AT HOME WITH SINNERS: ONE WOMAN'S JOURNEY TOWARD EMBRACING HER IMPERFECT CHURCH AND HER IMPERFECT SELF

by

Abigail Martin
A Thesis
Submitted to the
Graduate Faculty
of
George Mason University
in Partial Fulfillment of
The Requirements for the Degree
of
Master of Fine Arts
Creative Writing

Committee:

[Signatures]

Date: May 1, 2008

Director

Department Chairperson

Dean, College of Humanities and Social Sciences

Spring Semester 2008
George Mason University
Fairfax, VA
At Home with Sinners:
One Woman’s Journey toward Embracing Her Imperfect Church and Her Imperfect Self

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at George Mason University

By

Abigail Martin
B.S.
The Pennsylvania State University, 2002

Director: Steve Goodwin, Professor
Department of English

Spring Semester 2008
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Fairfax, VA
DEDICATION

This is dedicated to CJ, who was never scared to walk with me into my deepest questions and fears about church and whose support, prayers, and often damp shoulder helped sustain me through the many trials of writing.
I would like to thank a great number of people without whom this thesis might never have been written. I am extremely grateful for the instruction and support I have received from various professors during my time at George Mason. Thanks to Alan Cheuse and Beverly Lowry for their input on early drafts of these chapters. Thanks to Kyoko Mori for her thoughtful and specific feedback over two years of workshops and for serving on my thesis committee. Thanks especially to Steve Goodwin, who guided me through the year of thesis writing with patience and wisdom.

Special thanks is also due to Heather King, whose experience in writing her own memoir of faith made her comments on my draft particularly helpful.

I must also thank the many people who have provided the encouragement I needed to keep going on this project. Thanks first of all to my parents, who as always, have extended support, guidance, and patient care for my soul. Thanks to my brothers, Joel and Nate, for their friendship, for their willingness to provide feedback on my writing, and for speaking words of truth and hope. Thanks to the many friends who have carried me in prayer throughout this project – Becca, Steph, Liz, Brynne, Cathy, Lisa, Mary Grace. I have needed you all. And once again, thanks to CJ, who has persevered with me through the challenges of pouring out my soul on paper.

And finally, my deepest gratitude is due to the “one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all” (Ephesians 4:6). Ultimately, these pages are the story of His redeeming work in my life. Soli Deo gloria!
TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preface: A Legacy of Leaving</td>
<td>vii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 1: New Life</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 2: First Steps</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 3: Staying Safe</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 4: Leaving Church</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 5: Into the World</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 6: Fearing Difference</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 7: Freshmen Friends, Like Me and Not</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 8: True Community</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 9: Searching</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 10: Career Corps</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 11: The Rollercoaster of Dreams</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 12: Crashing</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 13: Stumbling Forward</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 14: Finding Sovereign Grace</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 15: The Shaping of Things</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 16: Forgiveness</td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 17: Staying</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 18: Among the Broken</td>
<td>162</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of References</td>
<td>172</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ABSTRACT

AT HOME WITH SINNERS: ONE WOMAN’S JOURNEY TOWARD EMBRACING HER IMPERFECT CHURCH AND HER IMPERFECT SELF

Abigail Martin, MFA

George Mason University, 2008

Thesis Director: Steve Goodwin

Raised as a pastor’s daughter in what she believed to be a great church, the author’s world was rocked when in her early teenage years her dad stepped down from the ministry and left his church. Over the years that followed, she journeyed through a variety of church and parachurch organizations, always looking for and never quite finding a place that perfectly fit her expectations of community and shared mission. Perpetually disappointed by the failings of those around her, the author begins to wrestle with questions of what it really means to be part of a church. Eventually, she realizes that joining a church requires not only a choice to accept an imperfect institution, but also a choice to accept imperfect people, including herself.
“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?
Why are you so far from saving me,
from the words of my groaning?
O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer,
but by night, but I find no rest.”

--Psalm 22:1-2

“I just don’t like our church sometimes,” I told CJ through heaving sobs. “I don’t know why. I just don’t.”

Though it was nearing midnight, we were seated across from one another at the tiny wrought-iron bistro table on the back porch of my rented townhome in Fairfax, Virginia. One of my roommates was in the kitchen, the other upstairs asleep in her bed, so this was the only place where I could cry without disturbing anyone. Except, that is, for CJ.

“I’ll stay as long as you need me to stay,” he’d told me earlier that night, when the tears started, as we were driving back to my townhouse after a meeting of the church small group we’d both been attending for several years. We’d met there, developed a friendship, and started dating almost nine months prior, so he knew me well enough to know that I cry. A lot. And I knew him well enough to know that he hates seeing me sad, hates that he can’t
do anything to fix it. He’d been learning that part of caring for me is just being there, holding me, praying for me, but I knew it was still hard for him. He wanted to understand.

“So what about the meeting tonight made you feel this way?” he asked, brow furrowed in concern.

“I don’t know,” I said, pulling my blue fleece blanket tighter around my shoulders and turning my head to the side, averting his gaze. I’ve always had a hard time maintaining eye contact while trying to explain my heart.

CJ waited, and I took deep breaths to calm myself. In the dim glow of moonlight and street lamps, I watched a spider crawl across the iron rail of my balcony and tried to remember what it was about tonight that made everything feel so terrible. I’d been attending this group for three years now, and though there’d been a few small changes recently (new leader, new location, some new people), it was the same basic idea: ten or so people gathering to discuss the most recent sermon, sharing about how it applied to our lives, and praying together.

So why did I suddenly feel like I didn’t want to be there? Was it the ongoing adjustment to a new leader who was a little quieter than the last? Was it the flippant comment someone had made tonight about “everything burning anyway,” conveniently dismissing the efforts of all environmental activists and sounding a bit too much like the religious right I’d grown to mistrust? Was it the fact that many of the people in the room simply weren’t my type, didn’t seem cool or fun? Was it the impression that everyone else was smiling and happy and together while I felt miserable and broken inside, weighted down
by doubts and feelings of depression, by the pressure of maintaining my faith while teaching and writing in the context of a secular university? Was it all of these things or none of them?

“I don’t know,” I repeated, desperate for the phrase, the idea that would make him understand, that would make me understand myself. “I guess . . . it just seems like there wasn’t any grace there. I felt like . . . I don’t know . . . like I had to have it all together.”

The tears started streaming again, and my words came like hiccups, halting, staccato. “And I don’t . . . I can’t . . . be . . . perfect.”

CJ reached across the table and put his arm on my shoulder. “Do you really think that’s what the people there want you to be? Do you really think that’s what they think they are?”

“I don’t know,” I said, a bit too quickly, pulling back and tightening the blanket around my shoulders. “It feels that way.” I wanted him to understand my feelings of despair, to respond by sharing his own sense of discontentment with the people in our group, and I could already tell the conversation was not headed in that direction. I was afraid he was going to take their side and leave me alone, the one with the problem.

“Okay,” he said, settling back against his chair. “I don’t mean to defend the church. It’s not perfect. You know I have my own issues with it. And you know I agree that some people there can be fake and spew out easy Christian answers without really thinking. But I think it’s a pretty good church. And unless it’s teaching heresy, unless it’s clearly wrong on some major issues, I’d have a hard time leaving. I just don’t give up on things so easily.”

He stopped, waiting for my reaction. I nodded, tears welling up and spilling down my cheeks. I hated that things seemed so easy for him, that he didn’t wrestle like I did. But
I knew he was right, that he’d hit on the core issue: our church wasn’t perfect. He was willing to stay, to deal with what was, to try to make it better. I wanted to leave, to escape the problems and the shortcomings, to look for something new and different. It was the same problem I’d run into time and time again these five years since college. Churches, like people, have issues; issues make me want to bail.

We sat in silence, interrupted only by the sound of an occasional car passing in the distance. A slight wind rustled the trees that stretched over us. Normally, I loved sitting on the porch at night, found a quiet there that was difficult to discover in the fast-paced chaos of the Northern Virginia suburbs. But tonight, I felt trapped. I wanted to marry this man and to love going to this church, or at least I thought I did. But I was scared that I couldn’t, scared I wouldn’t be able to commit my life to both an imperfect man and the imperfect church he of which seemed so sure. And yet, at the same time, I knew I could not leave either behind, that both had been sources of a deep goodness I could not ignore, a goodness I sensed God providing for me through all the struggles of the previous year.

And I knew too that another church and another boyfriend would come with their own set of problems, different ones to be sure, but problems all the same. Leaving wouldn’t solve my fundamental problem of being an idealist stuck in an uncomfortably real world. It might make things seem better for a season, but eventually, something would go wrong, something else would look better, and unless I somehow learned to embrace the imperfect, I’d be back. On the porch. In tears. Wanting to leave again.
I like to think that I come by my tendencies honestly, one from a long line of leavers. My ancestors were people who enjoyed a deep and sustaining faith in the redeeming work of Jesus Christ, people with a passion to make God’s church all that it should be. Interestingly enough, they were also people whose depth of religious conviction often caused them to leave the existing church of the day. A Protestant, I can trace my spiritual heritage back to Luther and Calvin, men who looked at the Bible, looked at the practices of the Catholic church and realized that something had to change. Though they did not originally intend to leave, their ardor for reform eventually forced it, in Luther’s case through excommunication, in Calvin’s through choice. My biological ancestors are Mennonite, stretching back centuries on both sides of my family. They took the leaving one step further, standing against both Catholics and Protestants by advocating adult or believer’s baptism over the prevailing practice of infant baptism. They too left, not only the churches in their Swiss towns and villages, but also their homeland itself, fleeing persecution and death at the hands of their Catholic and Protestant neighbors, looking hopefully to the religious freedom promised in the new world.

Even there, after settling into the agrarian rhythms of Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, after carving a niche for their head coverings and simple fabrics in the land of the free, they found endless reasons for leaving. On my dad’s side of the family, my great-great-great-grandfather, the Mennonite bishop Jonas H. Martin, left his church over disagreements about pulpits and Sunday schools and English services, establishing the Old Order Mennonite group that remains in Lancaster to this day. My grandfather on my mother’s side left the Mennonite church all together, embracing the Charismatic movement.
and its theology of the Holy Spirit, helping to plan for and manage hippy-like Jesus Festivals in the rolling hills of central Pennsylvania and starting a ministry that would provide Christian materials for churches in once-communist Russia.

And then there’s my father himself, who left not once, but twice. After graduating from college and marrying my mother, he too left the Mennonite church and started his own nondenominational, Charismatic church, wanting to move away from what he perceived to be unnecessary rules and traditions in order to embrace a more experiential relationship with Jesus. But after fifteen years of being a pastor, he left this too, feeling cut off from the world, reminded of Jesus’s call to seek and save the lost, to not be a candle hidden away, sheltered from the darkness. Now he’s working full time in a secular job, helping Lancaster County farmers with a variety of water quality projects and initiatives. On evenings and weekends, he’s busy leading a small group of Christians in Lancaster City, learning what it means to live among and serve the poor, taking his Hispanic “little brother” Jose bowling and coaching his baseball team.

When I think about most of this leaving, it feels good and right and exciting. I see people trying to figure out what Christianity is all about, holding onto the gospel message Jesus proclaimed while making changes to embrace a lifestyle and community that will allow them to live it out most effectively. I see people dreaming big dreams, being willing to make big sacrifices for the sake of what God is calling them to do. That’s the kind of leaving I want to embrace. That’s what I felt like as a thirteen year-old following my father into the world outside the church, learning to build friendships with people who didn’t share my beliefs, learning to study in and engage a culture very different from the sheltered Christian
community in which I’d grown up. That’s what I felt like when I moved to Northern Virginia after college, leaving behind the tightly knit campus fellowship of which I was a part, ready to embrace a more diverse and powerful culture and to discover a new Christian community within it.

But finding that perfect community has proven much harder than I’d expected. And along the way I’ve done more leaving than I’d ever hoped, trying out a host Christian groups and churches, excited always by the newness of the experience and the spirit of the vision statement, only to find the holes and the gaps, only to once again leave and move on. For me, leaving’s become less about the anticipation of good things to come and more about the problems with what is. This kind of leaving does not feel good at all. It makes me feel like I’m a prisoner to my own idealism, like I’m doomed to be a restless searcher, to never feel settled and content.

I’ve been at my current church for almost three years now and have actually become an official member. I’ve considered it a victory. But I’m not sure. Most Sunday mornings, there’s at least one thing that rubs me the wrong way, makes me wonder if I really fit there, makes me dream of a place I might fit better. And then, I have to ask myself, if I still want to leave, am I really making progress? Or am I only delaying the inevitable?

Maybe leaving, like the farms and fields of Pennsylvania, like the pungent sweetness of cow manure and the haunting melodies of bluegrass, is in my blood. The Martins, my mom explained to CJ on a recent visit, are dreamers, idealists. They feel deeply about things. They’re often moved in ways others don’t understand.
I like this about myself, like that I can see the problems with what is, that I can picture what should be. But right now, I’m tired of leaving, tired of feeling dissatisfied and alone. I don’t want to be a quitter, to give up on things easily, as CJ put it. I want to be woven deeply into a church community where I feel loved, valued, and needed. More importantly, I believe God has called me to be a functioning member of a local church. And yet I wonder if I will ever be able to stay long enough for that to happen, fear that staying somehow means dying, admitting that the imperfect is good enough, losing the part of myself that dreams and dances and hopes.
CHAPTER 1: NEW LIFE

“Yet you are he who took me from the womb;
you made me trust you at my mother’s breasts.
On you was I cast from my birth,
and from my mother’s womb you have been my God.”

