails. Life.

But a place like this would be expensive. I knew I could never afford it. I tried to prepare myself for the let-down. *How much is the rent?* I wanted to know.

$1300 a month.

$1300! That's all? I could manage that!! I couldn't believe it! What an unexpected blessing! And it was just in time—my Stoddard lease was up. I could move the end of March.

I signed the new lease and started packing.

At last, the dark curtain lifted.

Good Neighbors

Stoddard, Alberta
March 2019

I came up the stairs one night after work to find George waiting for me in his doorway, arms crossed. *I want to talk to you...to help you out a little,* he said.

In my experience, a statement like this, accompanied by that posture, is usually followed by a reprimand of some sort. I traipsed after him into his apartment where he dawdled, showing me his tomato plants and forget-me-nots, tiny sprigs just poking up through the soil of the window boxes lined up along the floor. We chatted about flowers and spring. He's easing in gently, I thought.

So, he got down to business. *The day you move out,* he motioned me to the window and pointed to the street. *If you want to use the back door, I'll make sure those trucks—you see down there? I'll make sure they aren't parked there. I know both those guys. I'll have them leave that space open, so you can get in nice and close with your moving truck.*

Oh, okay. That would be great. I relaxed. That wasn't so bad. *Thanks,* I told him, truly pleased.

I want to help, he smiled. *I can't do the stairs or lift much, but I can do this.* Then he sobered, *I never thanked you for the Valentine's chocolates you left for me last month. I feel really bad about that,* he said.

I brushed him off, *Pfft, don't worry about it, George. I just wanted to give you a little something.*

And..., he paused, looking more forlorn. *I'm gonna miss you when you go.*

Two days later, Roger rang my bell. Roger's my neighbor in number 11. He moved in the summer after I did. He, too, is an older man, retired, living alone. He's not the goofy character that George is. He's softer spoken, but just as sweet.

I peeked through my spyhole and there he stood, looking dejected. *I hear you're leaving,* he greeted when I opened the door.

I am, I nodded.

I'm gonna miss ya, he stated, sadly. *You're a good neighbor.*

Ah, I was so fortunate to have these two wonderful gentlemen looking out for me. Good neighbors, indeed!

Suddenly, Roger's face brightened, *And after you're gone, I'm getting your parking space!* he announced.

Just weeks before my move, plans started to unravel. I needed to be out of my Stoddard place, cleaned and steamed, by noon on March 31st. Then I learned my new place wouldn't be ready till April 4th. The management there needed time to power-clean and paint. Good grief, what do I do in the days between my move-out in Stoddard and my move-in in Airdrie? I mean, I could probably go to a friend's for a few nights, but what about all my furniture?

Okay, okay. I'd just fork over the cash and rent the moving truck for a few extra days. Surely there'd be someplace I could park it till the fourth. So I called to book a truck.

We can't do that, the agent told me. *We only do one-day rentals at the end of the month.*

Are you kidding me?

Don't worry, a friend told me. *I have a big trailer. We'll pack your stuff in it for as long as you need*.

That was a pretty big inconvenience to her, I realized, to clean her stuff out and bring the trailer to me. It was incredibly good of her to offer, and I was so grateful.

Whew! Okay, back on track. I kept on with my packing. Then a few days later, she came to me. Something had come up; she couldn't spare the trailer. Uh! I was back to square one.

I checked into storage containers. They were outrageously expensive. I couldn't justify something like that if I wanted to eat for the next six months. Now what? I was out of ideas. I couldn't imagine how this would work out. Where would I find a space big enough that I could afford?

Just days to go. I had almost everything packed up and labelled. *I still don't know what to do,* I told Lee on the phone one night. *I might have to stack my stuff at the curb like a fort and sleep inside it.*

I don't know either, Sam. God will work it out. Let's pray and give it to Him.

I talked again with the manager of my new building. I explained my predicament and asked if there were any way she could up my move-in date. At last, she surrendered, *You can have it at noon on March 31st.*

I sighed with relief and gratitude, knowing the sacrifice it meant for her and her staff. Bless them!

About the same time, the friend with the trailer had another idea. She remembered that her church used to have a ministry helping people move. She'd get in touch with them, she told me, and see if they still did it.

Calls were made, arrangements put in place, and sure enough, these wonderful people were at my door at eight on Saturday morning, March 30th. I'd barely let them in and they were carting out the boxes. They went about their work cheerfully. They were so efficient—so fast—they were done and gone in two hours. All my things were loaded into their own trailers and trucks and driven away, safely parked for the night. The next day, they drove up to my new place in Airdrie and unloaded it all into my apartment, just as quickly and just as efficiently.

They never asked for payment. This was ministry for them—a way for them to give. What an amazing crew! What servants' hearts!

We were so blessed, Sam, Lee said again and again. *There's no way we could have done all that by ourselves. God did this for you. God has blessed your decision, Sam.*

Out of the Coma

Airdrie, Alberta
2019

Before Stoddard, I knew I was sensitive to my surroundings, but it wasn't until I lived there those long months that I came to realize just how great an effect they have on me. It's impossible to explain it adequately to someone who doesn't understand. To many people, a room is just a room. If it has four good walls, a solid floor, and a roof that doesn't leak, it serves them well.

For me, a room can soothe and comfort—I feel stress slip away—or it can make me unsettled and anxious the minute I step into it. It can mean the difference between being relaxed and able to participate in what's going on or sitting rigid and quiet, being distracted, feeling awkward and in the way. It all depends on the layout, the colors, the placement of furniture, and the lighting.

By suppertime on that March 31st, the movers had left me amidst my boxes to do the unpacking in my new Airdrie home. They'd made sure the big things were in place for me, so I got right to work. Setting up my home is a job I enjoy, and I worked late into the night. I'd booked the next day,

Monday, off work, and I was up early in the morning to go at it again till evening.

I finished it all in a few days. I stood back to look at what I'd accomplished. I walked from room to room, feeling it out, a smile on my face, a thrill in my spirit. The colors. The space. The light from the windows. All brought together with my little treasures and cherished furnishings. Inviting ... Comfortable.

This place worked.

It snowed many times that April. Wind whipped across the pond and dumped a cold, white blanket on my balcony. But when it was warm enough, I was out there with coffee in the mornings and supper in the evenings. I watched ducks and geese come and go. I scanned from bank to bank in search of the two great blue herons. I could usually find one or the other, but the sight of both of them together was a rare treat.

One warm spring evening, I stayed there quite late. I sat on the loveseat in the glow of a lantern and listened to night fall around me. My heart warmed as I stared out into the shadows. This little balcony, this home—beautiful gift from God—was a solace for my soul.

For the first couple of weeks living in the city, my head was still in a fog. I worried I might not get back the ability to think and to create.

Then, slowly, Airdrie woke me from my coma. I began to relax. The vibration inside me stopped. I started to think about writing again.

It was already six years since I'd begun making notes on my time at Cornerstone. From the very beginning, I'd been keenly aware of how God

had planned my entrance into that refuge. It was important to me to record it and to tell it well. It kept calling me to finish it.

It had happened that one fall evening back in Shaunavon in 2016, a church friend, Rose Acker, and I had taken a long walk down a dirt road. I'd told her of our difficulties, Robert's and mine, over the years. I'd told her how I'd come to Shaunavon and of Robert's reason for the divorce shortly afterward. I'd spilled out the back and forth of our relationship, my hopes of reconciliation, Robert's dismissal of my offers, and my resignation at last. Like most people, she'd been surprised by my strange story. *I don't understand it myself,* I explained, as I did to everyone. *I don't expect anyone else to.*

When I'd finished, Rose had turned to me in earnest, *Sandra,* she'd said, *You have to write this.*

I'd mulled over her words and tucked the thought away. But not too far...

You know, there was a time I didn't think I had a story. *Everyone has a story,* I was chided. Yes, everyone does. But one worth writing? One anyone would want to read?

Then one day I noticed with amazement some of the things in my life—the adventures, the trials, the laughs, the tears, the treasured moments with so many extraordinary people, my incredible God.

Added to that were my family, the divorce, and the efforts to restore our marriage. I'd struggled long and hard in that conflict that touched all of us—Robert, the kids, and me. It had left me both damaged and strengthened. God had been with me in that too. His work there was just as evident as it had been in my time at Cornerstone—His leading, His lessons, His increase.

I do have a story, I realized! A beautiful story of God's grace and rich blessing!

How would I write it, I wondered? A journal-style telling of those years in Shaunavon? A letter about our family? And when would I ever find time to write both of these accounts?

Then it occurred to me—the two stories go together. They're both my story. They are one. Intertwined.

The keyboard drew me. I pulled up my old document with my notes about Cornerstone and Robert and us, and I pushed all that I'd entered over the years down to the second page. I brought my curser back to the top, just under the title...

I went back to the beginning—Cornerstone and Kenton—and I started to type.

The story spilled out as I relived it, my head and my heart pulled right back in.

Easter Morning

Airdrie, Alberta
April 21, 2019

I'm bundled in jacket and blankets, out on the balcony in zero-degree temps. It's Easter morning. The air is clean and crisp with April freshness. This is the last morning I'll be able to see the moon as it wanes. By tomorrow, it will set too far south to view from my perch here. Airdrie traffic is sparse but constant. Between the hum of passing cars is a delightful stillness, broken only by the song of ducks and geese on the water below.

Easter. Reflection.

As a kid, I just accepted God's love for me. It was told to me every week in Sunday School. I knew of it like I knew my name. I never thought it through.

Now, I marvel at it. Mystery. Beauty. Undeserved gift.

His is a perfect love, a love that cost Him His Son. What a price to pay for the likes of me!

That His love is only one side of the coin makes it that much more incredible. For the other side is His holiness and justice. Sobering.

Fearsome. Because He's holy, He cannot excuse sin. Because He's just, He must punish it.

I'm accountable for my wrongs. My sin is a stain I can't wash clean. Somehow that I can't explain, God looked at me and loved me anyway. He sacrificed His Son to pay my debt. Jesus took my punishment for me.[1] When I repented, He cleansed me white as snow.[2] He gave me a new heart.[3] He rescued me. He took me in and made me His own. It was not because of me that He did it. I was nothing. Only He could give me value.

Love balances judgment; they are equally God. It was God's love that chose me and purchased my freedom from His judgment. For His glory.

This is what makes me marvel.

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1. Isaiah 53:3-6. "He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were *our* faces from him; he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. But he *was* wounded for our transgressions, *he was* bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace *was* upon him; and with his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all." (KJV)

2. Isaiah 1:18. "... Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool." (KJV)

3. Ezekiel 36:26. "Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh." (NASB)

Airdrie, Place of Awakening

Nana's House

I commented to Lee, once, that my new apartment, much as I loved it, was not what I'd envisioned as 'Nana's house' for my grandkids. I'd pictured a little more space for them and their toys and a yard where they could run and play.

Wherever you are, Sam, will be Nana's house to your grandchildren, he said.

Kimberley came out with Thomas and spent the long weekend in May with me. It was cruelly cold, but that didn't stop Thomas from taking full advantage of "Nana's" playground. I bundled up in my winter coat and still shivered, but the delight on his cute little face as he laughed and climbed all over the play equipment, just steps away from my apartment building, was warmth enough. They visited again in October with second baby, Oliver, three months old. His darker complexion, dark hair and eyes are the exact opposite of Thomas's fair coloring, but he's every bit as adorable. Kimberley's so patient with her boys. How sweet to have them there again,

to hear the pound of little feet and their delighted squeals peal through the rooms.

Kimberley, months later, texted me this:

> *Thomas was pretending to be an airplane today and said, "I'm flying to Nana's house."*
> *And he still points out your house here* [in Shaunavon] *every time we walk by.*

Holly and Eric came in August that summer. By then, it was warm enough for the splash park. What kid doesn't like to splash! I traded in my winter coat for shorts and t-shirt and chased after Eric through the spray. Another day we went to the Calgary Zoo. Eric loves animals, and at only two-and-a-half years old, he knows all their names.

One day, weeks afterward, Holly called me just to say, *Eric talks all the time about going to the zoo with Nana Pepper and seeing the hippos and crocodiles with Nana Pepper!*

Ah, my heart...!

Nana Pepper is his nickname for me because of my salt and pepper hair. It's gracious of him to choose the *pepper*.

I'm really mostly *salt*!

Awakened

Within a few weeks of living in Airdrie, I was feeling like my old self. I'd stopped crying. My insides had settled, and my head was clear. What relief! My mind had awakened. Creativity was bursting within me and needed an outlet.

I had to write.

I wanted to be useful. I wanted to help people, in some way—those who were hurting.

Back in New Brunswick, I'd been so sheltered, I was clueless about many things. My parents took good care of us girls when we were growing up. Nothing touched us. I stepped from their house into Robert's. He was a good provider. He gave a home and food and security to me and the kids. He came home to us every night. Through the ups and downs, I had it quite good. I thought tragedy struck only the few.

In Shaunavon, I had my eyes opened. I was living my own tragedy by then, and it made me recognize tragedy in others. It was everywhere—so much hurt and loss and tears. So many women, picking themselves up and going through their days with wounds on their hearts.

Here in Alberta was more of the same. It seemed everyone I met had endured divorce, betrayal, the death of a loved one, or serious health problems. I wanted to reach out to them. To help, to encourage, to listen. I didn't know how. I had no skills or training in these areas. All I had was my own experience.

I'd start a blog, I decided. Nothing preachy. No lectures. I had no stuff to strut. It was a small thing, but it was something. It would give me a chance to scratch my writing itch and see what people thought. I would write about everyday things—difficulties and blessing...the beauty around us. Stories that I hoped would encourage and show them they're not alone.

So I started my own website, googling "how to" every step of the way.

Then in early September 2019, heart pounding, my finger hovered over the "Publish" button. At four p.m., right on schedule, I sent out my first real article telling of the incredible scene right below my balcony—a praise to the Creator God.

Home for the Night

Airdrie, Alberta
September 2, 2019

Tonight, I'm waiting for it. Watching.

The brilliant sun slowly makes its way toward the horizon. Deep blue sky stretches downward and merges into pink, then orange where it touches the hilltops to the west. Reflections shimmer on the waters below my balcony. The warm air stills with expectation.

Then I hear them calling; it's faint at first, they're so far off. I search the sky and soon locate tiny specks to the west, moving through the blue. As they approach, I can make out the sweep of their wings, carrying them on the air, light and sure.

Canada geese.

They begin to take shape: long, sleek necks; plump bodies; slender black heads; blazes of white.

Anther flock appears from across the sky, calling to the first, announcing its arrival. It's the beginning of a ritual that will go on for the next hour.

Arcing toward the water, the geese begin their descent. I know their pattern, yet it's new every time. Suddenly, they break formation. They duck and swirl, darting opposite directions and back again, circling each other; down, then up—a spontaneous dance, mid-air. They move as though unaware of each other, yet the whole performance is an intricate choreography, timed to perfection, playful, elegant.

Magnificent.

My breath catches. I'm riveted, an unseen intruder, witness to this spectacular display.

Then, their recital ended, they drift downward, gliding on the soft breeze. With a flutter of wings, they touch the surface, skimming across the water in effortless grace.

And skein after skein, they arrive home as darkness deepens. The last of them come in droves as though they are late. They hurry in to join the others. There are two or three hundred, now, in all. They settle in groups all over the pond, honking, fretting, squawking. The night is filled with their noise, and I know why they are called a gaggle.

Above them, the sliver of white moon glows brighter, reflected on the water. Moments pass, and a tinge of yellow seeps across the white. The stain slowly darkens as deep blue sky around it turns velvet black. The moon edges downward. At last, it glows orange just before it's gone.

The racket on the pond fades to resigned babbling. A slight chill brushes my skin. I slip away now.

Their clucking will go on all night. I sink into the melody, lulled by the rhythm. My geese are home, guided back by the One who gathers the scattered and brings order out of chaos.

We tuck into His hands.

The night folds in around us...

Peace. Rest. Home.[1]

1. Psalm 19:2. "The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of His hands." (NIV)

Gypsy Heart

Lee and I took the motorbikes out many times that summer of 2019. We rode in warm sunshine, in cold, through fierce winds that nearly blew us over, and under dark clouds and streaks of lightning that crisscrossed the big Alberta sky. We were awed by the breathtaking scenery along those back roads around Airdrie, Sundre, Carstairs, Cochrane, Ghost Lake, Black Diamond, Bragg Creek, a pretty little community called Dogpound—you read it right—and to the hoodoos in desert-like Writing-on-Stone[1] Provincial Park near the Alberta/Montana border.

We discovered Big Hill Springs, a provincial park just west of Airdrie. We hiked a winding path through lovely forest and along a creek to gorgeous waterfalls. How I miss the woods; I don't realize it until I'm there. They soothe every time I walk them—the rustle of leaves, the snap of twigs underfoot, the way sunlight filters through branches and dances on the forest floor.

I was so grateful for my lovely new home and for Airdrie, the city—for the light and life they brought to my soul. Those months there saved me, resurrected me. What relief to feel like myself again, to function properly, to create. I could never have imagined, those first few months, the deeper

1. Petroglyphs of the Blackfoot people

purpose for my move, what that awakening would do in me or how far it would take me. I could not have guessed how brief would be my time in that sanctuary overlooking the pond and its creatures.

My vacation that summer was the first time since I'd come to Alberta, more than two-and-a-half years before, that the stress of work released me. It left me completely, and for those two weeks that I was off, I was free of the worry. This was the shift I'd waited for for so long, I was certain. I'd been telling myself for months that my new surroundings would reset me—would fix the glitch inside me—and I would come to fit into my job and be able to learn it inside out. I'd perform the tasks with ease and finish them well. I'd do my work with the same level of competence as the rest of the staff. Tension would lift and I'd be okay. I began to look forward to a fresh start.

Within days of returning to the office after that vacation, however, it all came back. The knot tightened again; it twisted a little more each day. I told myself it was my imagination—just keep pressing on; it will fade away soon. The sick feeling in the pit of my stomach took hold and increased as the weeks went by. What was wrong that this just got harder?

What if it never changed? I'd given Livingston more than a reasonable chance by that time. How I'd wanted it to work. But I couldn't seem to overcome whatever had thrown me off track. As much as my Airdrie haven healed—as much as I wanted it to be the answer—there was this one thing that it could not change. Would I live like this for the rest of my life? Was there no way to fix it?

How do you know when to try harder and when to admit something just isn't right and let it go?

Should I look for another job? Something a little less intense? Could there be a job out there that suited me better? I'd had it once at Cornerstone. Could I find it again? I felt horrible just thinking

it—Livingston had been so good to me; how could I leave? The thoughts bounced inside me for days—for weeks—before I finally let myself take the first step.

I fired up my laptop one afternoon and scrolled through online job postings. Administrative Assistant. One after another they rolled by, but they all seemed to be more of the same—fast-paced office, answering busy phone lines. Discouraged, I closed the screen and set it aside.

Starting again... Learning all new procedures and systems just to be back in the same old stress, different office? What was the point? And where else would I find a work environment as great as the one right where I was already?

No, I didn't want to trade one stressful office job for another. I drummed my fingers on the countertop. What to do? I paced the apartment. Stay put? Was this what I wanted for the next twenty years? Could I keep it up...somehow learn to do it without being almost sick every day?

You need to go soar with the eagles, Sandra...

Again, came the thought of living overseas. It nudged a little harder this time.

I'd been drawn to other countries ever since my parents took our family to Bolivia when I was fifteen years old. I could still picture that intoxicating land I'd fallen in love with way back then, still feel the jolts in the back of the pick-up truck as we drove over the Andes, still see the smiling faces of the beautiful people who came out to greet us. Nothing broadens a person like getting into other cultures. Explore. Meet the people. Hear the languages.

I yearned to go. A year abroad. And now the dream had expanded: I wanted time to write—to finish my story—a call that was even more compelling.

But that was just crazy. I shook it off. I couldn't quit my job to go away for a year. And, oh yeah, to write. Who does that? People would think I'd lost my marbles!

But the thought wouldn't leave me. The desire grew bigger.

On August 1, 2019, I finally got a tenant in my house in Shaunavon on a one-year lease. With the mortgage taken care of till at least the end of the next July, I realized this could be a good time to take the plunge. I might not get another chance.

I'm thinking of going overseas for a while, I tested it out on Kristen and Joy, my two friends from the singles' group at Lee's church. We each had a seat on my balcony, snuggled under blankets, waiting for the sunset. *It's been my dream for years. I just might do it.*

Dreams can get us into trouble, Joy said.

But Kristen saw it differently. She'd followed her own dream after her divorce. She'd quit her job to spend four months in South Africa and a month in Uganda. She said it's where she'd healed. *You should do it. And if you need a place to stay anytime, I have an extra room,* she told me.

I had a lot to figure out, yet. I still didn't know how or when or where... I'm not really a "ducks in a row" kind of girl. I mean, sometimes I start to gather my ducks, but it takes too long. And if I do get ducks all assembled, somebody tosses a stone right into the middle of them. They scuttle off, squawking. See the ducks scatter?

I signed up for an Oxford Seminars course that would run through November at the University of Calgary. I'd get my TESL[2] certificate, so I could teach English if I needed an income while I was gone.

2. Teaching English Second Language

My ducks were beginning to come to order. But I was hesitant to tell people what I was planning. To go away with no job was just crazy; I worried they'd have me committed.

I fired off a message to each of my kids, and they all came back with support for my strange venture. Holly was my biggest fan, "I'm so proud of you, Mama!" she said again and again.

My courage boosted, I went into my boss's office on the morning of September 18th and handed him my resignation, effective October 31st. For just a moment, his shoulders slumped. But when I told him my intentions, he straightened again and smiled. From then on, he seemed excited for me and, I think, a little proud of me. He announced to everyone who came to the office, *We're losing her. Know where she's going? Costa Rica to teach English!* I had no big reason for choosing Costa Rica, only that I'd heard of its pleasant climate, that it was a gorgeous country, and the cost of living was reasonable. It sounded like a good place to start.

Next, I called my building to find out the penalty for breaking my lease; I'd just pay it and go, I decided.

They don't let people out of their leases, I learned. The only way I could leave was to find someone to take it over. It was my responsibility to advertise, and then the interested party had to apply and be approved. Good gosh, what a stone in my ducks! I had just quit my job! I could be stuck here for five months with no income, paying rent. What would I do? I chided myself for my foolishness. I should have waited till my lease was up—that's what I should have done—before resigning my job.

But I was impatient to get going. An urgency was growing within me to do it now, to take full advantage of my tenant's lease while I had it, and more importantly, to get this story written. What if this were my only chance? Who knew what the future might bring that could prevent my plan should I delay?

No, I had to do it now. I had to hurry.

I wasn't worried, not yet. I was certain things would work out. It was as if God were saying, *Just watch and see what I do here.*

I posted my apartment on Kijiji; I wrote up its features in the most enticing ad I could create. "It'll all come together," people told me. And before the end of October, I'd found new tenants.

I searched online for places to stay and found a pretty cabin in the Costa Rican mountains, about an hour's drive south of the capital city, San José. If it was anything like the pictures, it was the perfect setting to immerse in writing. I reserved it for the month of January. I'd go somewhere else for February, to experience more of the country. But I'd figure out the second location after I got to the mountain—get a feel for things first.

I booked my flights for December 31st. I'd arrive in Costa Rica on New Year's Eve.

As it happened, my mother had, months before, planned a tour of Israel for herself, my sister, and me—a ten-day trip, starting the end of February. That meant I had to be in Toronto on February 28th to catch a flight to Tel Aviv, so I booked for myself the Toronto flight at the same time.

My plan was to head south again right after the Israel trip and finish my year abroad, maybe back to Costa Rica or perhaps to another country. But I didn't have that part worked out yet.

One Thursday, I went to lunch with my friend, Leslie, a co-worker at Livingston, and I gave her the rundown—my idea in all its foolishness. I told her how I wanted to live my adventures now while I still had the chance. *I'd rather get to the end of my life and say, "that plan didn't turn out so great" than to look back and say, "I wish I'd tried."*

I figured she'd work to hide her oh-my-gosh-you're-insane look, but of course, I'd see it anyway. Instead, Leslie's eyes brightened. She was

impressed that I was following my dream and excited for me. *Now's the time to do it, Sandra,* she beamed.

Her support gave me courage. Maybe, my idea wasn't so stupid, after all. Maybe it was okay to hold onto it and okay to tell it.

It occurred to me then that I hadn't truly felt like I was home since I'd stepped onto that plane back in 2012 and headed to Moose Jaw for the first time. Perhaps being so unsettled in life was the very thing that would give me wings. I smiled at Leslie as I slipped out of my seat to head back to the office. *Maybe I'll become a gypsy,* I told her. *Maybe I'll wander the world.*

There was still one important person left to tell.

Sunday, October 13 on a drive back from Kananaskis Valley, I took a breath and finally spilled my plan to Lee. *I resigned my job, Lee. I'm done the end of this month,* I began. *And I'm going to Costa Rica after Christmas, maybe for a year. I didn't tell you before because I was hoping to have it all figured out first. I didn't want you to be disappointed in me...to think me irresponsible.*

I told him about the parts that weren't coming together, hitches and glitches—what to do about this and that; *Where will I store my furniture?*

Lee was very quiet as he listened. He was thinking it through, he said. His eyes looked sad as he took my hand. He told me he was glad I'd made this decision. He wanted me to be happy. He didn't think I was irresponsible. *I think you're doing the right thing, Sam.*

So I prattled on, *Maybe I'll just stay a year, or maybe I'll stay permanently. Maybe I'll wander the world for a while. But sooner or later, I hope I find home.*

The miles fell away behind us as we sped over the highway. *What will I do with my motorcycle?* I continued. *I tried selling it. Nobody buys a bike in the fall...*

There was a choke and a sniffle beside me, and I turned to look at Lee. *Who am I going to go biking with?* he blurted, staring out the windshield, straight ahead, as tears ran down his face.

Lee and I tossed around ideas for where to put the bike. I needed every penny I had to make my plan work, so I was hoping to avoid a high storage fee. I thought about my garage in Shaunavon, if only I could get it there. But it was too cold this late in the season for that long a drive, and I couldn't depend on road conditions. It could snow any day. I had to get it somewhere fast. I was running out of time.