--Psalm 22:9-10

I was born just two years after the inception of my father’s church, both of us entering the world of Lancaster County, Pennsylvania after much waiting and laboring on the part of my parents. They were young then, twenty-seven and twenty-four at my birth, both younger than I am now, and already, their lives were characterized by a deep passion for God and His church.

Though they’d been raised by Christian parents in conservative Lancaster County Mennonite homes, God had become real to each of them through their participation in the Jesus Movement of the 1970s, a countercultural revival that embraced the “Charismatic.” This movement toward an emphasis on the Holy Spirit frightened the established church, which mistrusted both the hippy-like look of the “Jesus people” and the way in which they worshipped, singing rock music hymns while they raised their hands and danced. But for my parents, the Charismatic experience addressed the problems they saw in the Mennonite
churches of their childhood—tradition without meaning, worship without passion, religious practice without vitality. In the years preceding my birth, they’d continued attending the Mennonite church in which they were raised, but also started meeting weekly in their living room with a group of young, like-minded Jesus-followers.

By June of 1978, my dad had left his job as a vocational agriculture teacher at Lancaster Mennonite High School, working part time in construction and maintenance, devoting the rest of his time to the growing gathering of people. By November of that same year, the group had decided to leave their childhood congregations and organize themselves into an official church, called Community of Believers. Shortly thereafter, as numbers continued to grow, they started meeting outside my parents’ home, first in the Humane Society’s dog training room, then in a farm house, and in the years to come, in a hotel ballroom and a school auditorium.

Within a year of the church’s first official meeting, I was conceived. My parents had lost a baby through a miscarriage a few years prior, which meant that I was their first child. They spent months preparing for my arrival, stocking cloth diapers, praying over my name, writing me letters rich with anticipation. My mother kept a journal of letters to me, recording her developing excitement.

*November 13, 1979 – I don’t know that words can capture the feelings of awe that I have. To realize that there is life and a being within me is quite a responsibility.*

*January 9, 1980 – We’re on your 4th month of life and according to all the books you should be about 3 inches long. Isn’t that exciting!*

2
March 8, 1980 – Daddy was so excited last week ‘cause he could feel you move for the first time. You must be getting stronger.

May 26, 1980 – Daddy and I play little games with you where we poke at you and watch you move. Hope it doesn’t irritate you too much.

I was due on the fourth of July, but the day of independence from my mother’s womb was delayed two and a half long weeks. She suffered the heat and humidity of a Lancaster County farmhouse apartment without air conditioning while I waited, apparently enjoying the dark comfort of the only place I knew. My parents joke now that I was a snuggler even then, not wanting to move away from warmth lest my cozy cocoon be destroyed. All I know is they had to scratch their plans for an at-home midwife delivery; only after my mother’s labor was induced did I finally make an appearance in the local hospital.

My parents named me Abigail Kristin, Abigail meaning “source of joy,” Kristin meaning “anointed one.” For my father in particular, both names were rich in significance, representative of his heart for me and his heart for the church. In a letter that is included in my baby book, he wrote:

The meaning of your name expresses what you mean to me and also my desire for your life. Abigail is the best expression of what you mean to me; you are truly a “source of joy.” Kristin means anointed one. It is my desire that you will grow into a woman of God, anointed of Him.

Your name also expresses the heart of your father and his desire to pursue the purpose of God in his generation. You have been born into a family that is committed to the
Lordship of Jesus Christ. Our life is given to build with Him in His church. He has promised that the church will be the joy of the whole earth; that He will build His church and all nations will find their springs or source of joy in her, and that this church would be anointed to bring all things in subjection to Him.

So your name has a second meaning to me. We are commanded to give Him no rest until He makes and establishes Jerusalem a praise in the whole earth. So as you grow you will be a constant reminder to me of my responsibility to give myself to God's purposes and also a testimony of hope that God will fulfill His whole purpose.

While it would be years before I read this letter, I knew early on that I was special to my parents not only because I was their child, but also because they desired for me to be God's child, to share their passion for Him and for His church.

And I felt too that I was deeply connected to the church that was growing up along with me. The congregation, which had yet to reach fifty members, was newly full of babies, six of us born within a few months of each other: Maria, Sabrina, Gabriel, Matthew, Jared, and me. At the height of their pregnancies, our mothers posed for a picture my parents still have tucked away in a basement photo box. In it, faces are glowing; bellies are bulging; everyone's grinning from ear to ear. In a way we children could not have understood, but must have known, even from our days as playpen pals, we were a physical symbol of hope and newness and fresh life. Our parents’ dreams for us and for the church were intertwined, propelling all of us forward.
It was a happy time to be a child, and I was tenacious and precocious, aware both of my goals and of my ability to reach them. Walking and talking by nine months, I ran into the world full force, ready to handle whatever challenges might come my way. When my younger brother Joel arrived just before my second birthday, I reveled in the role of big sister and mommy’s helper, wanting both to contribute and to be in charge.

My parents love to tell the story of me at four, stumbling into an argument they were having in the kitchen after dinner. My dad, fearing the worldly influence of the local public school and lacking the resources to afford private school, wanted my mom to home school me for kindergarten. She, however, was pregnant again and was already feeling overwhelmed with caring for Joel and me. Understandably, she had fears about her inadequacies as a teacher, particularly in the area of reading.

“Don’t worry,” I apparently said when I had listened long enough to figure out what the fight was about. “I already know how to read.” Shocked, my parents looked at one another and then at me.

“Show me,” my dad said. And I obliged, running off to my room to find a book, bringing it back to the living room where he was waiting for me while my mom finished the dishes. I jumped on his lap and read it perfectly, having memorized the words while listening to it read to me time after time. My dad was impressed, but unconvinced that I’d actually learned to read in any sort of transferrable way. He skimmed the newspaper for an advertisement I’d never seen, then asked me if I could read a few basic words.

I could. And I did. With at least one fear behind her, my mom agreed to homeschool me. And already my identity was being defined. I was the child who would do
things above and beyond her parents’ expectations. I was the child who lived not simply to please, but to exceed.

I was also the child who liked things to go my way. My mom’s journal, continued after my birth, records my early character flaws along with my successes. “Perfectionist tendencies show themselves as you hate dirt and like to have things in order . . . You are also learning how not to complain and whine when things don’t go your way . . . I’ve also noticed a lack of perseverance in doing new things if you can’t do them right away.” My sinful nature was already in full gear.

As was my interest in and understanding of God. I wouldn’t have been able to articulate it at the time, but it was clear to me that all of life was supposed to be about honoring God. He was the center of everything that we did as a family–of our prayers before bed, of the stories we read, of the songs we sang in church, of my parents’ conversations. According to the songs and stories, He was also the center of the universe, the creator and ruler of all things. And He was personal. He loved us so much that He’d sent His son Jesus to die for our sins and to give us eternal life. I didn’t focus too much on the concept of sin, certainly didn’t define it as I would now–man’s fallen nature, depravity, and utter rebellion against God. And unlike many children, I wasn’t particularly afraid of hell. Certainly, I didn’t want to go there, but avoiding it wasn’t my primary reason for accepting Christ. What drew me to God was the promise of a personal relationship with Him, the idea that even when I did wrong things, like not sharing toys with Joel or disobeying my parents, He forgave me and still allowed me to be in His presence. And it
may sound crazy, but even as a four year old, I knew that being with God and following Him was what I wanted more than anything else.

One night, around the same time as the reading incident, I remember telling my dad as he was putting me to bed that I couldn’t wait until I could become an adult and actually be a Christian. I guess even then I expected that God would want me to have everything together before He accepted me. But my dad was quick to inform me that anyone could be a Christian, that all I had to do was recognize that I was a sinner and ask Jesus to save me from my sins. The next morning, in the quiet of our basement family room, distanced from the activity of my two younger brothers upstairs, my dad led me in prayer. “Dear God,” he began, sitting beside me on our tan couch, my fingers tracing the pattern of coarse fabric swirled into its surface. My echoed response matched his confidence, but not his volume. “Dear God,” I said, praying earnestly.

“I know that I am a sinner,” I prayed, still echoing my dad with every phrase. “I know I cannot save myself. I need You to come into my heart and save me. Please come, and change me from the inside out. Amen.”

Afterwards, my dad prayed for me that I’d be filled with the Holy Spirit, the gift Jesus promised His disciples before his death, and that I’d be given the gift of speaking in tongues, a common Charismatic practice in which I’d seen both of my parents engage. I remember wondering what it would feel like to have this supernatural experience and feeling rather disappointed at how much the same I felt. My dad asked if I could pray in tongues, and I managed a few words in a language that was not English. But I felt uncertain, wondering if the words were more imitations of something I’d heard the grown-ups around
me saying than they were actual words given to me by God. I kept that worry to myself though, establishing early on a pattern of not opening up my weaknesses and fears to others. After all, I figured, I felt sure of God’s love; the tongues thing, if it were important, would come in time. There was no reason to tell anyone else about it.

Plus, I was confident in my ability to figure things out and to understand how life worked. When my youngest brother Nate was born, a week before my fifth Christmas, my grandmother took me to the hospital to see him. I was thrilled to have another little brother and another opportunity to assert my authority and influence as a big sister. “Now,” I explained to my grandmother on the way home, “all they have to do is put the milk in mommy, and Nate can come home.”

“Well, it’s not quite like that,” she said. “Women’s bodies make the milk themselves.”

“Oh,” I said, pondering this fact for a second, “so you can make milk, grandma?”

She laughed. “No, not anymore; grandma’s done having babies.”

I persisted, recalling a Bible story I’d heard. “But Sarah was 100 years old when she had Isaac. So you could still have a baby and make milk.”

I had her. She didn’t know how to convince me that her milk-producing days were over. “You were so sure,” she said recently, chuckling as she told the story to a group of my college girlfriends who had gathered in her two hundred year-old farmhouse kitchen to learn how to make applesauce and homemade potato doughnuts. “I didn’t know what to say.”
As I suppose is natural for children from solid and loving families, I did not worry or question much of anything. I loved the school lessons my mom taught me at home, except for the phonics rules I had to memorize. To me, they seemed useless seeing as I already knew how to read. I did the lessons, but spent most of my time reading, devouring entire chapter books each day by the time I was in first grade. I loved my family and my friends from church, loved playing house and school. I loved going to church, loved the vibrant experience of worship and community I experienced there. When I looked to the future, I saw only forward momentum via my dad’s passion to advance God’s kingdom through the local church. By this point, he was working full-time as a pastor. The church was growing. Things were happening. And I wanted simply to be part of it all.
CHAPTER 2: FIRST STEPS

“They send out their little boys like a flock,
and their children dance.

They sing to the tambourine and the lyre
and rejoice to the sound of the pipe.”

–Job 21:11-12

Growing up, I remember looking often at a framed verse that hung on our various living room walls. Written in intricate red, blue, and black calligraphy on parchment-like paper, it read: “Your statutes are my songs in the house of my pilgrimage. – Psalm 119:54.” When I asked about the significance of this wall hanging, my parents explained that it was a verse they felt God had given them to direct their thinking about their living situation. They said that wherever they lived, they wanted to view it as a house of pilgrimage, a place to live during their short time on earth, a place they wanted to be ready to use for God’s glory and to give up whenever God called them elsewhere. Throughout my childhood, I watched as they lived out what they believed.

We moved often in those early years, six times before my fifth birthday, each of them small moves. Always, we stayed within the borders of Lancaster County, where generation after generation on both sides of my family had been born and raised. Though I
didn’t realize it at the time, there was a safety in staying in Lancaster. Not only is it the place where all of my grandparents and many of my aunts and uncles live, but it is also a place where Christian faith runs deep. A significant majority of Lancaster’s original settlers were Amish and Mennonite, people whose faith had been forged in the fires of persecution, people who were truly willing to sacrifice it all for Jesus. They were also stable, hard-working people with deep ties to their farms, families, and communities.

In Lancaster, change happens slowly. While today it is home to an increasing number of Hispanic immigrants, while here too church membership is in steady decline, it is still the land of Amish buggies and farms scattered among rolling hills, still a place where church attendance is expected, still a place where if you talk to someone long enough, you’re bound to discover that they know your dad, your grandfather, your aunt. There’s a sense of history, of connectedness, of stability. There’s a feeling of home.

So even though we moved often, I never felt uprooted. Our surrounding environment remained constant. Both sets of grandparents were just a few miles away. We continued visiting the same grocery stores and shopping malls. And our church community remained intact. In fact, most of the moves occurred out of desire to better serve this community, either by placing us in closer proximity to other church members or by giving us more space with which to host them in our house. I’m sure all of the changes were challenging for my parents, who had to pack and unpack an entire household on an almost yearly basis.

But I don’t recall them ever complaining. Their enthusiasm for following God and telling other people about Him was contagious, and in my young mind, the connection
between Christianity and our frequent moves was clear. God called His followers to be willing to give up their comfort and their own plans in order to serve others and share the gospel message with them. This was both our privilege and our responsibility as Christians.

At the time, I had no real conception of other forms of Christianity, denominations that were characterized more by social stability and tradition than by a sense of radical mission. I felt excited to be part of God’s work, wanted, as most kids do, to follow my parents in what they were doing.

I remember my dad coming home one afternoon and waking me up from my nap to tell me that he’d just prayed with his brother, my uncle, to accept Jesus. And I remember telling the little girl who lived next door that Jesus loved her and wanted to be in her heart. With a simplicity and freedom from self-consciousness I now envy, I understood that people’s souls mattered, that eternity was at stake, that the greatest thing I could do to help someone was to tell them about Jesus. What I did not understand was that this lifestyle was not meant to be an easy, always exciting, always successful one. What I did not yet understand was what Jesus meant when he said, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me” (Matthew 16:24).