On October 21st, Lee called. He explained he'd been at his Bible study and had mentioned to the group that his friend needed a place to store her motorcycle. He'd asked that if anyone knew of something to let him know.

I have an extra parking space in my building, one lady piped up. *She can have it for her bike!*

And there it was!

Lee drove my motorcycle from Airdrie to Calgary, and I followed in the car. We got the bike all the way to her place and tucked in for the winter while the roads were still bare and before it got too cold. The parking space was in a lovely, heated underground garage. No cost—the lady didn't want payment, she told me when I tried to hand her cash.

So I got to keep my beautiful bike. Another detail "fallen" into place.

At just the right time.

Faceless Unknown

Airdrie, Alberta

It's November 1, 2019. Today, I'm home, even though it's Friday.

This is my first day unemployed. I breathe in the sweet fragrance of anticipation as I putter away at projects that need to be finished before I move.

Mid-morning, I pull my head out of my tasks and look around. A touch of melancholy brushes over me. I walk through the apartment. I'm sad to leave. Oh, I love it here, my Airdrie haven after being lost for so long! Am I crazy to let it go? Is my silly idea worth all that I'm leaving behind? Good job? This home? Friends?

Sometimes I'm afraid of the course I've chosen for myself. What will happen to me? This could be the stupidest thing I've ever done. I might never recover from it.

I stand at the glass doors and look out beyond the balcony. The pond is frozen over now, and all the geese are gone.

I've never liked fall. It feels like the end...like the loss of something vivacious and beautiful. Abruptly, summer withdraws, and frigid mornings and early dusk rush in to fill her place. Leaves, once lush and

full, turn brittle and drop to the ground. Stark branches jut upward, lonely silhouettes against a frosty sky.

Yet Fall has a beauty all her own...

Autumn. Just the word evokes images of russet and gold. Feel the crisp, fresh stillness as morning light silently pushes back the darkness. Sunshine bursts above the horizon, painting the sky a radiant palette. Its shimmering rays catch the silver frost; the tiny crystals sparkle like a diamond veil spread out across the ground. Here in Alberta, most of the trees turn yellow. But I can still see the explosion of color back east: stoic brown, laughing yellow, brilliant orange, and blushing crimson rose. Their playful leaves dance and twirl on the breeze—a celebration.

Autumn. Elegant. Regal. Beautiful metamorphosis.

Life is change. Often difficult. Here I stand clinging fearfully to the familiar, even while reaching for something new—while knowing something better awaits. Fingers wrapped tightly around yesterday's prize, my hands are closed to tomorrow's reward.

Change means loss but offers hope and newness and opportunity. Promise glistens when I let go of my *comfortable* and take hold of the strange unknown. Releasing my grip on a fading past, I open my hands to the future...

Excitement. Adventure. Uncertainty. Challenge. Gain.

Vibrant and freeing.

Like the splendor of autumn.[1]

I turn from the glass, my hesitation gone and the thrill of what's to come back in its place in my heart.

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1. Ecclesiastes 31:6. "To everything there is a season and a time to every purpose under heaven ... a time to get and a time to lose; a time to keep and a time to cast away." (KJV)

This month, I'll pack up my apartment. I'll sell furniture and drop things off at Salvation Army. Lee will take me to my first TESL class because he knows I'm nervous; he'll walk me to the door and kiss my cheek for luck. Near the end of my course, he'll pretend to be my student, and let me rehearse my practicum on him. He'll rent a U-Haul for me, help me load the rest of my belongings, and drive it to Shaunavon where we'll unload it into my basement for storage while I'm gone.

In December, I'll move into Kristen's guestroom. I'll write my TESL exam, she'll cheer me on, and I'll pass. I'll visit Kimberley and her boys in Shaunavon. I'll spend Christmas in Peace River with Holly. Just three days before I leave for Costa Rica, I'll find a buyer for my lovely car.

Lee will take me to the airport in the early morning of December 31st. We'll linger as we say good-bye. One last hug...last words to each other.

I'll step onto a plane and leave behind all that I know. Hours later and a world away, I'll stand on a rooftop patio and watch fireworks over San José. With a handful of strangers in Costa Rica, I'll cheer in the new year, the new decade—

2020.

Hope. Fulfillment. Opportunities.

I'll poise on the edge of another adventure, and fly into the faceless unknown.

Costa Rica, Place of Healing

Mountain Cabin

Jardín de Dota
January 2020

The cabin is always cold. I wrap up in fleece and pad out into the sunroom with cereal, coffee, laptop, and Bible. I tuck blankets in around me, and if I need it, I have a little space heater to keep me from shivering. A little "God time," then I get to work, clicking away at the keyboard.

The sky begins to lighten at five-fifteen a.m. Most days I'm out here to watch the sunrise. As soon as it's bright enough, I go outside and circle the cabin to unlock all the shutters and let in the light.

The back of the cabin is against the mountain with just enough room to walk between. The front, this room of glass that runs the full length of

the cabin, looks to the northwest, over a lush valley, to the mountain ridge on the other side.

Fierce winds have hammered my little abode for six days and nights; it wakes me sometimes from my sleep. The cabin groans and shudders under the stress, and I wonder how long before I'm blown over into the valley below. My little place in Jardín de Dota sits at an altitude of more than 7300 feet—no wonder it's cold and windy here in January.

When the winds aren't too strong, I hear the whir of hummingbirds as they dart in and out at the feeder; their iridescent colors shimmer in the sunlight. It took just a day or two for them to get used to seeing me here behind the glass, and my movements no longer frighten them away.

Once the day warms up, I wander outdoors, exploring and snapping pictures with my phone. What beauty here on this mountain—shades of green that blanket the slopes, stately trees, vibrant flowers, and crops spread down the mountainsides. Way to the northeast, on a clear day, I can see Volcán Turrialba and the funnel of smoke that hovers over it.

Nights are very dark...eerie. Coyotes howl close by. I peer down at the valley, but all I can make out are vague shadows of shrubs and trees, barely distinguishable, black on black. There are lights in the distance—a small town—and a few to the east coming from the farms that share this hillside. But they're too far away to shine on my yard.

Some nights, the dark slopes are alive with fireflies, twinkling pinpoints of white-blue light. Their dance is captivating, and the beauty of their movements, like magic, dispels the eeriness just a little.

Once I close the shutters, the cabin's pitch black—not even a shadow against ebony darkness. I force my thoughts away from the solitude before claustrophobia overtakes me.

The only hot water here in my cabin is the shower. Mateo had told me that if I turn the water on too far, it will come out cold; not far enough, it will scald me.

So today, again, I twisted the tap and waited. Cold water poured out. I adjusted the tap and waited again. Still cold. I fiddled and twisted—a little more...a little less. Yet try as I might, I could not get even a hint of warm water. I'm beginning to think there was more to Mateo's instructions that I've forgotten—a switch to flip, maybe.

But it's so cold in the cabin, I don't think I could bring myself to strip off for a shower, anyway. I've made do with sponge bathing. I heat water on the stove, scrub myself out of a pot, one section at a time, and bundle back up before baring the next area.

Squeaky clean and sweet-smelling, I get suited up in sweaters and jackets. Then I go at my hair at the kitchen sink. It's a bit of a process—the pot doesn't hold much, and several times I have to wait for water to heat on my little electric burner before my hair is thoroughly rinsed. As soon as I'm finished, I get back to my seat in the sunroom where it's warmer.

Despite these little inconveniences, I'm loving my cabin and this mountain. The bus stop, about a kilometre down the road, gets me to the town of Santa Maria to the west, where I shop for groceries, or all the way to Cartago and San José if I need a city fix.

I've already had lunch at La Cabaña, the restaurant that's just down the road, about a ten-minute walk from my cabin. Elazar, the owner, speaks English, so I enjoyed a few moments of chit-chat with him over a tasty meal of trout and rice and beans. He serves a great coffee and flan, too, I was pleased to discover.

The other day, I crossed paths with a neighbor, Lily, who lives just up the driveway. Her cabin stands on the hill above mine, though from my windows I can't see it through the trees. She told me she doesn't speak much English, but she asked if I'm doing okay here. "My house is your house," she offered as we parted.

And suddenly, I don't feel so alone.

Headlights & Coffee Honey

January 4, 2020

The narrow road wound up giant mountains, above the clouds, and down again. From the front passenger seat, my view was unhindered. Out the side window, I could see straight down, and at times, there appeared to be no shoulder at all between our tires and the sharp drop-off into the deep valley below. A small shiver went through me, and I had to force my thoughts away from the images of doom that floated, unbidden, through my head. *The views, Sandra, not the drop-offs. Look at these views!*

These trees...this vegetation I'd never seen before... To look at these mountains rising up, one after another... I'd never get another chance.

And in no time, I'd forgotten all about our precarious route as my attention was drawn, instead, to stunning scenery in every direction.

An hour before, Mateo, the owner of my mountain cabin, had popped in to check on me and to bring me a pair of fluffy slippers to keep my toes toasty on the cold floors. He and his family were on their way to their sister's coffee plantation, he informed me, and they invited me to go along.

Even before I'd landed in Costa Rica four days earlier, I'd had a wish list of four adventures that I'd hoped to experience while in that beautiful and mysterious country. Seeing a coffee plantation was on that list. But these tours are quite pricey and are many miles from my mountain cabin. I wondered if I'd get to see any of those I'd hoped for.

And then there it was—the first adventure dropped right into my lap. And with that, I was on my way to a private tour of a coffee plantation.

We arrived mid-morning and walked out to where the men were hard at work. Mateo showed me the coffee bushes and explained that the berries had to be picked by hand; it couldn't be done with machines the way we harvest wheat and other crops.

Costa Ricans don't like to pick coffee, he said, so they hire workers from Nicaragua and Panama. The workers get paid well, so the same ones return every year—everyone's happy.

Coffee bushes need shade, Mateo told me. *That's why there are banana plants.* I gazed out across the tints of green to the banana trees that grew throughout the plantation, all down the mountainsides. The tall, umbrella-like trees, amongst the squat coffee shrubs, gave the slopes a textured look, like the fuzzy threads on a puffy tied quilt.

Mateo told me to pick a coffee "fruit" and try it. *Because it's a new taste for you,* he said. I sucked the fruit off the seed. The red berry was sweet and juicy—I don't know why we don't eat them. The seed inside was the coffee bean, the real harvest.

Down a dirt lane we came to a parked truck and a group of workers. On the ground in front of them was a tarp with a square metal bucket set on top. One man poured coffee berries from a sack into the bucket; another man swept his hands across the mound to level them, then heaved the bucket over his shoulder, dumping the berries into the truck box. Thus

was the beginning of the coffee beans' long journey from the Costa Rican mountains to the percolators of our Canadian kitchens.

The workers get two dollars a bucket, Mateo said. *That's good money.*

Evening fell in a beautiful, haunting dusk and the song of crickets. Big fluffy clouds hung just beyond the nearby mountain, almost eye level, gorgeous in the twilight.

It was after nightfall when we left. *See that dark line on the road?* Mateo pointed ahead of us as he drove. *That's 'coffee honey.' It drips from the trucks loaded with coffee berries. It's very slippery. Trucks lose a lot of honey, especially when they go up hill.*

I looked at the dark line and thought about coffee honey and about everything else I'd seen and heard that day. What a memorable experience Mateo and his family had given me.

Our car hummed over the crooked highway, up and down the same mountains we'd traveled earlier, now shrouded in black, velvet night. In the path of the headlights, I watched the road and the trail of coffee honey, leading us home.

Now I Know How Snow White Felt

January 6, 2020

When Mateo and his family had brought me from San José to the mountain on January 1st, he'd taken me on a walk around the cabin. He'd shown me flowers he'd planted, trees, and succulents. It was all very beautiful, and his pride in his garden oasis showed just a little through his modesty.

He'd pointed to a tree where hung an oblong fruit. *That tomato will be ready to eat in a couple of days. You can have it,* he'd said. How delightful! I'd get to try a taste of Costa Rica from right here in my yard!

So I picked it today, my tomate de árbol, nice and red. It would go great with my lunch. As always with a tomato, I washed it and sliced it. Then I put it on my plate next to my chicken, and I scarfed it all down at my table in the sunroom.

The tomato had an interesting flavor, I admitted to myself as I swallowed the last bite. It didn't taste like any other tomato I'd ever eaten. So I looked it up online, just to see what I might find. Turns out, you're supposed to cut it in half, scoop out the flesh, and add a little sugar. Huh. That might have made it tastier. I should start checking into these things beforehand.

I scanned the article further in case there was anything else I should know. Yadda, yadda, yadda... Then my eyes alighted on the words, *Don't eat the skin*.

I did a double-take. What? Why not? I'd chomped right through it. Yikes! I was beginning to have some second thoughts about the culinaries of Costa Rica.

Continuing my search more urgently, I typed in the question, "Is it safe to eat the skin of tomate de árbol?" and I landed upon a conversation about this curious little fruit. *The skin is poisonous. Don't eat it.* A lady had written. The words jumped at me, reached up, and grabbed me round the throat.

Poisonous! GULP! Oh, no! Too late! My plate was bare! My whole body started to tingle and the world went black. Why hadn't Mateo mentioned this little fact when he was showing off his horticulture! *Oh, by the way, don't eat the exterior of this pretty little treat, or you die!*

There wasn't a thing I could do. I had no way to get anywhere, no one to call. I was too far from everything to walk for help. They'd find me, eventually, slumped over my dinnerplate.

If it's your time, Sandra, you're done! Face your fate. Bold wisdom from my conscience, but where was she *before* I ate the apple of death?

Get a grip! I commanded myself. *Maybe they're not lethal. Find out what to do.* I went back to my screen and made myself focus on the next few lines of the entry. There were several laughy faces followed by someone else's comment, *Where did you hear that? They're not poisonous! They just taste bad.*

I blinked at the words. They just. taste. bad.

That's it?

Forget poisoning, that little falsity had near given me a heart attack!

No more tomate de árbol for me! Uh-uh! Nope!

I messaged my host just to be sure I finally had my facts straight. He was unconcerned and said he didn't think they would even make me sick.

Okay, so maybe I won't die today. But check back with me tomorrow, please, to make sure I'm still here.

Desires of My Heart

I sit on this mountain, green valley below me, blue sky above. A thick, white cloud hangs between me and the distant hillside. The wind is back after days of calm, but not so strong.

We're nearing the end of January. In a few days, I'll move to Quepos on the coast. I've reserved an apartment there where I'll spend my last four weeks in Costa Rica. I'm excited to be on the ocean. I'm a maritime girl; I miss the water.

I still don't know where I'm headed after the Israel trip with Mum and Rachel. I want to finish my year abroad, but can I fund it? I might have to set aside the writing to take up teaching English for the remaining months, and that's okay.

What happens after that, I wonder, after my year? I yearn for a home where I can put down roots and immerse myself in a job I enjoy. How long will I wander before I find it? Is it out there waiting for me somewhere?

My pretty house in Shaunavon was the closest I've felt to being home for a long time. And Cornerstone will always be my place of belonging. Is there another Shaunavon—another Cornerstone—for me somewhere in the days ahead?

I think about my grandkids. I hate that I don't know them; they're growing up without me. But even if I could go back and settle near them, which family do I choose, they're all so scattered?

I want to be near my kids. I miss them.

My girls are both wonderful mothers. Kimberley runs a day home, so she can be with her boys. Holly was a journeyman parts person until she left her career to raise little Eric. She runs a day home now, too, and has built her own successful homemade fudge business.

I want to see my boys again; it's been too long. Ian working construction, now lives in Nova Scotia with Suzanne and their boys. Jack, a heavy equipment mechanic, still lives near Kenton. He's married now, too, and has a son.

All four of them message me from time to time. Digital visits are the best we can do. Holly and I are in touch almost every day, sharing life and laughs. Sometimes we watch a favorite show together in our separate living rooms. "Are you wine-ing yet?" she'll text me. I'll pour a glass, and we'll both sit down to sip and chat together, a world apart.

So where will I go when this adventure is over? Where is home? I've sacrificed everything to be here. I've thrown myself into God's hands in every way. Then I worry it's not Him directing me at all; it's just me being stupid. Sometimes I question the wisdom of what I've done.

I watch the clouds change shape as they pass over this beautiful valley. No, I realize, even though I wanted this, I could never have brought it together so perfectly just to suit myself. I rein in my fears and remind myself of all God did to get me here—the intricate details I couldn't resolve that fell into place last minute, from unexpected sources. My confidence is knowing I didn't jump in carelessly or selfishly. I only answered the call in my heart that beckoned louder day by day. He sparked this idea in me. Then He moved the pieces into place.

And God blessed. God solved. God enabled. God protected.

A line from Genesis 24:27 comes to mind, "...I, being in the way, the Lord led me..." (KJV) A friend made a two-fold observation: 1. the Lord leads me in the way I'm going, down the path He's put me on, and 2. even when I—my will, my ideas—get in the way, He still leads me, around myself, my wants, and my fumblings to the place He wants me to be.

I wouldn't change my choices. For I know that when I want to follow Him, He guides my decisions. He puts in my heart a desire for the things He wants for me.[1] And even when I make mistakes, He smooths them out, turns them around, and changes them for my good. For His glory. He will bring me through this and what follows and through whatever comes after that. He has a purpose for it all.

That's my security.

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1. Psalm 37:4. "Delight yourself in the Lord, and He will give you the desires of your heart." (NASB)

Lily?

January 29, 2020

This morning, I left the grocery store in the nearby community of Empalme and started down the long hill, headed back to my cabin. The day had brought pleasant weather, and I looked forward to the two-kilometre walk.

I hadn't gone far when a vehicle pull up beside me. (I'm always a little wary of that.) I glanced over to see the Jeep window slowly roll down, and a cheery lady called out in Spanish. I didn't know the words she used, but she was clearly offering a ride. Taking a closer look at the woman behind the wheel, I realized it was my neighbor. How nice!

I opened the door; "Lily," I said. She smiled and nodded, so I hopped up into the Jeep and away we went. We chattered back and forth, neither of us understanding the other but nodding anyway, just pleased with each other's company.

It was only a few minutes till we reached the lane that led to my cabin and to her home. But instead of turning in, she pulled to the shoulder of the road and stopped to let me off. We said goodbye and she whisked away. She must have been heading to Santa Maria for more shopping, I mused.

I skipped down the long, dirt lane, past the big tree and the flowering bushes. The dogs, which belong to everybody and nobody, bounded over to greet me. Coming to my neighbor's place, I glanced over at her yard...

There was Lily.

And her Jeep.

Not even the same color.

Fragments

I'm back at the writing today in my sunroom on the mountain. With keyboard and coffee in place, I'm soon pulled into the past, and some places aren't that easy to revisit. Loss is heavy. And some things can't be brought back.

I pour over that story of the hayfield on an August night long ago, and I'm transported to a time I thought I'd erased. My father. Me. Before it went wrong. Whatever happened to that little girl and her dad? When and how did things change?

The implicit love and trust of a child became anger and resentment. Sweet moments together turned to rigid obligations. His words were too harsh...his attitudes were destructive, so I believed; and I finally removed myself—protect my energy...maintain my boundaries... The "wise" advice of the "experts," right? I stomped down my hurt and walked away; it was just too hard.

Years passed as I pulled indifference tighter around me, a cloak of protection. I think I got rid of resentment and anger—I didn't want to live a victim of their ruin. But still, I couldn't go back to him. I was saving myself, so I was justified. Or so I believed. For a long, long time, I didn't care about restoring that father and little girl.

I see in my hand a small, white envelope—*For Sandra, from her dad,* written across its face. It's the spring of 2013, and I'm living in Moose Jaw. I'm seated across the table from the friend, a local pastor's wife, whom my father had sent to deliver the envelope to me. Inside it is a fifty-dollar bill—no note, nothing else. I stare at it. I smile. *Ah, how sweet,* I say and mean it.

It didn't occur to me then—why did it take till now for me to wonder—beyond his obvious care for me, what were his hopes with that little envelope? Was he reaching for one last chance to make things right?

I pass on to my father a message of my thanks, and I never hear from him again.

He's in my thoughts all the time now, the dad who loved his girl so much, unconditionally. I've come to realize that, just like me, there was more to my father than met the eye, pieces I never saw that, put together, made him who he was. And I wonder now, what were those pieces? If I'd known in time, would things have been different?

Here I sit in the fallout of our actions, the debris and the fragments that are left of father and daughter. It took all these years, these tears, writing this story to bring me full circle. The little girl who turned her back on her dad. Now she carries a wish, a longing for restoration—a word, a moment—knowing it will never come.

Hayfield on an August night...

Loss is heavy. Some things can't be brought back.

Down from the Mountain

Wilderness Majesty

January 31, 2020

This morning, I packed up the last of my belongings and did a walk-through of the cabin, checking for anything I might have forgotten. I swept the floor, wiped down the sinks, and put away my dishes. From the washer, I pulled the bedding and towels I'd used and hung them up in the sunroom to dry. I wanted to leave the cabin as clean and tidy as I could make it, as pretty as the day I'd first entered.

My host had arranged my transport with a driver he knew, and my ride arrived late morning. I climbed into the car with a tug on my heart. I kept my eyes at the window as we pulled away—a last longing look at my beloved cabin home on the mountain there in Jardín de Dota.

When the scene disappeared from view, I turned forward and set my sights on the road ahead. The drive to Quepos turned out to be the highlight of my trip thus far.

Such beauty! I was on the edge of my seat, looking every direction at once—couldn't take it all in.

Most of the way, we followed a dirt road, narrow and twisty, through the mountains. Often, our route wound along the edge of a sheer drop-off no more than a couple of feet from our tires, straight down on one side, with a wall of rock straight up on the other.

Then at one point, the road abruptly widened. My driver pulled over and stopped the car, offering me the chance to get out and take a look. I stepped through the long grasses to the edge of the drop-off and gazed in awe. A green expanse stretched out below. Mountaintop after mountaintop rose up around us and pierced the sky. Way in the valley wound a dirt road to a house, and just beyond that, the earth dropped away again, plunging yet deeper into another valley. Off in the distance, the Pacific Ocean was barely visible, a light-blue line on the horizon.

Down from the mountain heights, we were suddenly surrounded by hundreds of chicharra—cricket-like bugs, unseen in the trees. The air was filled with their steady chirp that sounded like the hum of electrical wires but shriller and louder. Their noise was so penetrating, it seemed impossible not to catch sight of them. Yet try as I might, I could see not a flicker, not a hint of even one.

All along our route, lush, thick foliage burst everywhere—I'd never before seen such color and variety of wild flora. Exotic flowers of satin-white stood along the roadway. Leaves of red, pink, purple, and burgundy lined the trail like they'd come out in their finest garments to watch us pass. Spider-looking epiphytes (plants that are not parasitic) grew on the trees, dressing the limbs in ruffles and making the foliage even

thicker. Throughout the upward slopes were huge patches of elephant ear—a plant that reminded me of giant rhubarb—and I felt dwarfed as we passed by them; I could curl up on one of the leaves and still have leaf left over.

Farther on, still going through forest, I noticed something. Something not quite right... A power pole stood at the edge of the road. I'd almost missed it—a tree among trees. The coloring was odd, but...

Power lines out here in the wilderness? And where were the wires? It didn't make sense.

I looked closer, and it took me a minute to realize the truth—it was not a power pole at all but a living, growing tree trunk, smooth without its bark. Then I recognized it...

Rainbow eucalyptus!

This unusual species grows so rapidly, it sheds its outer bark. Underneath, is bright green. Once exposed, the color changes to darker green, then to blue, then purple, orange, and finally maroon. Because it sheds in strips, not all at once, the trunk displays a unique color palette, each strip at a different stage in the process. No two trees and no two palettes are ever quite the same.

Then I saw that there was a whole row of rainbow eucalyptus lining the roadway. I asked my driver to stop, and I hopped out for a closer look. I took my time, admiring and taking pictures. It was like being in a cartoon—the tree trunks didn't look real but like giant rolls of playdough colors that had been twisted together in the hands of a child.

Once back in the car, we bounced through forest and clearings, past a field of pineapple, and back into the shaded woods. In time, we drove under the canopy of the rainforest, the thick treetops preventing most of the sunlight from penetrating to the forest floor.

Yes, the rainforest. This was another of the things I'd hoped to see—number two on my Costa Rica adventure wish list.

We drove right through a flowing river—no bridge. My driver said that in winter—September, October, November—the water comes up to the edge of the bank, which was higher than our car as we drove along the river bed. *No driving across then,* he said.

Back up the other bank, and we were on a road again, leaving the river behind us. A few more miles of twists and turns...

Then...

It was just as we were approaching a village... It came out of nowhere... Something flying toward us—a flash of color in the sky. My eyes snapped to it, this thing that seemed too bright and too vivid to be real.

A Lapa Roja, my driver told me—a Scarlet Macaw. I had a perfect side view of this beautiful bird as it flew past us and alighted in a tree.

I was captivated, trying hard not even to blink. I wanted to get a picture of this incredible creature but couldn't risk taking my eyes off it to look at the camera. I didn't want to miss even a flicker, not even a nanosecond, of that moment so exquisite and rare.

My driver was able to snap a quick shot of the bird before it took flight again. This time, it headed away from us, allowing me a view from behind, its wings and tail spread like royal fans. Stunning, brilliant hues! Like a kid had painted it, each part a different vibrant color.

It was over so quick—the Lapa Roja come and gone almost before I had time to take it in.

This unforgettable drive through the Costa Rican wilderness was an unexpected gift. The sights and sounds...the variety...the wonders of creation...

What an amazing God!

City on the Coast

Quepos, Costa Rica
January 31, 2020

Cristian met our car in front of his house, which sat right at the edge of the road, on a hill overlooking the city. My driver helped me unload my luggage and then sped away, probably relieved to be rid of the lollygagging tourist who took pictures of absolutely everything.

I turned to Cristian, my new Airbnb host and owner of my Quepos casa. He showed me to a narrow steel gate set into the wall that extended from one end of his house. He inserted a key, unlocked the padlock, and opened the gate, then led me down a flight of equally narrow cement steps, sandwiched between two more walls.