When I was five, I got my first real taste of the world outside our tightly-knit Lancaster community. My parents explained that we might soon be moving about forty-five minutes away from my friends and extended family to Hershey, Pennsylvania so that my dad could take over the senior pastor role of a floundering church there. The church in Lancaster was well established at this point and had forged official ties with a group of
nondenominational churches from across the United States. These churches, most of whom had formed independently, shared a common vision for advancing the gospel through the context of the local church and placed themselves under a united leadership team for the purpose of accountability and direction as they grew. It was through this team that the Lancaster church received a second full-time pastor, and it was also through this team that my dad had become connected to the Hershey church and learned of their desire for help.

For months, we commuted from Lancaster to Hershey each Sunday so that my dad could get a sense of what the church was like and to make sure that he felt called to be there. It was strange to be in a different church, to worship surrounded by unfamiliar faces, but I felt proud of my dad. These people wanted him to help. They needed him. And I was young enough to make new friends without much fear or anxiety. It would be okay, I thought, if we moved to Hershey. God had new adventures in store for us.

Eventually dad decided to take the job, and so we moved once again, this time far enough away to make visits with family and my first friends a rare occurrence. Hershey was different from Lancaster, still technically part of rural Pennsylvania, but more suburban, slightly more white-collar. Racial and ethnic diversity of any sort remained minimal, but though Christianity was the predominant religion, it was not quite as central to the lives of the average residents. Many of our new neighbors didn’t go to church at all. Surprisingly, I don’t recall the adjustment being particularly challenging. What I recall instead was a deepening awareness of God’s reality, of my delight in knowing Him not only as the foundation of mission and purpose, but also as source of beauty, joy, and goodness.
Shortly after we moved, the Hershey church’s meeting spot moved also, from a hotel conference room to the Hummelstown Fire Hall, a structure far from inspiring or sacred, at least in the traditional sense of the word. The large rectangular building faced Main Street with a marquee outside proclaiming: “Saturday Bingo. 7:00 p.m. Longaberger Basket Prizes.” Its face was dominated by large retractable doors that hid the town’s two yellow fire trucks from view, except in cases of emergency or Saturday morning chicken barbeque fundraisers.

Inside, olive green doors swung open to reveal a large, empty rectangular room that reeked of stale cigarette smoke, covered only partially by the pungent acidity of the citrus air freshener my Dad insisted on spraying every week before the service. The far side of the room, the one opposite the doors, was draped in floor-length curtains of the same drab olive green. In front of the curtains, a wooden platform of roughly two feet in height formed a stage, just high enough above the rest of the floor that the Saturday night bingo patrons could see the callers and the table displaying prizes to be won.

The fire hall’s janitorial staff, if there was one, did not clean often, and the place had not been remodeled in years. Dirty and discolored beige tile lined the floors. In some places, the tile had been completely chipped away, and only the residue of black adhesive remained, swirled on the concrete in the narrow grooves of a giant fingerprint. Bingo chips left over from the previous night’s activities littered the floor, some rimmed with a thin metal strip, others transparent plastic in blue, red, pink, yellow, and green. My friends and I often collected them before and after church services, and I sometimes placed them over my fingernails to create my own pretend manicure.
I was six by this time, and as strange as it may seem considering the setting, it was here that I first remember beginning to have a sense of a personal relationship with God. It was here too, in the unlikeliest of buildings, that I have my first vivid memories of a group of people who were, in a very real sense, family and community and home.

On Sunday mornings, the set-up crew got to work early. By the time my family arrived, about half an hour before the 10 a.m. service began, rows of metal folding chairs had been set up to face the stage. The worship band’s instruments and elaborate sound system were in place, along with miles of black electrical cord and an array of boxy speakers, some resting on the stage floor, others raised on poles to project sound throughout the room. Over all of this, and in front of the olive green curtains, ran a long white banner proclaiming one of my dad’s favorite verses from the New Testament, the verse that had inspired the church’s name. In letters of maroon outlined with yellow, it read: “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy, He has given us new birth into a living hope” (1 Peter 1:3, NIV).

My dad chose this verse because he believed it spoke to the beauty of what church can be; he had a vision to create a place where people’s lives were transformed by truth, where they experienced love in community, where their very lives proclaimed the hope Jesus Christ offered to a hurting world. As a child, I didn’t recognize this as a theology of redemption, didn’t consider the alternatives presented by other philosophies or religions, but I did love being around the people of Living Hope Church. In the half-hour before the service started, I ran around the room, greeting children and adults alike. On any given week, there might be several unfamiliar faces in the crowd, but for the most part, I knew
everyone, and they knew me. In the faces of the Mellingers and the Bells and the Rosenshines, in a hug from my favorite babysitter Esther, the dingy, dirty firehall came to life with all the warmth and safety of my own living room.

Promptly at 10 a.m., the church’s worship band, most of whom were in their late twenties and early thirties, crowded onto the stage at the far end of the room: vocalists, pianist, electric guitarist, acoustic guitarist, bass guitarist, drummer, and worship leader. As if on cue, the members of the congregation who had been milling about the room and catching up on one another’s weeks returned to their seats, conversation and laughter still ringing in the air as they walked, their voices mingling with the opening notes of the first song.

At this point, I left my friends and the bingo chips to join the rest of my family in the front row, where my dad always required us to sit. I didn’t mind. I liked the front row. I liked being close to the band and not having to feel trapped in the narrow space between two rows of chairs. I liked having space to move.

I also liked watching my dad lead worship. Though he had once been dismissed from a youth Sunday School choir, his passionate leadership more than compensated for his inability to read music or carry a tune. Standing front-and-center stage, cordless, hand-held microphone resting on the cleft of his chin (so his voice would go over it instead of into it, he explained to my brothers and me at home), he sang with gusto and, like the plucked string of a violin, released a tense energy in bursts of movement. His upturned arms would move quickly from the side of his lanky frame to extend above his head before returning to their original position, while always, his feet tapped, bounced, stepped, and swayed in time with the music. A master third-base coach accustomed to signaling his batters, dad used a series
of hand symbols to communicate wordlessly with the musicians, indicating to them when to repeat the chorus or verse of the song and when to start a new one.

He usually chose a loud song to begin with, the beat of the drums and the steady rhythm of the bass guitar bringing us quickly to our feet, ready to clap along. *Clap your hands all you nations; shout to God with a joyful cry.* The words to the songs were projected onto a large screen placed to the right of the stage, but unless dad was teaching a new song, most of us did not look at the screen but rather closed our eyes and turned our faces upward. *The Lord is King over all the earth; how great and awesome is the Lord, Most High!*

Even with my eyes closed, I knew that many around the room were raising their hands, some extending both straightened arms high above their heads, others raising one upturned palm to shoulder level, still others holding their open hands in front of their waists as if waiting to receive a gift. *God has ascended amid shouts of joy.* Loud cries of exclamation and celebration filled the room, and some people jumped up and down to the pulsing beat. I rocked back and forth on the balls of my feet, singing. *Give Him the glory that is due Him.*

Here, the music began to pick up momentum, the guitarists strumming a faster rhythm and the song building to a climax through lyrical repetition. *As you sing with all your heart.* Clap, clap. *As you sing with all your heart.* Clap, clap. *As you sing with all your heart unto the Lord!* Four quick drum beats, and then back to the chorus and verse two. The energy of the congregation, mostly in their twenties, but ranging in age from newborns to senior citizens, rivaled that of a group of teenagers at a rock concert. I felt exuberant, alive.

Sometime before the end of the first song, I usually left the front row and headed to an empty space at the back of the “sanctuary,” behind the rows of folding chairs and near a
Coke machine and the doors to the firehouse kitchen. This was my space to be with God, close enough to taste the energy of the crowd, yet out of their sight. Sometimes a few other girls joined me, but when they did, I danced beside them, not with them. It was just me and God, me dancing for God, Him smiling down, delighting in me.

During the fast songs, I skipped, and I twirled. With outstretched arms, I grand-jetéed across the floor, leaping into a spin that left me both breathless and light-headed at its conclusion. I don’t know if I had seen The Sound of Music at this age, but when I recall the moment now, I see myself as Maria, frolicking through the hills of Austria, tasting freedom in every step and turn of my body.

My favorites though were the slower songs. With the first strummed chords of a song called “Give Me One Pure and Holy Passion,” I became a ballerina, delicate and tender, passionate yet controlled, the steps I had learned in my beginner ballet classes providing language to express the depths of my soul. I bowed before God in plea, moved toward Him through tendu, and then spun into His arms with a pirouette. Always, I reached for Him with my puny arms, grasped for Him with my gently curved fingertips. And while I danced, I sang:

*Give me one pure and holy passion*

*Give me one magnificent obsession*

*Jesus, give me one glorious ambition for my life*

*To know and follow hard after You.*

These simple words and the simple melodies that accompanied them swept me up in ecstasy. I danced until the music ended, until the period of the service devoted to
announcements pulled me back to the front row and the presence of others. The feeling of abandon I had enjoyed during worship did not vanish immediately, but rather faded slowly, the way the sensation of warmth does in the half hour after finishing a cup of hot chocolate or spiced cider.

I allowed it to do so, listening to my dad or the other pastor mention upcoming events and facilitate the collection of the offering. I put in a dime when the offering baskets were passed, my personal contribution from the one-dollar per week allowance my parents had allotted me. Then, the children were dismissed to go out the swinging olive green doors and down two flights of cold concrete steps to another large, empty room directly below the first, which was separated into scattered groupings of chairs and tables for the various classes divided according to age. With the rest of the five to seven year-olds, I watched Bible stories acted out on felt boards and colored Noah’s animals, two-by-two. And as I grew older, we memorized verses and studied theology.

But as vividly as I can recall the worship service, I remember little else about these classes. Perhaps it’s because downstairs, I was studying God, trying to wrap my mind around the complexities of His existence. Upstairs though, Sunday after Sunday, in smoke-filled air and on bingo-chip littered ground, I met Him.

And we danced.

I couldn’t understand why everyone didn’t want to experience this joy. It seemed to me that if they only knew, they’d give up everything to be with Jesus.
CHAPTER 3: STAYING SAFE

“No one after lighting a lamp
covers it or puts it under a bed,
but puts it on a stand,
so that those who enter may see the light.”

--Luke 8:16

My childhood world was a small one. There was church and all of the activities and social events that went with it. And there was home, where we ate, slept, played, and studied. By the time we moved to Hummelstown, my mom was homeschooling both Joel and me, and within a few years, Nate would start lessons of his own.

Our daily routine was quiet and simple and beautiful, so organic that I still maintain it has ruined me for life in the real world of office buildings and deadlines and stress. In the mornings of my elementary school years, my brothers and I would wake up with the sunshine, sometime around seven. By then, dad would already be gone, and mom was usually downstairs, puttering around in her bathrobe. We’d grab bowls of cereal for breakfast and then jump right into our lessons for the day.

Homeschooling seemed normal to me at the time, but after years of teaching in public middle schools and colleges, I now know it was far from it. Instead of the typical
classroom set-up, we did most of our work at the dining room table. My mom functioned primarily as an overseer, telling us what lessons and activities were required for the day and then checking our work as we progressed. If we needed help, she was happy to give it to us, but most of the time, she let us work on our own.

For some kids, this might have been a disaster, but I relished the independence homeschooling offered, the freedom my mom gave me to complete my assignments in any order I pleased. Usually I began with math, enjoying the security of the rules and the structure and formulas. I’d read the lesson for the day, make sure I understood, then do the problems and double-check my answers in the back of the book, checking to ensure I’d gotten them all right. Then I’d do the pages in my grammar workbook, similarly satisfying in their absoluteness.

Often, we took a mid-morning break for reading, sometimes independently, often together. Sometimes my mom would have to make a phone call to one of the ladies in the church or knead and shape the loaves of honey whole wheat bread she made every week. Those times, it would be my job to read to Joel and Nate. They’d snuggle in close on the couch, one on either side, resting their heads against my shoulders, intent. I’d try my best to make whatever we were reading interesting, coming up with voices for each character, pausing for dramatic effect, turning the pages slowly. We could pass hours this way, lost in far-away adventures.

After the break, we usually did things together. Physical education involved the three of us and my mom running laps around the neighborhood and doing sit-ups and push-ups on the living room floor. For science, we built volcanoes with laundry detergent and
dissected a cow’s eyeball at the kitchen table. When we studied the medieval period in history, we invited another family over for a medieval feast, complete with a chicken we roasted on a spit in the garden and, much to the delight of all us kids, a utensils-free dining experience. One time we even built a wattle and daub wall in our garden, just so we could visualize exactly how the settlers had done it.

But my favorite part of all was that we were always finished with school early, no later than one or two. With all of the one-on-one attention, we could go above and beyond the required curriculum in that amount of time. And that meant every afternoon, when I had finished all my required learning and chores for the day, I could curl up on the couch with a book, usually the latest Nancy Drew or Hardy Boys, retreating into my own little world of adventure and mystery and romance. I also spent some time each afternoon reading my Bible, practicing the spiritual discipline my parents called a “quiettime.” I enjoyed the chance to take reading seriously, to try to figure out what the different stories were telling me about how to live my life.

Looking back, it is hard for me to not to idealize my childhood, hard to see faults in what I remember as pure and simple joy. But there are always trade-offs, I suppose. I realize now what I didn’t see at the time—just how sheltered we really were, just how infrequently we interacted with people who didn’t share our beliefs. In a sense, it was easier that way, simpler to define Christianity in the negative. We didn’t go to public school. We didn’t watch The Simpsons. We didn’t play Dungeons and Dragons. We didn’t watch movies rated higher than PG. We didn’t do bad things like lie or steal or curse.
And that was okay with me. I liked what I saw as our good world. I liked that we were set apart from things like drunkenness and divorce and harsh language, things I saw on TV and in the neighborhood and wanted to avoid. Unfortunately, however, focusing on the things we didn’t do because we were Christians made it increasingly easy to see Christianity as a religion for moral people, for good people. While Jesus Himself said that He came not to call the righteous but sinners, I tended to think that Christians were the ones who had it all together, the people who lived the most upright and desirable lives.