He stopped at a landing where the right side opened up into a little courtyard-like space, boasting a tiny strip of dirt that held several old paint cans and plastic tubs filled with flowers. Below this open space was a second house and then another house below that, both of them cut into the side of this hill that dropped steeply away from the road we'd just left.

To our immediate left was a door in a bright green wall, its cement cracked and chipped. Cristian unlocked the door and waved me inside. We were under Cristian's house—in its basement, also built into the side of the hill.

The interior of the apartment was bright with sunlight that streamed through the windows on the only exposed side of the basement. The décor was a combination of different paint tones and tiles of various sizes and colors, and none of it matched the large pattern on the linoleum floor. It

was a hodgepodge of designs and textures that struck the eyes and left the senses trying to recover.

At the far end of the apartment was the royal-blue-tiled bathroom. With hot shower! Yes, oh, yes! And hot water in the sinks! What luxury! No more bathing from a pot!

There was a hole in the bedroom wall, I noticed, where the AC pipe ran to the outdoors, the extra space around it not sealed. My eye just goes to such situations, drawn to the risks. Other cracks and holes throughout the apartment looked right out to daylight or went down into the ground. Anything could crawl through, I knew, but I decided not to think about it. Denial's a wonderful place to live.

The apartment looked just like the pictures online, so I smiled and thanked Cristian. *This is great,* I told him, and I meant it.

After pointing out some of the features of my new home, Cristian took his leave. I closed the door behind him and got myself settled. Then I ventured out to Soda Sanchez, which he had recommended. A "soda" in Costa Rica is a small, family-owned restaurant, and more often than not, these less-touristy places serve some of the best local food for cheap. My five-dollar plate of rice, fish, beans, and mashed potatoes was more than enough, and I carried home the leftovers for my lunch the following day.

I walked the few blocks back to my place, taking in everything I passed, snapping pictures and delightedly exploring my new surroundings while a gorgeous sunset hung over the city.

Quepos. This was the seacoast I'd waited for.

Quepos was a poor city, at least around my stomping grounds. Many of the tiny shops and homes were not in good state. Gutters ran along the streets, and I thought I recognized garbage, sewer, and raw meat in the smells that followed me everywhere.

It was hot, even in February, nearing forty degrees plus humidity every day, dipping down only to twenty-seven at night. Many stores didn't have air conditioning. Chocolate bars at the checkout stands lay limp, pathetically misshapen in the heat. I'd wait my turn in line, grocery basket in hand, while little rivers of perspiration poured down my face. From shivering on the mountain to stifling on the coast, I came home after every outing, soaked in sweat, making a beeline to the shower.

Still, I was excited about the home I'd chosen. Mornings began with coffee out on the steps in my "garden." Every day, I took time from writing to go out, even if just to explore a new street. I strolled a long, wide walkway that ran beside the waterfront while sunlight glittered on the ripples. I visited shops and returned several times to Soda Sanchez. The Farmer's Market came on Fridays—I sipped coconut water straight from the shell and nibbled homemade yucca cake.

I hiked a shaded jungle trail, up a cliff to look out over the sapphire water and waves that crashed against the rocks below. The mountains, the jungle, and the ocean all met down there, beneath that bluff, right at the edge of the sand.

It didn't rain the whole time I was in Quepos. Every day closed with a brilliant sunset over the water. I watched the changing colors through my living room window—pink, to orange, to deep red as the sky slowly darkened and the sun disappeared.

One Simple Word

The sidewalk from my Quepos apartment, down into the city, leads past a run-down dwelling that's perched right on the edge of an embankment. A fence runs between the sidewalk and the property, and the little gate is closed. The tiny spit of yard has an overhanging roof, an extension of the building. A white plastic chair sits at a table under the roof, just a step or two outside the door of the house. Trees and vegetation crowd the space, so it's shaded and cool.

The first time I walked by the little shack, I didn't pay much attention. I'd already passed it when a cheerful voice called, "Hola." I stepped back and peered into the shadows. A shirtless man sat in the chair, likely trying to stay cool in the heat of the day. I smiled and called, "Hola." He nodded and grinned, and I was on my way.

Next time I approached, the man was there with his wife, and she looked just as pleased as he did when I smiled. He came to the gate and talked to me. I couldn't understand his words. When I asked if he spoke English, he shook his head sadly. So we waved to each other and parted with, *Bien día.*

Every day, I follow the cracked and pitted sidewalk down the hill past that shack and call out a hello to my neighbors. Baby chicks scurry ahead of me. Roosters crow from every direction, and lizards scuttle into crevasses. I make my way through the streets, dodge the never-ending traffic, and step carefully over holes and around broken concrete.

I pass many more houses, fenced and gated. Laundry dries in the sun, hung from a line or spread out on the bushes. Patches of garden and pots of flowers line the walkways. The people sit under their porches or in the shade of the alley. They talk and eat together and chase after their children. Many homes, many lives, many stories.

This city will forget me the moment I'm gone, but for a little while, it knows me. I'm immersed in its life, and its pulse fills me. This is my home. These are my people. The man and his wife are my neighbors, separated by language, brought together by smiles and one simple word—

Hola.[1]

Free

Quepos, Costa Rica
February 10, 2020

I hammer at my keyboard in the heat of my apartment—thank goodness for AC. Many tears, today, as I work on this story. Memories flood. The ache returns. I don't know why.

That May of 2015, when Robert refused to visit me, was the end for me. For so long before that, I hadn't been able to accept that he'd do this to me. I couldn't believe he'd send me away or that he'd let me take the fall for his choices. I'd been willingly naïve. Finally that May, I saw it—I'd been holding on to something that had died already. I couldn't pretend anymore. I had to accept that the divorce was real. What was, was gone, and I could not bring it back.

The last time I saw Robert was a year after that, in August of 2016. He came to Shaunavon to see new baby Thomas. Even that far into the death of our marriage, I'd held a fleeting thought that he might show some real

1. Psalm 24:1. "The earth is the Lord's, and all it contains, the world, and all who dwell in it." (NASB)

interest. But again, he whisked through with his own agenda and never checked with me about his plans. He offered me, after the fact, a day to do something together, like he might to an old friend he hadn't seen in years. I didn't see the point.

Instead, I invited him for a walk one evening, but it only made me more grateful to be where I was, for what God had brought me through, and for the life I now had.

He spent only two or three days at Kimberley's and then went off to Holly's. The afternoon he left town, I came home to twelve red roses in a vase on my living room coffee table. His sweet gesture touched me deeply, memories of a past that was gone. But the weeks that followed were the most vicious between us, and I finally stopped all contact with him.

Nearly four years have passed since then. I'm happy in my life now, and I wouldn't go back to the past.

Divorce is not the real disease. It's only the death of a marriage that's been sick a long time. Holding the relationship together to avoid divorce is like keeping a brain-dead body on life support. It accomplishes nothing to continue the marriage without treating the disease that's killing it—our selfishness and pride. It brings no honor to God, either, if we don't change our toxic behaviours and attitudes.

"I'm to blame," I used to tell people. I believed my horrible words and actions all those years were the reason our marriage had never been strong and that that had ultimately led to our divorce. Slowly, I came to see that wasn't so. I am to blame, one hundred percent, for my actions and attitudes, yes. I take responsibility for them. But Robert played a significant part, too. He was the head of our family. He held the keys to lock or unlock our relationship, to take us into right and solidarity or into mediocrity and instability. And in the end, he chose to seal our failures with divorce.

I used to wonder why God took me down such a long path. Why plant the idea of reconciliation and ask me to work toward it when He knew Robert would refuse most everything I offered? Why the back and forth—the promises, the rejections, the hopes and disappointments? Why didn't God just let it end when I signed the papers and be done with it?

Now I see He took me through all the possibilities, so when it was over, I'd know I'd done all I could. If Robert and I had walked away when the ink dried, I'd always have been haunted with *I should have tried this; maybe we could have worked it out.*

Then one day, He let me know it was over. *You've done all I've asked,* God whispered. *You're free.*

Bittersweet release.

To the best of my knowledge, I'm not angry, though I had to defeat anger again and again. I work through this stuff regularly, checking myself. I don't resent Robert. He did what he had to do, whatever his reasons, and now we live with it. I keep reminding myself it doesn't matter what he—or anyone—says or does or thinks, that I have God with me, my Comfort, my Companion, my Strength. I've done my best to follow Him through all these events. He's kept me and brought me to where I am, for His purpose.

I don't know why there are sometimes still tears. But I think I came out with peace and joy while Robert was the loser in his own arrangement. He got what he wanted, but I fear he doesn't like the life he brought upon himself. I worry about him. I don't want him to be sad or lonely. He's living with some health issues now, too, I learned about three years ago. I remind myself he's not my responsibility anymore.

We've resumed a careful smattering of communication recently. I'd like us to stay on friendly terms—we still share our children and grandchildren. *Dad speaks only well of you,* Holly told me this past Christmas. *I thought you should know,* she smiled. I was pleased to hear it.

I'd like to say that I'm healed and I'm strong...that I've overcome my hindrances. This isn't true, though. See, we expect that finale. That all-conquering victory. We wait for the breakthrough that sets us right again.

But there is no end to the battle. Not in this life. Triumph follows struggle, and before we reach the crest of our success, we're knocked back down by hardship. Difficulty and relief intertwine. Happiness picks us up to carry us briefly and sets us down again. For those who know God, there is joy and comfort through whatever comes. He is our peace in the storms, our shelter from the winds and the rains.

I still can't focus enough to read, though I used to have three or four books on the go at a time back in Kenton. I can't pay attention long enough to get through a movie. I still can't stay long in a social situation. I don't feel settled anywhere I go. These are the symptoms of the trauma of divorce.

The last seven years since leaving New Brunswick have been the most difficult of my life. They've also been the best. God has become more real to me than ever before. He's taught me lessons I'd never have learned if I'd not walked through the fires. I'm still a mess, and I might never be fixed. God doesn't heal all the hurt or take away the scars. He keeps us in our weakness, so we'll rely on His strength. He gives His comfort and peace to sustain us. He carries us through our pain.

"...For my soul takes refuge in You (God); and in the shadow of Your wings I will take refuge until destruction passes by." Psalm 57:1. (NASB)

Pacific Sunset

I wait at the bus stop, eager for my afternoon. Several kilometers south of the city is a tourist town; that's where I'm headed. I look down the road

expectantly, and at last, my ride lumbers into view. I step into the bus and pay the fare, about sixty-five cents one way.

I settle into my seat and watch the jungle slip past outside the windows. I've seen it many times, but I never get tired of it. We twist over the road, up and down, and make many stops for passengers to get on and off. As we draw closer, I crane my neck for the familiar scene that's new every time. We round a turn, and there it is over the ridge—

The Pacific Ocean.

Manuel Antonio, our destination, is an oceanside village. The bus stops at the end of the route and we all spill out. I kick off my shoes and traipse through the sand. This seashore—exotic haven, palm trees and coconuts—this is the reason I came to Quepos.

A long, white beach stretches both directions to rocky cliffs that jut out into the warm water. I walk barefoot alone and can't stop smiling to myself. The undertow sucks the sand from beneath my feet and nearly pulls me over, though I'm only knee-deep. Huge whitecaps crash against outcroppings of volcanic rock. Pelicans flap above and dive into the surf. An ibis lifts from the shadows to rest in the branches of a tree. A tiny crab pokes out from his hole, then scuttles back inside when he sees my shadow.

I pick my way out onto the black rock and find a flat surface on which to sit. I gaze across the shore—I hadn't realized how striking palm trees are along a beach. I look out over the sparkling water, its rhythmic waves, mesmerizing. I soak in the sun, the air, the fragrance.

A cruise ship's anchored in the distance, its passengers here on the beach. A couple of smaller boats linger, and WaveRunners skim over the cove. The colorful balloon of a parasail drifts overhead.

Paradise.

I wade out up to my chest and ride the waves back to the shore. Voices call across the water. Peddlers push their carts along the sand. Tranquility. Laughter. Unhindered beauty.

I don't want the day to end.

Everything stills at evening, and the people gather on the beach to gaze out across the Pacific. I stand among them, all of us transfixed, as the sun slowly sinks downward. A shimmering path of light stretches across the surface of the ocean as though reaching for us. The sky turns yellow, then gold. The moment lingers; it hangs in space, soundless, unmoving, as though punctuating its own beauty. Then the ball of fire picks up speed; it slips quickly now, every second changing. We hold onto the scene before us, never turning, barely daring to blink.

In a final flash, the orange sun dips below the horizon and is gone. Silence hovers.

And I let go the breath I'm holding.

Oscar

Quepos, Costa Rica
February 17, 2020

Awake this morning ahead of the sun, I turn on my bedside lamp before putting feet to the floor. I poke my head out into the hallway. For just this purpose, I leave on a light in the living room all night. I scan the path to the bathroom—nothing crawling…no creepies. The coast is clear.

This is my morning ritual.

I walk the length of the apartment to the light switch, located by the entrance, and flip it on. Then, puttering in the kitchen, I'm startled by a roach-like creature on the counter. Ugh!

But I've got this. I cross the apartment a second time to grab a shoe from under the bamboo shelf that sits by the door. Returning to the counter, I move some things out of the way to set up for a clear shot. The roach scuttles, and I pull back, startled again. (You can hear these things clicking on the tile as they scurry.)

I take a moment to gather my courage. Shoe clasped tightly in my hand, I start to go back in for the bug and…

That's when I see it…

My gaze darts to the thing perched on the ceiling as though overseeing its kingdom. The blood drains from my head.

Spider! All eight legs of it! Huge!

I've already walked back and forth twice, right under it! I start to hyperventilate. My skin tingles. I break out in a sweat. Oh, my gosh! Oh, my gosh! Oh, my gosh!

What do I do? There's no way I'll attempt to whack a spider that's over my head—gravity can be most inconvenient in such situations. Besides, I've nothing to reach it—no fly swatter; no broom. I go half a step forward, half a step back. What to do? What to do?

Then it moves.

It crawls across the ceiling toward the far end of the house, then down the wall to the floor. I beg it not to come to the kitchen where I cower.

Instead, it crawls under the bamboo shelf and seems to settle. I don't know how long I stand frozen in place before I recover enough to get my breakfast, eyes always on the corner where, somewhere in the darkness, the enemy waits.

Then it's on the move again—across the open space toward me. I grab the lid off the crockpot and slide up to El Creepo. *Don't slap it down too hard, Sandra. We don't want spurting spider any more than we want to break the glass lid.* When I'm close enough, I bring down the lid, hoping to trap the intruder underneath it. But he's too fast; he darts away, and I miss. My second attempt misses again. My rival races back under the shelf, then up the wall, down the wall, taunting me.

Hey, I realize, *if I could get the door open, he just might call off his assault and go outside.* I move carefully as I enter the space he has claimed in my home. I reach for the latch and pull it open. Sunlight gleams. The outdoors... Freedom... *Go on, Oscar* (that's his name). I will him back out into nature.

Slowly, Oscar starts for the door. I hold my breath. *Yes, yes, keep going.* He reaches the threshold and pauses, poised for escape. He lifts up his two front legs and wriggles them in the hot air. *Go! You're free!*

No! He withdraws abruptly, catching on to my trickery. The ruthless arachnid turns to confront me. Like lightning, he charges me! I jerk back, terrified. Then just as quickly, he changes direction and retreats to his haven under the shelf.

There he stays.

Now you're probably thinking, *For heaven's sake, Sandra, that little thing? It won't hurt you.*

Oh..., but Oscar's not little! He spans as big as my hand!

And one of the most poisonous spiders in the world, the Brazilian Wandering Spider, lives in Costa Rica and looks suspiciously similar to giant Oscar, here.

Logic has no place when we're talking spiders.

So, the hours go by. I hardly take my eyes off the corner where he hides. He waits. I watch. Sometimes the shadows play tricks on me, and I'm not sure if he's even still under there. I shine my flashlight into his lair, and two white ovals glare back at me. Hideous. I dread nightfall and darkness.

By dusk I can't take it anymore. I grab a few things, stuff them into my overnight bag, and make a reservation at a nearby hotel. I gather all my remaining possessions into my suitcase and zip it up, secured against invaders. I stash it in a handy spot, ready for quick retrieval when I get up the nerve to come back for it.

Now I flee.

The next day, I return with Cristian to pick up the suitcase and clean the apartment. He insists the spider's not poisonous. Just the same, he turns the place inside out, but there's no sign of Oscar.

Nevertheless, I don't want a roommate and won't take any chances of being here should he return. I book a room in San José. I board a bus that whisks me from the west coast to the center of the country.

I'll spend my last week in Costa Rica in the bustling capital city. I'll make friends and we'll explore together. It'll be the best week of my whole trip.

And I'll never see Oscar again.

San José

February 19–27, 2020

Heaven's Door

My San José accommodation was a pretty room dubbed, "Heaven's Door." Ah, just the solace I needed after rooming with Oscar. The second-story apartment was within walking distance of restaurants, cafés, mall, grocery stores, and bus stops.

Temperatures were a beautiful twenty-five to twenty-eight degrees Celsius, not so cold as the mountain but not so stifling as the coast.

In the room across the hall was another guest, Charlene, from England. She knew quite a few people in town, was always on the go, and was a fountain of information about what to see around San José. Because of her and her connections, I was a very busy girl that last week, and the writing went by the wayside while I enjoyed a taste of life in the lovely capital city.

It was through Charlene that I learned about the Toucan Rescue Ranch in Heredia, about a half hour's drive from where I was staying. The ranch was founded in 2004 to rescue sick and injured toucans, rehabilitate them, and when possible, release them back into the wild. In 2007, they'd expanded their mission to rescue sloths as well.

Yes, sloths! They were number three on my Costa Rica adventure wish list. And I finally found them! Lots of them!

One little guy let me film him eating his lunch, hanging belly up and reaching back over his head to pick up carrots and green beans to stuff them into his mouth, all while eyeballing me and my camera. Another sloth climbed slowly down his wire cage and stopped, posed upside down, just inches from my face. He looked me over curiously while I snapped his photo, giggling to myself. He was so adorable, he could have been mistaken for a kid's stuffy toy.

One afternoon, Charlene suggested we hop the train to Cartago—cost: about a dollar each way—just for the fun of the ride.

She took me to the Basílica Nuestra Senora de Los Angles, Cartago's most famous site—a stunning grey and white stone building trimmed with gold. The building was set at the far end of a long, wide brick plaza. The interior was gorgeous with marble railings and hand-painted columns, rich wood, stained glass, and high arches. I lingered over one incredible artifact after another, taking pictures.

We exited at dusk to see the beautiful face of the church bathed in yellow and blue lights—breathtaking—and its evening bells rang out after us as we walked away across the square.

From the basilica, we hiked a few blocks west to the ruins of Parroquia de Santiago Apóstol, the last of several church buildings that have occupied that spot, going all the way back to 1575. All of the previous buildings were destroyed by earthquakes. The current stone structure was damaged by earthquakes so many times they never finished building it. Now the roofless interior is a beautiful oasis with stone walkways that wind through lush lawns and around trees and shrubs loaded with colorful blooms. The gates were closed when we got there, but I got some of my favorite

pictures—the serene garden in haunting splendor—shot through the bars at dusk.

Then came one of the coolest things I've ever done...

Jewel Behind the Clouds

February 21, 2020
Number four on my Costa Rica wish list—

We set off on foot at record pace. Skies were clear, which isn't common in a cloud forest, and we all knew it wouldn't last.

Charlene and I had been on the go since before the sun was up, starting with a 40-minute walk to downtown San José where we'd met up with two of her friends. Then a 30-minute bus ride to a second bus in Alajuela. Another hour humming along mountain roads had deposited us here at the park gate. Our tickets were checked, and we were granted entrance with no guarantee we'd get to see what we'd come for.

We knew we must hurry. But some of us were already out of breath and having difficulty keeping up. ("Some of us" was me.) The steep ascent can be a challenge for anyone who's not used to the altitude, even for an avid walker like myself.

Our race was abruptly halted at the visitor's center where we were called inside—precious time lost; sunshine wasted.

We were each handed a hard hat and directed into a theatre. It was required that everyone watch an information and safety video. I figured, *hey, I don't want to die on this mountain, so maybe I should pay attention.*

Once armored up and informed, we were ushered outside and assembled into a group of twenty-five or so. We stood, impatiently shuffling to and fro, while our guide warned us that we'd be permitted *only twenty minutes*—it wasn't safe to stay any longer, he said. While he talked, fog closed in, and disheartened, we watched the grey sky swallow up visibility. Would we get to see anything up there?

Finally, he led us out, on a trail through the forest, and we continued our upward trek. Even this far away, some of the thick vegetation was brown from acid rain.

Reaching the top at last, we fanned out along the railing. Ominous signs looked down on us, admonishing of the risks we'd taken just being here.

By now, thick cloud hugged the mountain, and we couldn't see beyond the cragged rim of rock just on the other side of the barrier. It was a strange effect—the bare brown twigs and dried leaves that lined the edge and then nothing but a sheet of white, like the artist never finished the painting.

The clock was ticking...

I moved along the railing, stopping at different points, as though I might hit the magic button that would draw back the white veil. I snapped pictures and waited, hopeful...

Slowly, yes, the cloud was thinning, wisps hurrying away on the wind. I could now see down the barren slope to my right. "It's lifting," I called, never taking my eyes from the scene before me. Wherever my companions had wandered, I did not want them to miss this.

Then suddenly, the curtain pulled back...

And I was looking into the crater of an active volcano.

Volcán Poás: elevation 8848 feet.

Down its bleak slopes lay one of the largest craters in the world, last erupted just five months ago—September of 2019—following an eruption seven months before that.

But the real gem was Laguna Caliente. The crater lake flashed before us, its ash-rimmed bowl of luminous, milky-green waters, eerie under the constantly-moving streaks of fog that were already closing in again.

The early-morning dash to busses, the smell of sulfur, toxic gasses, the wait here in the wind and the mist, the risk of eruption. It was all for this. A chance...one look at this beautiful jewel.

Celebrate it. Drink it in. Don't turn away.

It was no more than three minutes when cloud wrapped around, shutting us out, and the lake was gone.

But that one breath-taking moment—that glimpse of the crater and its lake—was a gift...a memory we'd take with us to cherish forever.

Volcán Poás...

The emerald jewel behind the clouds.

I Plan

"The mind of man plans his way, but the Lord directs his steps." Proverbs 16:9. (NASB)

It was down to the crunch for me as to where I would go after the Holy Land trip with Mum and Rachel, what would be the next phase of my adventure abroad.

I up and decided, about halfway through my eight days in San José, that I'd spend four weeks with Melody Livingston in Arizona—*Your room's still waiting for you to come back,* she told me over and over. *Come here after Israel. Stay a good month*. So I booked the flight from Toronto to Phoenix—to Melody's—for March 9th.

But after the beginning of April, I'd need a destination. I spent hours on my bed in Heaven's Door, laptop in front of me, trying to pick. I went round and round on Google—Peru, Bolivia, Ecuador, Panama.

One afternoon, Charlene was telling about some of her cycling tours in various countries. *So of all the places you've been in South America,* I asked, *What's your top recommendation?*

Cusco, she said without hesitation. *Because the new structures are built on top of ancient ruins. It's really amazing!*

I had my answer. The next day, I booked flights from Phoenix, Arizona to Cusco, Peru for April 8th. I'd stay two weeks and then go to on Cuenca, Ecuador on another recommendation. I reserved accommodations in those two cities for most of April and May. Finally, I was ready for the next three months—Israel, Arizona, South America.

On with the adventure. On with the story.

Israel, Place of Reflection

February 28—March 8, 2020

Beautiful Gift

My treasured days in Costa Rica ended much too soon. I said good-bye to the lights of San José as my flight rose into the sky at two in the morning on February 28th.

Israel.

How incredible to think that I'd soon be in this country of such rich history and promise. This, the land where God came down to live among His created. Where He fulfilled His plan of salvation, our pardon from sin. Where Jesus will one day return to set up His kingdom.

What a wonderful gift our mother gave Rachel and me, to take us with her on this walk in the steps of our Savior.

I met up with Rachel and Mum and the rest of our tour group in the Toronto airport about four-thirty p.m., just in time to board our flight to Tel Aviv. My second night on a plane.

Israel was the opposite of the leisurely two months I'd spent in Costa Rica. Our days were booked solid from the moment we landed, early morning till five or six at night. I never did catch up on sleep and ran on fumes the whole time, head in a fog. When I'm that tired, I can't hear, so no matter how much our guide explained, I was never sure where we were or what we were doing. I soon gave up trying to stay on top of it all and just let myself stray, happily clicking my camera, then running to catch up with the group that was constantly leaving me behind. At night, I was too worn out to make notes on what we'd done. The days whizzed by in a blur.

But some things, I remember well.

Upon arrival day, we stopped first in Jaffa. We all spilled out of the tour bus that had brought us there from the airport, and I got my first real taste of this place—this town...this exotic country, so familiar, yet so new to me and strange.

There were narrow alleyways and walled gardens, buildings of sand-colored stone and cobbled sidewalks. Tall, spindly palm trees stretched upward, competing with minarets and church towers. People milled about the parks, and cars putted past.

We spent some time touring through the streets, our guide pointing out places of interest like St. Peter's Church and the home of Simon the Tanner. Then she sent us off to find food.

Mum and I stepped into a pretty bakery—all stonework inside. Table after table was laid out with the greatest assortment of sweets I've ever seen—trays of squares and mounds of twisted pastries and treats. But we were looking for lunch, not sweets.

Wait! Forget lunch...! I spotted halva!

I stood before the display and stared, mouth watering. I'd never heard of halva before, but the spread before me was irresistible, and I just had to try some.

Halva's made from sesame or nut butters and resembles a big brick of fudge, but as it turns out, is not nearly so sweet. I finally made my choice—so many enticing flavors—and handed over payment. The server cut me a way bigger chunk than I'd expected—I was delighted. I'd nibble away at it over the next few days, I figured. I added to the purchase a couple of little pocket-like pastry items that looked like they might have meat inside. We needed our protein, after all.