Halloween was a holiday my dad told us was evil. We always spent trick-or-treating night in the house with the lights off, huddled together in the back bedroom watching TV, pretending we weren’t home, ignoring anyone who was brave enough to knock anyway. We whispered and lit candles, and I felt safe then, protected from everything strange and foreign happening outside the blind-covered windows: the rustling of plastic costumes passing by, the shrieks, the whispers, the shadows.

But one year, we woke up the morning after to find fragments of eggshell and streaks of yellow stickiness on our brown Hyundai sedan. My parents shrugged it off, explaining that some people just didn’t like those who were different, but it bothered me. Apparently, people who didn’t understand our beliefs couldn’t be trusted, were in fact out to hurt us. Standing outside that morning, squinting my eyes against the brightness of the sun, I watched my dad clean off the car with soapy water. I looked up and down the street, wondering which neighbor kids had done this, which house was harboring our enemies. It seemed then that though staying inside was easier, it was not necessarily safer, not to
mention that doing so for any length of time was impossible. The reality was that we were
different, and the world was filled with other people who didn’t think we were right and who
sometimes would tell us so. I didn’t like the feeling.

The older I got though, the clearer it became that I would have to deal with it if I
intended to have any engagement with the world outside the church. As a preteen, that
happened primarily through ballet, during the weekly lessons I took in the basement studios
of the McCann School of Dance. I must have been a sight then: long, dirty-brown hair
pulled back from my nine-year-old face in a tight ponytail; thick, plastic-rimmed glasses;
long, bony arms and legs. More than anything though, I wanted to be a ballerina. In
addition to dancing during the worship services at church, I grand-jetéd across my living
room and spent my free time devouring biographies of Pavlova and Fonteyn. The walls of
my bedroom were covered with ballerina figurines, ballerina posters, ballerina calendars,
decorative ballet shoes. I couldn’t wait for class each week, for the chance to learn new
steps and to practice the piece for our upcoming recital.

Always though, I felt a bit uneasy, aware that I was outside my safe zone, that most
of the girls in my class didn’t think God was all that important, that they didn’t play by my
family’s rules. Hanging around them, listening, I quickly realized what they thought was
important: New Kids on the Block, t-shirts tied in a knot at the waist, boyfriends. Like any
kid, I wanted to fit in and be accepted, but I knew, always, that my parents wouldn’t want
me to date until I was much older (thirty-six my dad would often threaten jokingly), that
they’d rather I listened to my Amy Grant tapes, that I’d get in trouble if I tried to use some
of the words I heard the other girls saying. Even as the years passed and I advanced from
beginner ballet to intermediate and advanced classes, even as I grew to know the girls at my studio better and became more comfortable around them, I could never forget that I was different.

Most of the time, I didn’t mind so much. I liked my life, loved being at church, felt even then that God was real and that people who didn’t know Him were missing out on something special. And I wanted to tell people about Him. But sometimes, when I couldn’t join yet another conversation about Saved by the Bell, when I watched, silent, as the other girls broke out into a spontaneous rendition of “Ice, Ice Baby,” it seemed like we inhabited two completely different planets. I wished I could be more like everyone else, wondered if there was a way to hold onto my faith without feeling isolated from the people who didn’t share it. I wished also that they would be more like me, that they’d abide by the same morals that my family and I did. In actuality, I wanted it all, wanted to hold on to my safe and protected little world, wanted also to both fit in and change the bigger world I was beginning to see.
CHAPTER 4: LEAVING CHURCH

“I do not ask that you take them out of the world,
but that you keep them from the evil one.

They are not of the world,
just as I am not of the world.”

--John 17:15-16

The gospel of John records Jesus’s prayer that his disciples would be in the world, not of it. It seems he desired his followers to remain actively engaged in their cultures while maintaining a distinct, Christ-like identity. As I neared the age of twelve, my parents became increasingly concerned with this idea of being in the world, with the Christian’s responsibility to share the gospel of Jesus with those who did not know Him. They’d always thought that evangelism was important, but they began to realize that expecting people without church backgrounds to come to church wasn’t really realistic. Quite simply, it wasn’t happening.

Perhaps, they began to realize, the church needed to go to the world, to be in it. And yet, with my dad serving as senior pastor of a church of 250 members and my mom busy home schooling three kids and caring for the women in our church, they also began to realize that they had little time for building relationships and sharing their faith with anyone.
outside the church. They began to feel like this might be a problem, like they might not truly be following all of God’s commands.

Even though my brothers and I were young then—twelve, ten, and eight—we were often privy to my parents’ conversations on matters like this. On Sunday afternoon car rides home from church, my parents would evaluate the meeting, commenting on how my dad’s sermon had gone, who had been absent that week, how different church members seemed to be doing. At meals, in the midst of sibling squabbles and renderings of the day’s events, we often shared what we were thinking, what God had been teaching each of us. So it didn’t seem strange to me that my parents were thinking about life in a new way. That’s what God does, I thought, helps us to see more clearly the way that we should go.

Looking back now, I suspect my parents knew early on that this was not simply a slight shift in thinking, that if they were really and truly to be in the world, they’d have to put in place some pretty dramatic lifestyle changes. And as leaders of the church, people both respected and under constant evaluation, they must have wondered how others would react to these changes, whether or not they’d be followed. After all, they’d done something like this before, both having left the Mennonite church by their early twenties to start a more Charismatic one, cutting ties with Mennonite friends and with the culture of their parents and grandparents, trying something new, something they believed was of God. And though there was relatively little friction, and though their families were generally supportive, they had still, in a sense, left them behind.

They must have hoped that this time would be different, that this time change could come without leaving. They must have known, as I know now, that in leaving, there is
always a cost. But at twelve, I felt the way I usually did when my parents introduced a new idea, excited, intrigued at the possibility of learning how to truly befriend people who I’d previously thought of as “outsiders.”

One Saturday morning I came downstairs to find my dad in front of the TV, watching a video I didn’t recognize.

“What’s that?” I asked, settling down beside him on the family room couch.

“It’s called Living Proof,” he said, pausing the tape while he talked. “It’s a video I’m thinking of having the small groups at church go through, about how people need to break out of their comfort zones and make real friendships with people who would never go to church.”

“Huh,” I said, intrigued at the scene frozen on the screen: two men, one wearing an “I Love Jesus” t-shirt, appeared to be in the middle of conversation outside a suburban house. This looked very different from the Christian teaching videos I was used to, the ones where a pastor stood behind a pulpit, usually on a stage with a nice big plant or two, and preached on some topic like raising kids or studying your Bible. This looked more like Boy Meets World or The Cosby Show.

“Do you want to watch with me?” he said.

“Sure.” He pressed the play button, and I settled in, resting my head against his shoulder.

The movie was kind of like a sitcom; it consisted of ten “episodes,” each beginning with a scene of Bill, the Christian guy, trying to interact with Gerry, his unchurched
neighbor. Bill wanted to talk to Gerry about how Jesus had changed his life, but he wanted to do it in a way that wasn’t strange or awkward. Sometimes he accomplished this; more often, he made a complete fool of himself. But both success and failure were resolved in the second half of the episode when Bill would meet with his small group of Christian friends, and they’d talk about their efforts to engage their unchurched friends on spiritual topics. Steve, the small group leader, was played by an actor I’d later recognize as the host of the television game show, Supermarket Sweep. His job was to tie everything together nicely into a lesson, one that usually involved charts and white boards.

At the time, I liked the way the movies were done, liked how they tried to prove a point not just by saying it, but by showing it. I liked too how they didn’t take Christianity too seriously, how they poked fun of the rules that often defined it. When one group member commented, “There’s that age old question–can Christians dance?” Steve shot back: “And the age old answer–some can; some can’t.” I laughed out loud.

I liked too how they showed the perspective of the other side. At the end of each video, the camera would pan out so that you could see both Bill and Gerry’s houses, dark except for the bedroom lights. You’d hear each couple talking in the privacy of their own bedrooms, saying what they really thought about each other. Gerry would wonder why Bill wasted his Sunday mornings going to church when he could be watching football. Bill would wonder why Gerry didn’t see the need for God in his life. Eventually, the couples would turn off their bedroom lights, first one and then the other, and the screen would fade to darkness.
My dad only had time to watch a few episodes that morning, but I stayed after he left, watching all ten back to back. I wondered if there was a good way to do this: to live a life of faith in the world, to tell others about my beliefs without making those who didn’t share them uncomfortable or even angry. I hoped so.

There had to be. After all, even I knew that Jesus’ teaching was clear—“You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 5:14-16). When we sang a musical version of these verses in Sunday School, it sounded Jamaican, fun and light and happy. And for awhile, that’s what I thought being a light would feel like. But as I watched my parents try to apply this message to their lives, I realized it was going to be far from easy.

The whole church ended up going through the Living Proof series in small groups. I guess I was old enough then to be part of the discussion, released from watching Lady and the Tramp in the basement with the other kids, because I remember sitting in the Bell’s living room, listening as people tried to figure out what it meant to be more “in” the world. As my parents would later explain on the car ride home, some people got it, and some didn’t. Some were excited about stepping outside their comfort zones and building real relationships with neighbors and coworkers. But others were resistant, fearing that their own beliefs might be threatened. The idea of grabbing a beer with a coworker after work or skipping church every once and awhile to play golf with a neighbor seemed too risky. What
if people started drinking too much? What if they decided to stop coming to church altogether? How could the pastor encourage such behavior?

For my parents, who were under the direction of an organization of nondenominational churches, things came to a head within a few months. Not only were some church members resistant, but the leaders of this organization were also resistant, questioning the wisdom of my parents’ approach. Phone calls were made. Meetings were planned. I was left out of many of these dialogues, spent the time playing in basements and backyards with the kids of the leaders, kids I’d grown up with, kids I called my best friends. I don’t know exactly what was said while I was gone, but I do remember this: walking into living rooms dense with silent tension, seeing my parents’ red-rimmed eyes, hearing, for the first time in my life, my mother swear. For the first time, I began to see hints that Christians were not always kind, loving, and united. I didn’t know what to do with that realization, but I did know that seeing people I loved in conflict was hard. And I knew that it hurt.

Within a year of first seeing the Living Proof videos, I watched my dad step down as senior pastor of our church, listened as he explained, time and time again, why he felt he must go. People didn’t understand what God was calling him to do, he explained. Even though he’d wanted to stay, pastoring part-time and working at a secular job part-time, he’d realized this would be too hard for the members of the congregation and for the associate pastor who would take his place. So we stopped going to Living Hope altogether.

For the most part, people were kind and sympathetic, even if they didn’t understand. We were always welcome to attend church functions, they assured us, just as the parents of my friends promised we’d still get together. We did. Sometimes. But it was never the same.
For the first time in my life, I was suddenly an outsider to church. The church family I’d loved, the group of people who had nurtured both me and my faith, was gone. I found myself floating, trying to make my way in a faith that suddenly felt a lot bigger and more confusing.
CHAPTER 5: INTO THE WORLD

“As you sent me into the world,
so I have sent them into the world.”

- John 17:18

For the next few years, life was full of change, changes that reflected a shift in priorities from church to purposeful engagement with the secular world. Dad took a job with Penn State University, working as an agriculture extension agent. In less glamorous terms, he helped educate farmers on environmentally sound practices for managing their cow poop. I stopped being home schooled and attended the local public middle school, followed over the course of a few years by my brothers. Instead of having people from church over for dinner every night, we went to high school football and basketball games and spent more time with our neighbors, many of whom didn’t profess any faith at all.

We still went to church, but we attended a large Evangelical Free congregation we could easily slip into and out of, avoiding notice and any real involvement. It felt huge and overwhelming to me, vaulted ceilings stretching high above hundreds of rows of pews in the sanctuary, a stage big enough to hold both a choir and orchestra each week. I visited the youth group a few times, enjoyed the messages the youth pastor shared. But I held back. It seemed that everyone knew each other already, had been friends since they were little kids. I
decided that the group was a failure, that it wasn’t doing a good job of reaching out to and
including new people. I decided that like Living Hope, this church had problems, that
because of those problems, it wasn’t worth my time to really get involved. I kept going on
Sunday mornings, but nothing more. I can see now that if I had tried to make some friends,
had put myself out there a little bit, I would have met people, probably would’ve enjoyed
myself. But I hadn’t yet learned that building community takes time and effort, that to
become part of something required me to offer something of myself.

While I wonder now if I was angry at God, I don’t remember feeling that way, don’t
even remember questioning my parents’ actions. I trusted them completely. If God had
told them this was what we were supposed to do, who was I to argue? But I do remember
feeling like I didn’t fit anywhere, as uncomfortable among the hundreds of unfamiliar faces
in the church lobby on Sunday mornings as I was with the bawdy jokes at the cafeteria lunch
table on Monday.

But I pressed on, following my parents’ example the best I could. I watched them at
the neighborhood Christmas parties, sipping a single Coke while the other adults downed
beer cans and wine glasses at a frightening pace, attempting to sustain normal conversation
while everyone around them became louder and less controlled. I heard stories of white
elephant parties with “off-color” gifts I wasn’t allowed to see. And I also heard things that
were exciting to me, things that seemed to prove our family’s efforts to engage the world
were accomplishing something. Neighbors wanted to talk to my parents about God;
teachers were so impressed with my behavior and academic performance that they jokingly
asked my mom if they could send their own kids to the Martin “home school.”
In fact, academic success was the one area of my life that seemed to come naturally at this time. Homeschooling had instilled in me a deep love of learning, and though public school placed heavier demands on my time than homeschooling ever had, I rose to the challenge and enjoyed it. I was that kid who always had her homework done, who knowingly went above and beyond project requirements, who didn’t want to be absent for fear of missing something important. I relished the compliments of my teachers, the reinforcement of steady A’s pouring in on every report card. It was never a conscious goal to become the class brain; in fact, I distinctly remember entering the public school system with no idea how I’d do compared to my peers. I simply did what I always had, tried to meet and, wherever possible, exceed expectations.