Out we went into the street, Mum and I with our entrées, to a flight of stairs leading up from the sidewalk. We sat on the steps in the sunshine to nibble our fare. On closer inspection, I realized my mistake with our "meat pockets." They were baklava. Duh, how did I miss that? Baklava didn't do us much good as a lunch, but oh, was it delicious!

And my wonderful halva... I offered it around, then carefully packaged up the leftovers—most of the piece—guarded it all day, and carried it back to my hotel room that evening.

Then forgot it in the fridge when we moved to Galilee the next morning.

I mourned the loss.

From Jaffa we drove to our hotel in Tel Aviv, just a few blocks from the water. After dumping off our luggage in our rooms, a bunch of us walked to the shore. Off came the shoes, and I ran through the surf, heedless of the splashes I sent up onto my clothes.

I couldn't believe it! I was standing in the Mediterranean Sea!

We took picture after picture of beach and sky and crashing waves against the rocks. It's addictive, this picture-taking—just as I'd start to turn

away, a bigger wave would break and a higher spray would shoot upward, escaping capture by my lens.

When most of the others headed back to the hotel, Mum, Rachel, and I lingered. That day was our only chance to be there on that beach, and it was so beautiful, I hated to leave. The sun would soon set, and I wanted for us to see it.

It made its slowest descent ever as we shivered on a bench overlooking the water. We pulled our jackets around us in the cold and tied our hoods up tight. We waited.

At last the orb touched a wide stretch of cloud that stood up out of the horizon. Then it sank gradually till it disappeared completely behind the cloud. Rays of light shot upward into the sky and streamed out through a slit in the cloud, turning everything they touched to gold. Magnificent.

Only after the brilliant yellow had dimmed and the beams had faded did we turn to go.

A beautiful moment for the three of us—our sunset on the Mediterranean.

Galilee

Low "mountains" rim the other side of the lake; they curve around the end of the basin to form the backdrop for a neat row of houses in the distance. Like in a painting, each ridge rises a little higher behind the one in front of it. Clouds reflect on the water, and grasses grow along the shore.

This is the Sea of Galilee. Peaceful. Tranquil. I pause at the water's edge and look out over the lake and the shore. I'm struck by images—vivid recollections of the stories I've known since childhood. Part of God's perfect plan, unfolded right here around this spot where I stand.

Our group piles into a little boat, and we sail out to the middle. We sing hymns and read from the Bible. Gulls flock around us, circling for the crumbs our Galilee guide throws out to them. He casts a big net into the water and pulls it up again, showing us how the disciples would have fished.

The Sea of Galilee is much smaller than I expected, twenty-one kilometers long but only thirteen kilometers wide. Nestled between surrounding hills, it sits about 207 meters below sea level, the second lowest lake in the world, after the Dead Sea. The calm surface today belies the fierceness of the storms that hit this little lake. Quick changes in temperatures and air pressure can whip the sea into a violent tempest, like the accounts we read of in the Gospels.

I sit on the bench at the side of the boat and drink it all in. I'm lost in my thoughts. This place—the New Testament come to life. It was at this lakeside that Jesus called Peter, Andrew, James, and John, "Follow Me; I will make you fishers of men."

I see Him in the stern of the boat, arms raised to still the raging storm. "Why are you afraid?" He asks.

I picture the disciples, exhausted from fishing all night, coming back empty. "Throw your net on the other side," the Lord calls. They cast one more time, and the catch is so great, they can't haul it in. There's Jesus on the shore waiting for them, cooking breakfast in the early morning sun.

Somewhere out here, Peter walks on the water. In a moment, he'll take his eyes off Christ and begin to sink. Still in faith, he clambers out of the boat onto the angry sea. Imagine!

They're not just stories in a book...not just characters in a novel. They're history, true accounts in His Word. They were real people who walked with our Lord, right here.

I rejoice that I know their Saviour too, this King, this friend of fishermen, the Most High God.

Just in Time

Bet She'An is one of the most ancient cities in the Holy Land. It was on the walls of this city that King Saul's body was hung by the Philistines after he'd fallen on his own sword to avoid being taken by the enemy. Here, in the remains of a first-century theatre, our group stood together and sang hymns just to hear the marvelous acoustics in the old stone amphitheater.

We walked among Roman and Byzantine ruins. Crumbled stones and broken columns lay against one another, toppled by an earthquake in 749 AD. A sidewalk of a lovely mosaic pattern followed an old street lined with more columns, still upright, that somehow escaped the quake's destruction.

Mysterious and haunting are these remains of a once-thriving city and trade-route between Mesopotamia and Egypt.

We whisked from one site to another: Nazareth Village where real people and animals replicate life in Galilee at the time of Christ; The old stones of Jerusalem's main street—the street that Jesus walked—barricaded now to preserve them; Ancient synagogues where Jesus might have taught; The prison below what might have been Caiaphas' house where Jesus was held the night before His crucifixion, awaiting trial in the morning; The hill that looks like a skull, possibly Golgotha.

We looked out across the Kidron Valley to the Dome of the Rock, glistening in the sun. More beautiful to me was an unadorned spot farther down—the Eastern Gate. Though it's not the same gate as in Ezekiel 44 & 46 nor the same gate as in the millennial kingdom to come, its plain,

weathered stone is a glorious reminder to me that Christ will one day enter Jerusalem as King and will remain forever with His people.

We went to Bethlehem on March 4th. We visited the Shepherd's Field and looked out over the Field of Boaz. We waited in a throng of visitors for a ten-second turn to touch the medallion that marks the place presumed to be where Jesus was born.

They closed Bethlehem to tourists on March 5th due to coronavirus.

We went to Masada on March 6th. Masada... Once Herod the Great's grand winter palace. Later, a fortress where fled a band of rebel Jews—the Zealots—to escape Roman oppression. The story goes, the nearly one thousand Zealots—men, women, and children—chose suicide, rather than capture and slavery to Rome.

It was sunny and clear and we could see for miles atop that rocky height. "It only rains here twice a year," they told us. March 6th turned out to be one of those two times in 2020. We rode the cable car back down from the Masada cliffs and headed off in the bus to our next stop. We hadn't gone far when the sky broke open and emptied itself in torrents.

They closed the road from Masada behind us because of flash flooding.

From Masada, we went to the Dead Sea. I couldn't wait to float in its salt water. We pulled up to the entrance and were told the beach was closed because it was too slippery from the rains. We were granted entrance to a different beach a little farther on, and I got to do my float. I shivered and stepped in timidly, it was so cold. I lowered myself slowly into the thick, milky water and laid back. Rachel snapped a quick picture, and I beat it for the warm showers.

They closed all the beaches at the Dead Sea on March 8th.

Out of the rains at last, we had one more stop that day. Our bus pulled into a parking lot, and we all piled out. We stood together, cell phones in hand, delighted at the two camels that lay on the ground in front of us. I

was eager to ride double with Mum—I really wanted her to try it. *Oh, I don't think so,* she shook her head. So I teamed up with Rachel instead.

We all watched uncertainly as the first two couples from our group climbed into the saddles. The camels rose on their gangly legs, back end first, throwing their riders forward. Then up came the front legs. Away they went, led by the owner, around the large lot as the rest of us traipsed after them with our cameras.

One or two at a time, our group took their turns on a camel, to much chatter and laughter. Rachel and I waited patiently, round after round. At last, the camels came back and stopped on their spots, they lowered to the ground, and the riders got off. Everyone else had gone, I thought. We might be next.

Out of the corner of my eye, I caught sight of Mum. She marched ahead of us right up to a camel and swung onto its back. Well, for goodness sake, look at that! Another of our ladies got up behind her, and they lumbered off. I don't know what magic words that lady used to convince her, but I'm so glad she didn't miss her opportunity for this once-in-a-lifetime ride.

They're among my favorite snapshots of the trip—Mum on that camel.

The Lamb

On our way through Old Jerusalem late one afternoon, we stopped at a storefront, and our tour guide called out a hello to Arel, the painter who owned the shop. Arel had been in Jerusalem for fifty years, she explained. He was the first Jewish boy to grow up in the old city after Israel became a country in 1948.

Out came Arel to greet us, and he invited us inside. *Before they built these shops,* he told us with a grin, *I used to come here as a child, to this very spot, to hide from my mother when she wanted me to bathe.*

Now Arel comes every day to sell his artwork.

The walls were filled with beautiful paintings of all sizes. Display stands were stacked with dozens and dozens of five by seven copies in cellophane wrappings. I picked out one to buy—the Eastern Gate. There's just something about that image that captivates me, the glorious event to come. *Seven dollars,* Arel told me. *Take two, still only seven dollars.*

So I picked up another print, a lamb with a crown of thorns on its head. Arel stepped beside me. *Oh, this one has a good story.* He held it up for everyone, *I want to tell you about this picture,* he said to our group.

A long time ago, I saw a picture like this one, he explained. *One day many years later, the picture just came to mind. So I painted the lamb as I remembered it.*

There was an American woman who lived here in Jerusalem with her husband and little boy. She used to come to my shop, and we became friends. She saw this painting one day, and she asked, "Arel, what have you painted?" I told her, "A lamb." She said, "Yes, Arel, it's a lamb. But what have you painted?" So I explained to her that I just had an urge, one day, to paint this lamb from my memory of a similar picture. She said, "Yes. But Arel. Do you know what you've painted?" And she took out her Bible, sat down in the middle of my shop floor, and read Isaiah 53; she explained to me that passage.

A warm smile spread across Arel's face, and a glint touched his eyes. *I understand this Lamb now a lot more than when I first painted the picture,* he told us.

On March 5th, we went to the Garden Tomb, the place where they might have laid Him, the Lamb Who wore the crown of thorns.

Son of the Father

In a dank, dark prison cell stands a man condemned to die. His hands on the cold stone wall, he looks up at the narrow shaft of light from the only window high above his head. Outside is commotion—the crowd growing ever larger and louder. They're angry and shouting. What's happening? He stretches upward, but there's no way to see; no way to reach the small opening.

He turns from the wall and resumes his pacing. How much longer till they come for him? His heartbeat quickens despite his resolve. He's lived a vile life. He's a thief, a terrorist, a murderer. Now, he stares death in the face—execution, as he deserves. Long, slow torture. He clenches his jaw, his face, set.

Footsteps clop on the stones in the corridor, closer and closer to his cell. Metal jangles with each step—keys that hang from the guard's belt. The lock clangs and the door opens. "Come on, come on," the guard grabs him roughly and shoves him into the narrow passageway. From beyond the walls, he hears the throng, "Crucify him! Crucify him!" they shout. The chant rings louder as he stumbles up the steps into the bright courtyard.

But instead of being led away with the other prisoners, he's brought before Pilate. The Roman governor reads out his release and stamps it with his seal.

And the condemned man is pardoned.

Pilate glances down at him, a look like stone, then whisks away. Barabbas stares after the governor, unable to move. It has to be a mistake. No one would pardon him.

"You're free," the guard tells him and nudges him back down the steps from the portico. He nods toward the road that leads out of the city. "They're taking Him instead."

Barabbas cranes his neck and peers through the crowd. A man, beaten and bloody, stumbles under the weight of a heavy cross. "Who is He?" he asks.

"Jesus of Nazareth. He says He's the king of the Jews," the guard snickers. "The king who will die in your place."

"The king who takes my place..." Barabbas repeats slowly, tasting each word. "Jesus of Nazareth will die, and I will go free."

Thursday morning, March 5, 2020, I stood in the empty tomb in Jerusalem. They were sobering moments as I gazed on the place where, possibly, the Son of God had laid. It's not known if this is the actual tomb of Christ, and there are arguments for and against it. But whether or not it's the one, I know His grave is empty.

From the tomb, our group gathered in a garden alcove, a communion tray set on a marble table before us. Precious moments of reflection together on the sacrifice freely offered for us. The gift of God's pardon and eternal life to those who repent.

It was our group leader who pointed out the connection between Barabbas and us (me):

"Bar" in Aramaic means "son"
"Abbas" means "father"
—Son of the father

I am Barabbas. I am the guilty one set free. Jesus of Nazareth, God, innocent One, took my place so that I could become a son (daughter) of the Father.

Hallelujah! What a Saviour![1]

1. My depiction of Barabbas is fictional. The true account is in Luke 23:18-25. "But they cried out all together, saying, "Away with this Man, and release to us Barabbas!" (*He was* one who had been thrown into prison for a revolt that took place in the city, and for murder.) But Pilate, wanting to release Jesus, addressed them again, but they kept on crying out, saying, "Crucify, crucify Him!" And he said to them a third time, "Why, what has this Man done wrong? I have found in His case no grounds for *a sentence of* death; therefore I will punish Him and release Him." But they were insistent, with loud voices, demanding that He be crucified. And their voices *began* to prevail. And *so* Pilate decided to have their demand carried out. And he released the man for whom they were asking, who had been thrown into prison for a revolt and murder; but he handed Jesus over to their will." (NASB)
Matthew 27:31. "... they ... led [Jesus] away to crucify Him." (KJV)
Galatians 1:4. "Who [the Lord Jesus Christ] gave Himself for our sins." (KJV)
Luke 24:2-6. "But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb... And they found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they entered, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus... Two men *suddenly* stood near them in gleaming clothing...*the men* said to them, "Why are you seeking the living One among the dead? He is not here, but He has risen." (NASB)
Romans 3:23 & 6:23. "All have sinned and come short of the glory of God. For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord." (KJV)
I John 1:9. "If we confess our sins, He is faither and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." (KJV)
Ephesians 2:8 & 9. "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not a result of works, so that no one may boast." (NASB)

Arizona, Place of Thankfulness

March 9 – May 27, 2020

A World on Lockdown

Phoenix, Arizona
April 2020

The streets are eerily quiet when I walk today. Cars are parked in the driveways and at the curbs with no place to go. Houses are still, like the people are barricaded inside, afraid to look out. The cheerful twitter of birds is a stark contrast to the silent, lonely neighborhood. I walk on alone, like an intruder, thinking maybe I'm not supposed to be here. When I finally come across a man puttering in his yard, I'm reassured the human race still exists.