In one sense, I was being the kid I’d always been, the kid who’d impressed her parents by teaching herself how to read. But in another sense, I must have been trying to fill the gaping hole that I felt after we left Living Hope. Perhaps I thought that if the church had failed to represent Christ perfectly, I had better take on the banner of perfection myself. Perhaps I felt that the only way I could gain respect in this strange secular world was to distinguish myself through superior academic performance, that this would reflect positively on my faith and make people interested in exploring it.

Unfortunately, while my peers recognized me as smart, my academic success didn’t exactly make me popular. People would constantly ask to copy my homework. Slacker students would want to be in my group for projects, hoping (usually correctly) that I’d do all the work for them. Even my fellow honors students would groan when a teacher would announce that my near perfect test score had ruined the curve. Most of the time I didn’t
mind so much. I enjoyed being the best. But I envied the pretty girls, the athletes, those who made friends easily and went on dates often. I wore tortoise shell glasses and braces, had yet to be asked out, and was definitely not cool, no matter how hard I tried.

But slowly, gradually, I did make friends. I tried to do what my parents had, focused on building relationships with my classmates, hoping that somehow I might be able to bring God into their lives. My friends were as religiously diverse as was possible at the time in our small Pennsylvania town; they were Catholic, Mormon, Methodist, Lutheran, and atheist. I gravitated toward those who made me most comfortable—honors students, “good” kids, people who joined service clubs and perhaps played a sport but probably weren’t that good at it. They may not have believed the same things I did, but in general, they weren’t going to expect anything too wild and crazy of me either. We studied together, hung out at each other’s houses, went to the movies, the bowling alley, the mall. I was always aware that my background was different, that I’d missed out on things everyone else had shared, like elementary school and trick-or-treating. But over time, I began to feel safe in these friendships, valued and appreciated in spite of my differences. I began to feel like I belonged at Lower Dauphin High School, like I was an insider.

So when Sue called senior year to invite me to her Halloween party, I was both excited for my chance to finally join in the fun and worried that my inexperience would betray itself. I’d gotten over the idea of Halloween as an evil holiday, primarily through my participation in a high school club that monitored the streets near the school to make sure the little trick-or-treaters were safe and sound. I was still unnerved by the larger kids with
the *Scream* masks and scary black capes, but I loved seeing the small ones—the princesses, the fairies, the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. In many ways, I realized, Halloween was simply an excuse to play dress up, just as I’d done day after day in front of my mother’s mirror when I was little—lipstick slapped on unevenly, pearls drooping below my navel, small feet swimming in high heels three times too big.

But I was older now, seventeen, and I knew that Sue’s Halloween party would not be the kind I’d wear my mother’s clothes to. At the same time, my mother would have to see me leaving the house, so my costume would have to be reasonable.

One morning on our way to school, I asked my friend Kellie what I should wear. She said she was going to be a French maid, but offered to let me wear her cow costume from the previous year. That sounded relatively safe. No evil connotations with cows. In fact, my dad loved cows. It’d be perfect.

By the time we showed up at the party though, I wasn’t so sure. Already insecure around boys because of my 5’10” height, I felt even more conspicuous with four pink plastic teats protruding from my stomach. Kellie’s little black dress and fish net stockings were far sexier than my black and white spots, and Sue looked cute, as always, in a red devil number, her perfect blonde hair swept back with a horned headband. When the co-ed group of fifteen or twenty had arrived and begun to mingle, Sue announced that we were going to play suck and blow, a game I’d seen once before on a movie, where a playing card was passed down a row boy to girl, mouth to mouth, relay style.

I wanted to run. I wasn’t really comfortable with the idea of what I considered a kissing game. Besides, I couldn’t imagine anyone wanting to kiss a tall girl in a cow costume.
I wished there was an inconspicuous way to leave, that I could somehow vanish unnoticed into the bathroom until the game was over. But everyone was there, and the game was starting. If I left, they’d all know why and probably wouldn’t invite me to a party again.

So I stayed, hating every minute of it, feeling ridiculous and guilty at the same time. But, as I rationalized later, I was part of things. I’d been invited. I’d made the list. And it wasn’t like I’d really compromised. I hadn’t actually kissed anyone, and I certainly hadn’t enjoyed myself. I tried not to think too much about it.

And when it came time for senior week, I took the same approach.

For seniors in the small central Pennsylvania town where I grew up, the senior week ritual is as scripted as any other graduation tradition. The weekend after graduation, everyone packs up and heads to Ocean City, Maryland, settling into trashy rentals for a week of drinking, sex, and unsupervised mayhem. I knew this, had convictions against underage drinking and premarital sex, but I wanted to go anyway. I felt confident I could enjoy a week at the beach among friends and classmates, even if many of them were engaging in activities that I wouldn’t be part of. Plus, I figured, my closest friends, the girls I’d be sharing a room with, wouldn’t do that stuff anyway. Janea and Tori attended Fellowship of Christian Athletes meetings with me and didn’t drink, and while I wasn’t so sure about Sue, Trish, and Kellie, they certainly didn’t talk about partying the way many of my classmates did. And there’d been no alcohol at the Halloween party. In our senior week planning conversations, none of us ever mentioned drinking, so I assumed we were all on the same page, my page.
We eventually decided on the Barefoot Beachcomber Motel, located on 75th Street, some fifty blocks from the party scene of the boardwalk area. I breathed a sigh of relief, picturing a relaxing week with my girlfriends—sleeping in, laying out on the beach, reading books, eating out, watching movies, wondering the boardwalk and laughing at all the crazy drunks. It would be like family vacation—minus my family. A perfect way, I thought, to unwind after the stress of college applications, AP exams, and finals.

Janea and I drove down to the beach together, windows open, country music blasting. By the time we arrived at the hotel room, everyone else had already settled in, spreading out their suitcases and groceries across the blue-carpeted floor. In addition to beds for six, the single room had a one-sink bathroom, a tiny kitchenette, and a balcony facing Ocean’s City main drag, the store-lined and traffic-filled Route 1. I wondered where Janea and I were supposed to fit.

“Hey guys, look what I brought!” Trish announced after we’d exchanged greetings, pulling a brown, fake-leather suitcase out from underneath one of the beds. She giggled, a high-pitched titter, and opened it slowly, like an explorer uncovering buried treasure. At the sight of its contents, my whole body tensed.

I’d seen alcohol before, coolers full of Bud Light cans at the neighborhood Fourth of July party, wine glasses for the adults at my aunt’s Thanksgiving dinner, glass flasks of hard liquor in Karen’s parents’ dining room. But these were isolated instances, far removed from the routines of daily life at home. My parents, though they had nothing against drinking in moderation, were children of Mennonites after all. They didn’t drink. I’d never
been around my peers when they were drinking, had bypassed the coming of age rituals I’ve since heard described by many of my friends: Natty Light, Boone’s Farm, Goldschlager. I’d maintained a careful distance from the drinking I knew existed. People didn’t invite me to those kind of parties, which I appreciated, and I didn’t ask them what they did when I wasn’t around. It was safer for all of us that way.

But now it was here, in front of my face. For a brief moment, I thought about calling my parents, vacationing just a few miles away in family-oriented Bethany Beach, and asking them to pick me up. The last thing I wanted was to spend the week worrying that we’d get caught with that stuff in our room. But I’d paid my money, and I didn’t want to miss out, nor did I want to explain to my parents what was really going on. They’d probably feel the need to say something to the parents of the other girls. And that would probably mean the end of all these friendships I’d worked so hard to cultivate. I said nothing.

That night, without specifying what exactly we were preparing for, we spent hours preening in front of the mirrors. After curling our hair and applying fresh lipstick, we posed for pictures on the balcony: a row of smiles and sundresses. I stood on the end in my favorite black dress, slouching, as always, to avoid being noticeably taller than everyone else. Trish and Sue took a few sips from the under the bed stash and then headed off first. To check in on their boyfriends, they told us. The rest of us were single.

“Do you know,” Janea whispered as they left, “that they’ve decided senior week is like a free week?”

“What does that mean?” I asked.
“It means,” she said, pausing for dramatic effect, “that they’re not really dating this week. They can do whatever they want with whoever they want.”

The night was already spinning out of my control.

Outside, the remaining four of us paid a dollar each and caught the bus down to Ocean City’s boardwalk area. As we stepped off the bus and onto the boardwalk, I saw in the fading glow of twilight the pulsing rhythms of night: everywhere, teenagers walking, laughing, scanning the crowds for familiar faces, allowing eyes to linger on unfamiliar bodies. To our left, waves lapped gently against the sand. It was a sound I usually associated with comfort and rest, but that night, I barely noticed, silenced instead by the masses of people pressing on all sides, by the flashing lights and blaring music from the boardwalk shops.

Somehow, the group of us ended up at The Admiral, in the condo some of the guys from our high school had rented for the week. We split up then, Tori and Kellie picking up beers and heading for the deck, disappearing into back bedrooms I never saw, Janea and I sitting in the ratty living room, talking to an acquaintance from our classes, a kid named Bill. I didn’t have a single drink that night, but the rest of it’s hazy anyway. I remember picking at the textured ridges on the couch. I remember Tori coming in to tell us Kellie had puked all over the bathroom floor, that there would be no way we could get her back to our room without her getting busted, that we’d all have to stay the night. I remember starting to cry and Bill telling me it’d be okay, that this was normal, not a big deal. I remember curling up on the couch in my dress, putting my contacts in water glasses I hoped would be there when I woke up, and eventually falling asleep. I remember waking up the next morning and thinking that I hadn’t known my friends at all, that they probably didn’t know me at all, that
all of this was just too hard. I remember wishing the week was over so that I would be able to stop pretending that everything was okay.

I wanted to have friends who were safe, friends who wanted to save sex for marriage, friends who didn’t break the law. I thought somehow that I was being tainted by what I saw as the sin of those around me, believed that if I only had Christian friends, I’d somehow be above the painful chaos I saw on full display at senior week.

“I’m lonely,” I confessed to my mother, a few weeks later. She had come into my bedroom and found me sitting on my bed, body centered in a patch of warm sunlight.

“Why don’t you call Trish?” she suggested. “Maybe you could go down and swim at her pool.”

“No,” I said, “I don’t really want to.” I looked down, paying sudden and careful attention to the bright pink and yellow flowers splashed across my comforter, tracing their outlines slowly with my index finger. I thought of Trish’s face when she’d pulled that suitcase out from underneath the bed, shuddered at recollection of her maniacal laugh.

“What’s Janea doing?” my mom continued.

“I don’t know.” I looked up at her for a moment, than looked back down, biting my bottom lip and inhaling deeply. Truth is, I was afraid she’d chosen not to drink because of me, was afraid she’d rather hang out with people who wouldn’t make her feel guilty.

“Abby, what’s wrong?” Mom came to sit beside me on the bed. “What’s going on?” I began to cry, gentle tears sliding down my cheeks and dropping onto my lap. I wished there was a simple answer to that question, wished I could pull out some story of a
big fight that would explain it all. But I couldn’t. I couldn’t begin to try to explain senior
week to my mother.

She was waiting patiently, eyes moist with concern. “What are you thinking?” she
said quietly.

I took a deep breath. “I’m thinking,” I said, meeting her gaze, “about how I don’t
really feel like any of my friends get me. I mean they’re fun to study with and play volleyball
with and hang out with, but none of them really, truly get me.”

“What does that mean?” she probed.

“I don’t know,” I said, looking back down at the comforter. “I guess it means that
none of them really care about God as much as I do. They don’t want to talk about what
God is teaching them. They don’t get excited about praying and reading their Bibles. So I
don’t get to share those parts of me.”

At the time, I thought she didn’t understand, that mothers never really could, but
now I know she must have felt the same way when she went to the neighborhood parties,
when she chatted with the ladies at her new nursing job. I realize now we were all struggling
to find our way in this suddenly big world, floundering to be light outside the safety of our
own darkness.
CHAPTER 6: FEARING DIFFERENCE

“There is no fear in love,

but perfect love casts out fear.

For fear has to do with punishment,

and whoever fears has not been perfected in love.

We love because he first loved us.”

—I John 4:18-19

As lonely as I often felt that summer, I still dreaded the changes and uncertainty of starting my freshman year at Penn State University. Choosing a college, like most major decisions in my life, did not come easily for me. In my junior year, I’d visited schools in New York, Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Virginia, each time walking onto campus and looking for that promised sensation that this was the one. It never came. In fact, after all of the visits, I was clear on only one thing: I would not follow my dad and fifty percent of my high school in going to Penn State University. I wanted something more unique, more interesting. Or so I thought.

The diversity of the five schools I ended up applying to reveals I had absolutely no idea what I wanted. There was the University of Richmond, where girls wore dresses to football games and nobody wore jeans to class. “If I go here,” I told my mom when I
returned from a weekend visit, “I’ll have to buy a new wardrobe.” But it had a lake in the center of campus and a sense of history and tradition I found appealing. Then there was Grove City College, the only Christian school on my list. I wasn’t fond of all the rules that governed this campus (e.g. – “one foot on the floor, one shoe in the door” when members of the opposite sex were in the room). But I did like the idea of being around lots of other Christians. After all, I did want to meet and marry a Christian guy, and seeing as I’d yet to go on a real date, it seemed my chances would be higher at Grove City, where favorite proposal spots were part of the campus tour. Rounding out my list of options were James Madison University, because I liked the option of an out-of-state state school; Juniata College, because they had a good volleyball team; and Penn State, because everyone needs a safety school and because my dad’s job offered a seventy-five percent tuition discount. “Just in case,” he said. “You should apply.”

Good thing he made me because somehow in those last weeks of March, I decided I would go to Penn State. I’m still not sure exactly why, though as I recall, it had something to do with the quality of its journalism program and campus ministry offerings. All I do know is that one afternoon at Janea’s house, late in March when the pressure to decide was looming over us both, we decided we’d go to Penn State. As I remember it, she looked at me and said, “Let’s go to Penn State.” And I said, “OK.” And that was that. My excitement at finally having made a decision increased when I found out that Tori would also be joining us and that Janea and I were assigned to the same floor of the same dorm. I dreamed of new adventures and even after senior week, felt comforted by the thought of old friends close by.
And yet, as summer drew to a close, I became increasingly nervous. Penn State seemed big and overwhelming, and whatever high school was not, it was at the very least a known thing. There, I was Abby Martin, valedictorian, newspaper editor in chief, Fellowship of Christian Athletes president, varsity letter winner for the track and volleyball teams. No longer. At Penn State, I would simply be one of forty thousand undergraduate students.

Plus, Janea, Tori, and I had decided college was the time to meet new people, so we’d all be living with randomly assigned roommates. I’d talked to mine, Caroline, on the phone, and though she was pleasant enough, I wasn’t so sure about it. Like me, she was an English major enrolled in the honors program, and she said she didn’t watch much TV or stay up late. And yet for reasons I couldn’t explain, I felt uneasy; I somehow knew that in reality, she wasn’t very much like me at all. I tried to push the thought aside and hope for the best, but every time somebody mentioned her, I felt a little anxious. It didn’t help that my dad found her name amusing and in his trademark fashion, accompanied any mention of her name with an off-key rendition of the Neil Diamond hit: “Sweet Caroline, good times never seemed so good . . .”

When I think now about my first day at Penn State, I mostly think of what it must have been like for Caroline. My dad had been strategizing for weeks about the ideal plan for move-in day, hoping to avoid the traffic jams and crowds and to maximize our unpacking efficiency. His solution was of course to arrive early, so that’s just what we did. While it was still dark, both of my parents, my brother Nate, and I piled into our tan mini-van with all of
my stuff and made the two hour trip to State College. I’m not sure why Joel didn’t come, except perhaps that he might have been busy with preseason football practice. I was quiet most of the way, aware that these were my last few hours with my family, trying to decide if I was scared to be leaving the protective confines of home or if I was excited for independent adventures.

By the time we arrived at East Halls, the August sun was already creating waves in the humid air, and campus was buzzing with the other early-bird families. All the same, our plan went smoothly. We pulled up alongside a curb and unloaded all my stuff. While dad went to park the car, Nate stayed with the pile, and my mom and I began making trips up to the fourth floor of McKean Hall. Within an hour, everything was upstairs, and within another, my half of the room was completely set-up: bright floral comforter on the bed, computer plugged in, clothes hung neatly in the closet, Bible and dictionary and photo album of high school friends on the shelf. We even hung some posters. Above my bed was an Anne Geddes print, cherubic baby faces popping out of flower pots, set against a backdrop sponged with periwinkle paint. Beside it, I placed a poster of I Corinthians 13: 4-7: “Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.”

There was still no sign of Caroline, but we were done. After making sure everything was neat and that her side of the room was clear, we headed off to grab some lunch and pick
up some last minute dorm supplies at Wal-Mart. By the time we returned, Caroline and her parents had arrived.

I’m not sure what I noticed first when I opened the door to our dorm room. It might have been Caroline’s camo cut-offs or pixie hair cut. It might have been the decidedly more “earth tones” aura of her side of the room. Or it might have been the G.I. Jane and Rosie the Riveter posters hanging above her bed. If I were meeting Caroline now, I would’ve known immediately that she was gay, but at the time, I just felt a strong sense of discomfort and difference. We exchanged hurried introductions, both of us overwhelmed, I think, at the chaos of the day and the number of people and boxes suddenly crowded into our tiny, waffle-ceilinged room. I was anxious for my parents and brother to leave, partially afraid they’d say something embarrassing, but primarily worried they’d ask me how I was doing. I didn’t want them to know how scared I really was to hug them goodbye, how much I wanted to get in the van with them and head back to home and safety.

Looking back, I can only wonder what Caroline must have been feeling on that day. I try to imagine her face when she first walked into the room of smiling babies and Bible verses. I wonder if she, more aware in many ways than I, laughed at the irony of it all and braced herself for an interesting year. I wonder if she feared Bible-thumping, hellfire and damnation preaching. Or if she simply rolled her eyes at the over-the-top girlness. I wonder if she too wanted to run back home to Philadelphia, back to the arms of the forty year old woman she would later introduce to me as her girlfriend. I will always wonder.
Our first few days passed relatively uneventfully. I was distracted by shopping for books, trekking around campus to find the buildings for each of my classes, and keeping up with the dizzying array of orientation activities: concerts, ice skating, pep rallies, and everywhere, free food. But somewhere toward the end of all that, either right before classes started or shortly after, I was forced to deal with the Caroline issue head on. It happened when we sat down to fill out our roommate questionnaire for our RA, a basic exercise which required us to come up with rules about using food in the room, what we’d do when one of us stayed up later than the other, etc. It all seemed pretty standard and uneventful until we came to the question about overnight guests.

“I don’t think that will be an issue,” Caroline said. I looked up, surprised. I’d been preparing myself to defend my conviction that guys should not be allowed to sleep over in our room, convinced that Caroline, like most of the other girls I’d discussed the issue with so far, would desire the opposite. Before I had time to take in this first announcement, she continued with another.

“I prefer to date girls.”

I froze. My face felt hot. My hands started to sweat, as they always do when I’m nervous. I believed homosexuality to be a sin, but I had never actually interacted with any openly gay people. Engaging the world had only taken me so far.

“I know this might take you awhile to get used to,” she continued, her voice steady and calm. I marvel now at the patience she had with me in that moment. “My parents had a hard time with it at first.”
“Yeah,” I mumbled, nodding and not knowing what else to say. I stared at the taupe curtains, the tiled floor, the hangnail on my index finger—anywhere but at her. “I don’t think I’ve ever really known anyone who was . . . you know . . . homosexual.” The word slipped out with so much hesitation that in the silence that followed, it seemed to me to hang suspended between us.

“I think we can learn a lot from each other,” Caroline finally broke in. “I don’t really have any friends who are religious either. I’m curious to find out more about your faith and how that works for you.”

I managed some comment about how that would be cool and thanked her for being open with me.

“Well, it’s not exactly something I try to hide,” she said, and I felt guilty for wishing she had.

We signed the paperwork and spent the rest of the night in our room together, e-mailing, reading, chatting. I tried not to think about what seemed like a thousand unanswered questions racing around inside me. But they were there. How would I tell my parents? What would they say when I did? Would she be attracted to me? Could I get dressed with her in the same room? What was I going to do? Could I get a roommate transfer? Should I? I wanted to be anywhere but in the same twelve by sixteen foot space with Caroline, but I feared that doing so would be a clear rejection of her based solely on what she’d just told me. And no matter what I believed about homosexuality, I knew that wouldn’t be fair or right. Yet I felt certain Caroline could see right through my forced politeness.
CHAPTER 7: FRESHMEN FRIENDS, LIKE ME AND NOT

“No one has ever seen God;
if we love one another,

God abides in us and his love is perfected in us."

--I John 4:12

One of the first things I did upon arriving at Penn State was start looking for a Christian campus ministry to join. I was excited about the chance to find Christian friends and to build deeper relationships with people who shared my beliefs and values, people with whom I could talk openly about my faith. Thankfully, in contrast to youth group, where I’d felt like an outsider trying to work my way in, I was now one of many new people trying to find a place. And on a campus the size of Penn State, there were lots of options.

I decided to try out as many as possible, wanting, as always, to be sure I’d found the best. On Wednesday night, I went to Alliance Christian Fellowship, which was tied to the local Christian and Missionary Alliance Church. In a basement room of the campus chapel facility, with lights dimmed low, we sang worship songs, then played “Chubby Bunny,” stuffing as many marshmallows as possible into our mouths while trying to continue speaking intelligibly. Thanks to my big mouth, I won a gray t-shirt I still have and occasionally wear to the gym, one which proclaims in bold text, “It’s not about living
right…it’s about living life…SOLD OUT.” Below this a verse from Romans 12 is printed, one which talks about being a living sacrifice for God. That’s a good sign, I thought, these kids seem serious about their faith. That’s what I’m looking for. After the meeting, I mingled with a few people and chatted with a guy named Jeff, a fellow honors student who seemed nice and invited me to lunch in the dining commons near my dorm later that week. I felt excited that already I was connecting with people who might become the kind of friends I’d felt were missing in high school.

But I didn’t want to commit without checking out everything. My quest continued on Thursday night with Campus Crusade for Christ, which met in the same basement room of the chapel. The group was large and energetic, full of plans for outreach activities including pool parties and moon bounces. Though I’d planned similar events for our high school Fellowship of Christian Athletes group, I felt overwhelmed and uncertain of all the gimmicks. While I thought that it was important to present Christianity in relevant and relatable ways, I was more interested in finding deep friendships with Christians and in evangelizing through natural relational contexts. But it wasn’t so bad, I thought. Nice to have options.

To round out my week, I attended a meeting of the Navigators on Friday night. Again, we met at the chapel, this time in an upstairs room. Navs, as I would soon discover it was called by its members, was the only group I had some previous knowledge of. Twenty years earlier, during his own years at Penn State, my dad had been part of the Navigators, which originally started in 1933 as a ministry to Navy sailors and quickly expanded to other branches of the military and eventually to campuses nationwide. I didn’t know much about
my dad’s Navigators experience, except that it involved Bible studies and scripture memory and summer training programs. I remembered stories about “faith trips,” where groups of students would have to set out for a weekend without food or money, trusting that God would provide. In my dad’s experience, He had.

Though the faith trip experience sounded intense and rather foolish to me, it certainly piqued my interest. In general, my dad was positive about Navs, but he’d also made it clear that I should feel no pressure whatsoever to follow in his footsteps. “I have no idea what it’s like now,” he’d told me. “You should go wherever you feel God wants you to go.” I didn’t yet know where that would be, but I did know that I wanted to at least give Navigators a chance. My reasons for doing so were both admirable and suspect. An acquaintance from high school who’d already been at Penn State for a year had told me about how much he’d grown spiritually as a result of being in a Navigator Bible study. I really did want to grow closer to God, to better understand the Bible. But I also desperately wanted to be near people like this guy, who was a soccer star and played dreamy guitar ballads. I envied his ability to be both Christian and cool, and I hoped that in the Navigators, I’d find more people like him.

As it turns out, I did. There were roughly one hundred or so students in the chapel that first Friday night, and everyone seemed friendly and genuinely excited to be there. The worship team consisted of vocals, piano, acoustic guitar, and bongo drums and felt more calm and mellow than any of the other groups. I found myself relaxing, able to unwind from the stress of that first week of classes and to simply enjoy singing to God. And the best part was that when the meeting was over, everyone gathered for an “After Navs”
activity, this week at the house of the head campus staff couple, Dave and Cathy Bowman. I piled into a car with a group of people I’d just met and headed off to see what it was all about. After all, I figured, there was nothing to lose. I didn’t feel like crashing frat parties with the other girls on my floor, and there wasn’t much else to do in a college town on a Friday night.

The Bowmans’ house was warm and comfortable, a standard Pennsylvania middle class home complete with quilts, nature paintings, and a wood-burning stove. In the various rooms both upstairs and down, students and staff members mingled, playing games, eating brownies and chips and carrots, laughing, talking. People were quick to introduce themselves, to invite me join in whatever happened to be going on. They were warm, natural, and easy to talk to. I was impressed. Instead of spending their Friday nights out partying, these people wanted to be together. Instead of hooking up with random strangers, they appeared to be building something that felt, even as a newcomer, like community. This was exactly what I was looking for.

Sometime the next week, I attended my first Navigator Bible study. Karly, a staff member in her early twenties who’d recently moved to State College from Iowa, had stopped by my dorm room to invite me to her group, one which she said would consist entirely of freshmen girls. She asked sincere questions about my life and listened earnestly, and when she laughed, her nose crinkled and a surprisingly deep rumble escaped her throat. I liked her, and since I was already feeling positive about Navigators, I decided to give the Bible
study a try. She told me she was meeting some other girls in the parking lot of a nearby dorm and that we were going to go out for ice cream, so we could get to know each other.

I walked to the meeting spot, enjoying the pleasant coolness of a clear, late summer evening. Campus was strangely still, resting between the bustle of classes and dinner and the pulsing energy of the nightlife to come. I heard the other girls before I saw them, their laughter and shrieks rupturing the stillness. Drawing closer, I felt suddenly shy and thought about turning back, but I'd given my word to Karly. I had to introduce myself to these girls. They were kind and friendly, but I remained intimidated. Somehow they all knew each other already and kept laughing over shared stories about rugby tryouts and making macaroni and cheese in a coffee pot. Once again, I was the outsider. But after Karly picked us up and drove us to Meyer Dairy, as the conversation slowed and deepened, I couldn’t help but notice that these girls were warm and alive and that they talked about Jesus in a way I understood. They too talked about Him like they knew Him, like He was part of their daily lives. I decided to come back.