When I turn the corner, I see three or four people seated in chairs, lined up along the sidewalk. They're chatting with three or four more folks who sit across the street, facing them. This is how we visit now. I step onto the

road and pass between them, leaving a good distance on either side. Not that I'm afraid, but I respect the space of those who are.

Our tour group flew back to Toronto from Tel Aviv on March 8th, 2020. I said goodbye to Mum and Rachel there in the airport, not sure when I'd get to see them again. I spent the night on the airport floor, my coat tucked in around me, my carryon clutched in my arms as I slept.

When I walked into Melody and Cliff's house the next day, the world closed behind me. Borders slammed shut. Country after country locked down and urged their citizens home. Sports were cancelled. School, music lessons, and coffee houses turned to Zoom. Streets emptied as people shut themselves up in their homes. All eyes were on the media. Waiting.

My South America flights were cancelled. My Peru and Ecuador accommodations were refunded.

COVID-19.

This wasn't part of my plan.

We have a whole new vocabulary now in our everyday speech—coronavirus, social distancing, self-isolation, quarantine. New laws control us—stores and businesses are forced to close, churches aren't allowed to meet, no gatherings of more than ten, fines for going out, report those who break the laws. We call it "the new normal."

What a weird world this is.

How innocent, now, seem my days at the cabin. How carefree my decisions. To move about as I wished. To turn ideas into plans. To choose the mountain, the beach, then the city. To go from Costa Rica to Israel to Arizona. To set my sights on Peru.

Then that screeching halt. Movement suspended. Plans interrupted.

"The mind of man plans his way, but the Lord directs his steps."[1]

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1. Proverbs 16:9 (NASB)

Canada, too, called its people back. Friends and family messaged me in earnest. *Come home while you still can*. I have no home to go to. No job. With businesses closing, my chances are slim. I'm pulled back and forth, afraid to stay, afraid to go.

And I think, isn't this the first time in history the whole world has been caught up to this degree in the same crisis? Seems every country's affected in some way. It's frightening, but it's not the virus that scares me. It's all that comes with it. The repercussions are astronomical.

But nothing that comes to this earth or to us is beyond God's reach; it's all just as He decreed it.[2] He doesn't cause evil or make anyone do wrong, but He uses every choice of every living soul to achieve His purpose. He knew every detail of these events before the world began, and every stroke fits exactly into His blueprint.

God has written Himself across the universe since the beginning of time.[3] He's there for anyone willing to see Him. Now, more than ever, our generation's brought face-to-face with the truths of His Word. So much in Bible prophecy that once seemed impossible is happening now across the globe. The Book of Revelation come to life.[4] Not that this is it, necessarily; no one can know that at this point. But our current circumstance sure shows how easy it will be for the world to fall to fear and hysteria, blind obedience, ready and open for a savior[5] (small *s*) to swoop in and rescue.

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2. Isaiah 14:24. "The Lord of armies has sworn, saying, 'Certainly, just as I have intended, so it has happened, and just as I have planned, so it will stand.'" (NASB)

3. Psalm 19:1. "The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the works of His hands." (NIV)

4. Last book of the Bible. I Thessalonians 4:13-18. II Timothy 3:1-7.

5. II Thessalonians 2. Revelation 13.

It's coming, one day. God's Word is sure.

When Jesus told His disciples in Mark 13 about the persecutions to come, He told them not to be afraid. The Holy Spirit would sustain them and give them the words to say. In Matthew 24, He said we should not fear the horrors of the last days, that all these things have to happen before the end can come when He will set up His kingdom on earth.

Before that time,[6] Jesus will come in the clouds for those of us who've repented of our sin and put our faith in Him. He'll call His Church to Himself and take us home. Millions of believers will disappear from the earth, shocking the world, plunging those who are left into confusion and fear.

I look for it now. It seems current events have catapulted us to the brink. I wonder how many days are left for us, though God alone knows the day, the hour, the year. It could be decades, centuries away yet. It could be today.

As much as I fear what believers might have to endure before Jesus comes for us, I'm overcome with peace and assurance that nothing—no laws, no government, no punishment, no technology, no man on earth, no angel in Heaven or Hell—can hold me here when my Saviour gathers us home.

Desert Morning

Phoenix, Arizona, USA
April 2020

The sky's already getting light when I pad out to the kitchen for my coffee at five a.m. A shiny sliver of moon hangs over the desert. Slowly, the orange horizon brightens till the sun peeks over Superstition Mountain.

A new day begins.

The backyard comes to life with the gurgle of the waterfall. A hummingbird lights on a shallow pool and flicks his wings in playful splashes. Birds of all sizes and colors crisscross in the air, chasing one another. A gecko darts across the ground, sleek, brown body against the dirt. Only her movement betrays her presence.

A tanager has made her nest in the vines high on the wall above the backyard patio. Melody and I watched her, weeks ago, come with tiny twigs and tuck them into the framework, her mate close by, watching over, protecting her. Then, her task completed, she'd settled on her eggs, her little head barely visible above the edge of the nest. Our coming and going doesn't bother her. She knows us, but she keeps a close eye on us just the same.

From time to time, her mate comes for her and the two fly off together. When she returns, she lights on the vine and chirps to us. It's as if she's telling us where she's been and what's going on outside the garden walls.

Her mate perches on the stones a little way off and looks us over. When he's satisfied we're not a danger, he warbles his song to her—to anyone listening—a lullaby for the little ones to come.

The other day there was more commotion than usual. She fluffed and fussed. Her mate came more often to the edge of the nest, tilting his flame-colored head to peer inside. Tiny tweets responded from little beaks that I couldn't see. Mother and father flapped excitedly. Was it pride that swelled his chest a little broader?

Beyond these walls, the world's gone sideways, overcome with upheaval, uncertainty, fear. But the creatures in the garden carry on without worry, for they know their Maker. He guides. He sustains. He feeds, He clothes, He sees them fall. Nothing touches them outside His control. The Lord God who directs the universe and all who are in it.

They rest in His hands.[7]

Arizona Home

I hunker down in Arizona to wait it out, my visa good until September. Uncertainty has never been so strong. Where will I go when this is over? When? What do I do? What's coming next?

The other day, Melody and I went to pick up a few groceries. The store was so quiet. Shelves were bare. Not many people, hushed voices, and few smiles. The world looks so bleak. It seems there's no safe place anymore...no freedom anywhere. I fear the cure for this coronavirus is far more destructive than the disease.

My Arizona "home" is a refuge from it all—a place of support and security and comfort. The concern that I might overstay my welcome creeps in from time to time. *Stay as long as you need to,* Melody told me

7. Matthew 6:26. "Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?" (ESV)

before I'd even mentioned it. *I don't know what I'd do if you weren't here. You're a distraction from some very hard things right now. Don't hurry away.*

See, aside from the lockdowns and the threat of the virus, Cliff and Melody are revisiting a tragedy from a year ago—the loss of their newborn granddaughter. This month is the anniversary of the death of this sweet little one. Melody pulls out pictures that pierce the heart, and we pour over them together. I listen as she retells of that day, the weeks leading up to it, and the days and weeks following. She relives the memories, and I share in her tears.

They are a sweet blessing—this family...this home—delivered by the hand of God. And I'm reassured this is my place for now, a purpose beyond myself.

My time here in Arizona isn't wasted. I'm driven to finish what I started, the urgent summons on my heart. Prevented from work and travel, it's easier than ever to immerse in words, guilt-free. A long-buried story brought back to life, pounded out at a keyboard. I pour out everything in me. I empty mind and soul onto the page.

Agony. Tears. Release. Healing.

And I've nearly achieved the result I'd almost given up on.

How will you end it? people ask.

For a long time, I didn't know.

Desert Birthday

Saguaro Lake area, Arizona
May 2020

I lift my eyes to the window just as the city drops away behind us. A vast, rugged desert rushes by beyond the glass, an incredible landscape that takes the breath away. The Arizona sun beats down and bakes the wilderness floor with white light almost too bright to look at. Vivid hues of olive-, apple-, pear-, and army-green sprout up from the colorless ground. Vibrant blooms crown spiny cacti of all shapes and sizes. Flowering trees in brilliant yellow, rosy pink, and deep fuchsia pop against greys and browns of the dry expanse.

Can we stop? I call from the back seat. *I want to get pictures.* Cliff pulls the car to the edge of the road, and I hop out with my camera. I walk back to the spot where a saguaro cactus rises from amidst rambling bushes and squat vegetation. The trunk and branches are swollen with water, expanded like a stretched accordion, from the late spring rains. Its blossoms perch on its head like a daisy hat; its arms extend with fists full of flowers, comical and striking at the same time. It takes fifty to a hundred years for these cacti to grow their first branch. Some branches reach out long and twist like a pretzel.

I hop back into the car, and we drive on, the desert in bloom all around us. Rugged mountains line either side. Deep-blue cloudless sky stretches out endlessly above. We stop several more times for Melody and me to take pictures. I'm in awe again of this beautiful world, struck by yet another terrain completely different from anything else I've ever seen.

This is my birthday present, this excursion into lonely, majestic wilderness, and I can't stop the smile that's fixed on my face. What a marvelous God, this Creator! Incredible, too, how He directs His children, His timing, His movements, far beyond anything I can see.

I settle in my seat, alone with my thoughts, as we head back toward the city. One hand rests on the wicker shoulder bag beside me. The other clutches my phone, my connection to the people who fill my life, my storehouse of memories captured in pictures.

I flip through those pictures now, in my mind, treasured images of a life lived outside the ordinary. I don't need to look at the phone to recall the many faces and places along my way.

I see Kenton. The pale-yellow house, the double-doored workshop. I see us laughing, Robert and me. I see our four children at play in the yard.

I see Cornerstone, me at my desk. I see Stephanie through the window between our offices...her pretty smile. *I saw a King, wearing a beautiful crown...* I hear Elizabeth's soft voice.

I see sunflowers on my patio in Stoddard that first summer in Alberta. I see George at his door with the towel over his arm. The light in Leslie's eyes, *Oh, Sandra, I'm so happy you're following your dream*.

I see Airdrie, the sparkling pond, the geese coming home. Joy and Kristen on my balcony at sunset. Lee's smile for me on the dancefloor. His last words when we parted at the airport, *Sam, remember, you're beautiful.*

I see the mountain cabin, always my first image when I think of Costa Rica. The volcano with its plume of smoke. Lily and her Jeep.

I see Israel. The three of us framed together in the cold, waiting for the sun to set over the Mediterranean. I see us laughing on the camels, the quiet shadows around the peaceful Jordan River, the gulls on the Sea of Galilee, the red cross painted above the garden tomb, the olivewood communion cups.

I flip through pictures of my family I love. My father. My mother. My sister. I look at my four children, every one strong and beautiful. And their children, scattered across the country. The last time I was in New Brunswick, July 2018, I met three-week-old Arthur, Jack and Jocelyn's beautiful baby boy. And I have a seventh grandson now—darling Callum, born last September, little brother to Ethan and Wyatt. I watch him grow in the pictures they send me. I add his face to the other six, each one precious and sweet.

That choice, that moment that changes everything. I've had a few of those. Each one took me places I longed for and places I despised. Each one revealed my strengths and my weaknesses. Each one built me stronger and showed me God a little closer.

How far I've come since that bus ride into the unknown over seven years ago. How rough the walk on that cragged and twisted path I took. How beautiful the sunshine that broke through the clouds and shed light on my steps.

I soared with eagles into the storms. When I was too weak to fly, God spread His wings and carried me.[8] He took me out of familiar and safe and brought me into challenge and tears and splendor. He flipped my failures upside down. He turned my mistakes into good.

But it isn't over. God isn't finished. See, He is the author for His children. He writes the chapters of our lives, the plots and events in His eternal narrative.

Our stories go on, even after we leave this earth, influencing, shaping. A legacy in our children, our grandchildren, and all who knew us. They reach

8. II Corinthians 12:9 & 10. "But He said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses...for when I am weak, then I am strong." (ESV)

far beyond us to touch people we'll never meet—God's masterpiece, much bigger than ourselves.

One day, He'll take me to the home I long for. He'll fix me; He'll heal my scars and take away my pain. He'll bring meaning to every hardship. One glimpse of His face, and all the sorrows of this life will disappear.

The storms will be over. He'll pen the last chapter. He will write my ending...

My happily-ever-after.