The next week, we met in the dorm room of one of the girls, Becky, and began to actually talk about the book of James. I don’t remember exactly what we discussed, but because I know the content of James 1, I suspect it might have had something to do with the suffering and trials in our lives. “Count it all joy, my brothers,” James writes in the opening verses of his letter, “when you meet trials of various kinds because you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing” (James 1:2-4). James, who is believed to the half-brother of Jesus, was writing to early Jewish Christians scattered beyond the safe
confines of Palestine. Historians believe that these Christians were suffering persecution at the hands of their more wealthy and powerful neighbors. But James’ purpose here seems to extend beyond this particular form of suffering; he encourages his audience to find joy in “trials of various kinds,” to embrace the testing of their faith in all of its many forms.

When I think about trials now, I think of tragedies like Hurricane Katrina, of my friend’s baby who died suddenly just days before delivery, of the man from my church who spent the last two years of his life in bed, struggling to speak and unable to walk due to kidney and liver failure. But in college, my definition of trials was smaller, more immediate. In those early weeks of college, my trial was being assigned to live with a lesbian roommate, whose very presence was a daily reminder that many people lived in opposition to what I had been taught was good and right and true. This should have come as no surprise, and yet at the time, it felt awful and terrible and weighty, as if I might somehow become contaminated by what I believed to be Caroline’s sinful behavior. Within a day or two of Caroline’s announcement, I knew that I could not request a roommate transfer, that to do so would be quite unlike Jesus, who spent his life befriending prostitutes, tax collectors, and other sinners. And yet, I felt burdened by my situation, embarrassed to share it with others but unable to manage it myself.

At the end of our study that first week, when Karly asked if there were any prayer requests, I could hold it in no longer. The whole story about Caroline came spilling out with tears to these girls I barely knew. They sympathized with me and reminded me that God was with me and prayed for me, and I felt encouraged. It turned out that two of the girls, Kristy and Becky, knew Caroline from their rugby team, and they were excited about getting
to know her and all of us hanging out together. My trial remained, but I was filled with hope at the prospect of not having to handle everything on my own. For the time at least, I considered it joy to have friends who understood, to once again be a part of Christian community.

That group of girls – Karly, Kristy, Becky, and Eva – quickly became my best friends. We were different in so many ways. Kristy was short and fiery, always moving, usually laughing, brunette curls bouncing in her wake. Born in New England, she’d spent most of her life in Richmond, the oldest daughter of Navigator staff parents, a musical theater lover who’d somehow ended up in a math-science magnets high school. Becky was the stereotypical homecoming queen, blonde-hair, blue-eyed, athletic. Though she’d grown up in Philadelphia, she and Kristy had met as cabin-mates at a summer camp years previous and shared many years worth of old friends and memories. Unlike Kristy, who had aspirations of performing on Broadway or becoming First Lady, Becky’s dreams were smaller, though no less specific. She wanted simply to be an elementary school teacher and then, after marriage of course, a soccer mom who wore Keds and jean skirts.

And then there was Eva from New Jersey, the artsy one, who loved ratty old sweaters and walking in the woods and painting watercolors. Eva didn’t talk about what she wanted to be; she simply was and enjoyed it. In contrast, I was the studious one, the honors student, the keeper of rules and the worrier about breaking them. Even among Christians, I soon discovered, I was a goody-two-shoes, somebody who needed other, more adventurous people to help me have a good time. Rounding out the bunch was Karly, Midwestern, older,
wiser, desirous of sharing her passion for Scripture memory and prayer with us. Karly lived in a real house and baked cookies and gave us rides to places. Though she was only four years older, she was like a mother to us in many ways, or at least the older sister that none of us had. We were all so very different, and yet the bond forming between us was real and special, unlike any friendships I’d experienced before.

My friends in high school had been kind and fun and supportive, but most of them, even those who professed a Christian faith, were unable to offer me what the Bible study girls (or “Karly’s girls” as we began calling ourselves) could, relationships based on a mutual understanding of faith in Jesus as the center of life. Soon, our weekly study time was not enough. We met often for dinner in the dining commons, catching up on our days and laughing about our latest freshman misadventures. We spent late nights in dorm rooms, study lounges, and coffee shops, talking about what we were reading in our Bibles, about how we were attempting to share our faith with our classmates, floormates, and teammates, about the boys we liked, about our dreams for marriage and babies and life.

With some of the freshmen guys from Navs, we planned weekly movie nights, enjoying *The Usual Suspects* and *Shawshank Redemption* and *Star Wars*, among others. We hung out all weekend long, going to Nav events, football games, diners, and church on Sundays. We even formed another book discussion group that met one morning each week to discuss Elizabeth Elliot’s *Passion and Purity* and talk about how to honor God in romantic relationships. Unfortunately, for me at least, there was no opportunity to apply what I’d learned in any sort of real-life romance. I’d met lots of great guys in Navigators, but none of them seemed interested in me.
All the same, my relationships with the girls grew with all the unique intensity of college friendships, formed in the largely isolated bubble of campus life, deepened quickly by living in close proximity and sharing so many common experiences, heightened by the absence of the homes and families we missed. Everything was new and fresh and exciting. All of life was opening up before us, and we were able to explore it together from a common spiritual perspective. Finally, I felt I’d found a place where I fit, where it was safe to be me. I began to believe that when God designed church, this is exactly the kind of thing He had in mind.

And I also found that the support of my Navigator friends gave me a safe place from which I could build courage to begin the much scarier task of developing a real friendship with Caroline. I spent a lot of time praying that God would help me to move past my fears and to truly love Caroline. It was pretty clear to me that the Bible said homosexuality was a sin, but it was also pretty clear to me that the Bible called all of us sinners and offered all of us the gift of love if we accepted Jesus Christ. As far as I knew, Caroline had little interest in Jesus, but perhaps, I thought, that was all the more reason to get to know her. Maybe I could help her to see that He had a lot to offer.

It wasn’t easy or natural at first, but over the course of that first semester, Caroline and I began to build a friendship. We carved pumpkins in the study lounge at Halloween, hung the stockings her parents sent us at Christmas, and laughed as we sang our answering machine recording in unison. I watched in mock horror while she removed stitches from her chin in the hall bathroom, and she came to several of the Bible studies I held in our
room. When I got sick, she brought me a fresh sunflower from the farmer’s market downtown. And at her suggestion, we started telling each other one thing we were thankful for each night right before we went to sleep. I was learning that even though Caroline and I didn’t agree on many things, we could still communicate in real and meaningful ways.

We had our rocky spots, like when Caroline’s incense made me feel suffocated or when her forty-year-old girlfriend came for a weekend visit. Not willing to share a tiny room with the two of them, I spent the weekend at Becky’s. But by the start of the spring semester, I had stopped worrying about having a lesbian roommate and had come to enjoy living with Caroline. In fact, when it came time to make plans for the following year’s living arrangements, I realized that having Caroline as a roommate for another year was definitely an option. We got along well, had similar sleeping and studying habits, and genuinely enjoyed one another. I was encouraged to learn that Caroline felt the same way. In the end though, for reasons I can’t quite recall, she decided to get a single, and I decided to room with another girl from our floor. We were parting, but miraculously, we were parting as friends.

On the day my parents came to pick me up from school, she handed me the watercolor painting that I still have tucked away in a folder of college keepsakes. On it, two pink flowers with four petals each grow from streaks of green to stand out against a background of pale blue, the one on the left lighter, larger, and higher above the ground than the other. In the upper right hand corner of the page, a round, yellow sun the size of a grapefruit floats, running into the flower on the right and separated from the other by only a
fine, thread-like line of blue. Unexplainably, my name floats in the upper right quadrant of the sun, a comma hanging after it, dangling, as if it might sink into the rest of the empty, wordless orb. Further down, on the left hand side of the page, Caroline’s artistic scrawl spells out the following message, beginning in the empty blue space to the left of the sun and continuing on, words trailing like a cascading waterfall, dropping down between the leafless stems of the two flowers:

>This year, I learned more than I ever imagined a year could teach. You had a large hand in that and I am thankful that, by whatever twisted method of assignment they use (i.e. where your family’s gone on vacation), you were my roommate. It is going to be so bizarre the next few weeks at home. Have a really fantastic summer NOT writing papers! Woo hoo! Again, thank you so much! I will never ever forget our (bad) singing, scrubbing, bitching about work and dashing for the phone (or leaving it ring).

I love you,

Caroline

Though I may have suspected it, I did not know then that in the years to come, we’d slowly and gradually lose touch, even as I became closer and closer to my Navigator friends. And yet, Caroline’s friendship was important in my life in a way that my friendships with the Bible study girls could not be. While I still believed that homosexuality was a sin, Caroline had taught me to be more sympathetic, to question why it was that God would give someone a desire if it was not supposed to be fulfilled. She had also taught me that even if homosexuality were sinful, it did not make a person untouchable or somehow unworthy of love. If what the Bible said were true, I realized, she was no different from anyone else who
didn’t put their faith in Christ. The book of Romans teaches that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. Clearly, this referred to Caroline, but it also referred to the girl in my English class who was having premarital sex with her boyfriend. And, I would soon see with increasing clarity, it referred to me, a proud and self-righteous sinner who tended to think she was good enough to save herself.
CHAPTER 8: TRUE COMMUNITY

“The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of prison to those who are bound.”

--Isaiah 61:1

That first year taught me that in so many ways, college was better than I’d ever dreamed it could be. As an honors student, I was able to register early enough to get the classes I really wanted, especially those specific to my interests in literature and writing. My first semester I took the required freshman composition course, but also added an introductory British literature course. And by the spring of my freshman year, I was taking an upper level Shakespeare course, which, except for the giant book I had to lug around campus three days a week, was fantastic. To make things even better, I was able to avoid the dreaded biology and chemistry labs and take easy science courses to fulfill my general education requirements: astronomy, materials sciences, and the geology of national parks, otherwise known as “Rocks for Jocks.” The only thing I regretted was all of the AP
humanities credits I’d accumulated in high school. I wished I had space in my schedule for the history, sociology, and religion classes that looked so interesting.

But I couldn’t complain. After a rigorous honors program in high school, I found most of my college classes relatively easy. The formula for an A was simple: do the readings, go to class, pay attention to what the professor asked of you, and study a little bit. Don’t get me wrong; I was definitely learning new things and being challenged to think in new ways. But even though I devoted countless hours to studying and never skipped a class, I didn’t feel I was in over my head. I had the college thing under control.

Which left me free to devote a lot of time, emotional energy, and enthusiasm to my growing involvement with the Navigators. I’d enjoyed simply participating throughout my freshmen year, letting others plan events and take charge of small groups. After years of leading the Fellowship of Christian Athletes group at my high school, it felt nice to have somebody else take the reins for awhile. But when the Bowmans asked me to join the leadership team as a sophomore, I was honored that they considered me mature enough for the position and eager to give back to others in the same way I’d been so blessed myself. The commitment involved co-leading a Bible study for younger girls and attending weekly leadership meetings at the Bowmans’ house. I said yes.

Kristy had also been asked to join the team, so after a summer at our respective homes, we both came back to school a few days before the dorms opened for some preliminary leadership meetings. We stayed at Karly’s apartment and caught up over coffee and smiley face cookies at Eat N’Park (perhaps more aptly named Eat N’Puke by some of
our Nav friends). We talked about our summers and what we’d learned, and we talked about our hopes and dreams for the year to come.

Kristy and I told Karly about how we couldn’t wait to meet the freshmen girls who would end up in our respective Bible studies. I remembered how anxious I’d been at this time the previous year, and I hoped I’d be able to assist my girls in making a smooth transition to college life. Over the course of the year, I also longed to see them grow in their knowledge of God and to see Him radically transform their lives. I was drawn by the stories in the Bible that talked about God’s redemptive work in people’s broken and messy lives, stories like that of the woman caught in adultery whom Jesus defended, saying “Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her” (John 8:7). I wanted the girls in my study, whoever they were and wherever they were spiritually, to discover more about this Jesus, the God who knew everything they’d ever done and loved them anyway, the God who filled life with hope and meaning and purpose.

As it turned out, my co-leader, a senior who also happened to be named Abby, and I ended up leading a study for girls ranging in age from freshmen to seniors. With the gap in ages, it never quite gelled in quite the same way that my own freshmen study had, but it was energizing all the same. We met in a vacant study lounge in the top floor of my dorm, sprawling out each week in a circle on the gray carpet to discuss what we’d learned from our independent preparation. I liked leading the discussion, asking questions that helped people think, watching as girls began to apply Biblical truth to their lives.

And I found joy in meeting with some of the girls from the study one-on-one throughout the week and learning what was going on in their lives on a more personal level.
Ashley and I talked about her struggles to have patience with her roommate. Nancy and I processed through her relationship with her high school boyfriend and her lingering doubts about whether or not it should continue. Looking back, I have no idea what I possibly might have said that could have helped these girls. I knew so little myself about humility and even less about love. But they seemed to be grateful for the little bit I had to offer, and I was grateful for the chance to watch as slowly, the Bible passages we’d been studying began to inform and change the way they lived their lives. I liked seeing God at work and feeling like I had a small role to play in what He was doing in the lives of others.

This passion for mentoring women only deepened in my junior and senior years, which I spent living with a new friend from the Navigators, Mary Grace, in what were unofficially labeled freshmen dorms. Mary Grace and I hadn’t known each other particularly well before we decided to be roommates. Though she was a year older and had consequently been at Penn State longer, we had many mutual friends and had certainly seen each other at various Navigator events. However, it wasn’t until we realized we were both looking for a roommate that we actually started talking. We quickly found that we were kindred spirits in many ways, both feeling called to stay on campus and live in close proximity to the younger girls in our Bible studies rather than follow most of our peers into upperclassmen off-campus housing. Just as we’d hoped, our room in 307 Bigler Hall quickly became a haven for the sophomore girls Mary Grace was working with and the new group of freshmen girls I was leading in Bible study.
Those years in Bigler, ministry became much deeper for me, moving beyond helping girls to study the Bible and learn propositional truths to include dealing with the deep issues of their hearts. As Mary Grace and I got to really know the girls in our studies, we found ourselves suddenly facing a whole gamut of issues – multiple cases of depression, sexual abuse, extended relational conflicts, boyfriend problems, family problems, even an attempted suicide. It was as if all of these issues our girls had held inside for so long suddenly boiled to the surface, exploding with force into every area of their lives. Growing up in a home where my parents frequently provided counsel for church members on a host of problems, I shouldn’t have been surprised at the stuff these girls were dealing with. And yet, for the first time, I think, it hit me that becoming a Christian did not automatically make a person’s life neat and tidy, that compared to my peers, Christian and not, my own stable family situation and sexual abuse free childhood was a rarity, not the norm.

It was a scary time for me as I felt the weight of at least partial responsibility for helping these girls. I worried especially about suicide, that if the one girl chose to actually do something, that it would somehow be our fault for not having done enough to stop her. Thankfully, Mary Grace and I weren’t alone; we had the support of Cathy Bowman, who’d spent years mentoring college women through all sorts of issues, and the professional Christian counselors she’d referred some of the girls to. Still, the interactions with the girls were intense in a way I hadn’t anticipated, deep in a way I hadn’t planned for.

Sometimes, this made me sad. I hated that my girls had to deal with all of these hard things, wondered why a good God would have allowed them to happen in the first place. I got frustrated at the slowness of their progress, had to wrestle to find the patience to love
them even when they failed. And yet I couldn’t deny that God was at work, that He was bringing to the surface things that needed to be healed, things that when dealt with would eventually allow my girls to walk more fully in freedom and in joy. I watched as they opened up their wounded hearts to Him, saw how they clung to the promises of hope in Scripture, rejoiced as they reported answered prayers and deepening faith. What I saw bolstered my confidence that Christianity was the real thing, that when people sought God in the context of genuine, safe community, their lives began to change. Unlike my high school experience of church youth group, which had seemed shallow and insincere, this felt real and powerful. It was what I wanted my life to be about.

Sure, I was still a good student and desired to be successful in my classes and beyond, but I recognized that in comparison to seeing people’s lives changed, all of that meant very little. As I approached my final months as a college student, delving into full-time student teaching and beginning to think about where I was headed after college, I prayed often about how I could find a community like Navigators outside of college, one which encouraged real spiritual growth both for members and for people exploring the faith. I’d tasted something I didn’t want to let go of.

And yet, in my heart of hearts, I honestly felt like redemption was primarily for other people. I cherished my daily quiet times with God, where I read the Bible and journaled and prayed. God spoke to me then, and I recognized my sin and my need for grace, was aware that without Him, I easily dissolved into fear about the future, anxiety about my lack of a boyfriend and less than perfect appearance, pride at my own accomplishments, perfectionism. But I still couldn’t relate to the depth of brokenness I saw in the girls around
me, still felt like my own life was relatively together. I remembered Jesus’ statement that those who are forgiven little love little (Luke 7:47), and sometimes I wished my conversion story had been more dramatic, that I had more to be forgiven of.
CHAPTER 9: SEARCHING

“Asome wandered in desert wastes,
finding no way to a city to dwell in;
hungry and thirsty,
their soul fainted within them."

--Psalm 107:4-5

As I began to think about my post-college plans, I realized for the first time in my life that there was no script telling me what to do. Until this point, my plans had always been dictated by educational requirements, things that had to be accomplished before I could begin “real life.” But come May, real life would be upon me in full force, and I felt unexcited about any of my options. I’d always thought I’d get married right out of college and that real life would consist of creating a home, caring for a husband, and having and raising kids. Yes, it was the twenty-first century, and yes most of my peers at Penn State had little intention of getting married until later in their twenties.

But my expectations had been shaped in Christian community, where marriage is revered, motherhood extolled, and premarital sex condemned. My own mother had gotten married just days after her twenty-first birthday, and many of my Christian friends from
college were planning weddings to follow our graduation. I would be the maid of honor in Mary Grace’s wedding in early June and planned to attend Eva’s ceremony shortly thereafter. But I didn’t even have a boyfriend. I wondered why God was withholding from me what He seemed to be giving to so many others, cried many tears over what I perceived to be the death of a dream. In my immaturity, I thought God owed me, had difficulty believing that He could be good if He did not give me what I wanted when I wanted it. I spent months wrestling with God over the idea of being a single woman, working hard to get to a place where I trusted Him with a future that looked very different than I’d planned. Eventually though, I chose to believe what the Bible said: God was always good to His children. In this particular circumstance, I didn’t see how, but I trusted that God did.

And as a result, I began to get a new vision for life as an adult. I prayed that if I couldn’t get married, I’d at least have the chance to live with some really cool roommates and do some really cool things in a really cool place. I prayed that I’d use my single years well, to serve God and to serve others. In the process, I replaced my dreams of domesticity (think Little House on the Prairie and Little Women) with images of rollicking independence, social activity, and service (Friends meets Mother Theresa, minus, of course, the sex and the third world poverty). All of this, I thought would happen in a community much like my college experience of the Navs, where both deep relationships and evangelical ministry were emphasized. All I had to do was find that place, I thought, and I’d be doing exactly what God wanted me to do: investing my life in people, helping them know Him more.
Unfortunately, what I didn’t see at the time was that my hope was being transferred not from marriage to God, but from marriage to Christian community. In both cases, I was seeking to build my life around a thing that was good, but a thing that was definitely not God. I was neglecting to realize that Jesus described Christianity not as a grand parade of fun people, fun activities, and successful ministry, but as a daily choice to die to self, pick up a cross, and follow Him. At the time though, I felt certain that finding the perfect Christian community was indeed following God. I’d already given up my plans for marriage. What else could He want?

Still skeptical of the effectiveness of the institutional church, still hurt by the break with my dad’s congregation, I was excited when I heard about a Navigator initiative called Career Corps, which was getting started in the Washington, DC area. Apparently, the Navigators wanted to help students from their various college ministries transition successfully into the workforce, continuing to see their life as a ministry to those around them. The DC group of twenty-somethings had a snazzy brochure and a mission statement I thought described the kind of Christian community I was looking for perfectly: “Career Corps is about young professionals living life together with close friends. It’s about discovering how to know Christ more deeply. It’s about learning how to reach out to others on behalf of Christ in the context of busy, challenging lives. If this describes what you’re looking for, come join us!” It described activities like weekly discussion groups, mentoring by older working Christians, and shared social and ministry activities. I was sold.

Kristy, who shared both my fear of the church and my heart for real world community and ministry, was also interested. The spring of our senior year, we met several
times to discuss the idea of moving to Northern Virginia upon graduation. As we shared lemonade and Chic Fil’a French fries on the lawn behind Penn State’s student hub, our dreams gradually became a plan: I would get a teaching job; she’d look for whatever her speech major and business minor could get her. We’d find a cute apartment, decorate it, and spend our free time relaxing and exploring DC with the friends—both Christian and not—we’d meet at Career Corps and in our jobs. We’d also have Bible studies in our apartment and continue relating deeply to other women. After several trips down to check out the area and meet with the Career Corps group, I began to get excited about this new adventure full of firsts—my first apartment, my first real job, my first time living out of Pennsylvania, my first time living near a big city. It seemed like the perfect plan.

But by mid August, as I prepared to begin orientation for my job teaching seventh and eighth grade English for Fairfax County Public Schools, “real life” was already deviating from the plan. Kristy hadn’t gotten a job yet, and we’d realized that even when she did, we wouldn’t be able to afford a two-bedroom apartment. Through the internet, we’d found two cheap rooms in a townhouse with two other girls, but they wouldn’t be available until October. So while Kristy kept job hunting from her parents’ house in Richmond, I scrambled to find a place to live for six weeks. Parents of a college acquaintance were kind enough to offer me a spare bedroom in their Fairfax townhouse, and so on a warm Sunday afternoon, I left my family at the beach where we’d been vacationing for the week and set off on my own, car stuffed full with the books and clothes I considered essentials.

I’ve never been one to cry at goodbyes, but that day, the tears were halted only by the frustration resulting from my first experience of bumper-to-bumper Beltway traffic.
When I finally arrived, my host family was vacationing out of town, so I had to let myself in and unload the car alone, carrying box after box up two flights of stairs to the guest bedroom.

When I tell the story to friends now, after almost six years of Northern Virginia living, I can laugh at the utter loneliness I felt that first night, knowing the end of the story. But at the time, I simply felt sorry for myself. This isn’t the way it was supposed to be, I thought as I sat in the family room of a family I didn’t know, listening to the darkness of late summer settle. Normally, I liked quiet moments, found them a welcome respite from life in community, needed the chance to connect with my heart and with God. But tonight, facing a whirlwind of change utterly beyond my control, I longed for someone to be there with me, to tell me that everything would be okay. I prayed, but it wasn’t the same. God felt far away.

Suddenly, I realized that I missed the rhythms of dorm life: the comfortably irregular pattern of stereos blasts, slamming doors, and conversation fragments; the hum of the florescent lighting overhead; the gentle scrapings of Mary Grace’s pencil across the rough pages of her sketch book. Here, there were only solitary sounds, frightening in their unfamiliarity: breeze rustling tree leaves I’d never seen, crickets chirping in grass I’d never walked, the cars of people I’d never met rolling into driveways up and down the street.

I wished Kristy were with me. I wished I knew how to get to the grocery store. I wished change didn’t have to be so hard.
Those first few weeks were a blur of new faces, new roads, and a dizzying number of meetings designed to prepare me for my new job as a teacher. While I still missed family and friends, I didn’t have time to feel too lonely. Until the weekends, that is. The family I was staying with was very welcoming, and I enjoyed watching movies with them and talking over dinner. But when Julia, one of my future townhouse roommates, called one Sunday afternoon to ask if I wanted to go to an evening church service with her, I said yes without hesitation. It would be good to get out of the house and interact with some other people, some people closer my age.

Julia attended the Frontline service at one of metropolitan Washington’s largest churches, McLean Bible Church. I’d already been there twice, once when I was in-town on a job-hunting trip earlier that summer and once with the Cooks, and I was intrigued by the sizable influence this church appeared to have. Whenever churches in Northern Virginia came up in conversation, people mentioned McLean Bible, and after multiple recommendations, Kristy and I had actually used the church’s extensive online message board to track down our future roommates. I’d always been rather put off by the rather impersonal feel of huge churches like MBC, but I figured it couldn’t hurt to figure out what it was all about. After all, the Career Corps group Kristy and I planned to join wouldn’t start its meetings for another few weeks.

Julia said the meeting started at 5:30 p.m., so I left Fairfax around five, navigating the increasingly familiar routes through Northern Virginia. Just beyond the shopping mecca of Tyson’s Corner, I joined the line of cars waiting to make a left turn into the MBC “campus,” formerly the headquarters of the National Wildlife Federation, currently a structure I already
knew included a parking garage and food court in addition to the standard sanctuary, classrooms, and offices. According to the church bulletin I’d read when I’d visited with the Cooks, the church hosted seven services each weekend for some ten thousand members and countless visitors: one Saturday night and two Sunday morning at this location, two more at a second location in McLean, and two Frontline services including the one I was about to attend, geared specifically toward the needs and interests of twenty and thirty-somethings.

I shook my head as I was waved across Rt. 7 by a Fairfax County police officer and then directed into the parking garage by a church attendant wearing an orange vest. I hated the corporate look of the place, but I had to admit, as I watched clusters of young, well-dressed professionals streaming into the building, that the church must be doing something right, that this would be a great place to meet people and perhaps to become a part of something large and exciting. I wanted to see God’s kingdom advance, and it certainly seemed to be advancing here.

As I followed the crowd across the parking lot to the entrance, I thought about my breakfast conversation with Mr. Cook, who’d tried to fill me in on MBC’s history. According to him, the success of the church, started just forty-five years ago by five Northern Virginia families, was largely due to the dynamic leadership of its current pastor, Lon Solomon, a Jewish convert to Christianity best-known by most Washingtonians for his “Not a Sermon, Just a Thought” blips on the radio. I’d heard Solomon preach on my previous visits and had been impressed by his simple, genuine words and his vision to “impact secular Washington, D.C. with the message of Jesus Christ.” I’d been impressed too by the extensive display of ministry brochures lining the spacious church lobby in every
possible shade of color copy paper: Daily Bread Food Pantry, Signs of Life Deaf Ministry, Kids Quest, Access Ministry (serving children and adults with disabilities), Senior Adults Ministry, McLean University classes, and a Christian concert series, just to name a few. Clearly, Solomon and his congregation had been able to put what seemed to be a genuine faith into action and were impacting thousands of people on a weekly basis. I couldn’t argue with that.

But I still felt skeptical. How many people, I wondered, slipped in and out of this massive building in anonymity every week, never meeting anyone, never engaging, never growing? Wasn’t church supposed to be about small groups of people gathering to care for and help each other in specific and personal ways? I thought about the large church I’d attended in high school as compared with the small church of my childhood and the intimacy of our Navigator group in college. I had a hard time believing that a megachurch could be a good thing, feared that what it really entailed was a bunch of pretty people slapping on fake smiles and never really dealing with their hearts.

The sight of Julia waving to me from just inside the lobby door interrupted my thought process. I’d met her only once previously during our roommate interview at a local Starbuck’s, but it felt good to see a familiar face among the masses. She greeted me with a warm smile and a hug. After chatting briefly about my first week on the job, we began weaving our way through the crowded lobby toward the sanctuary, where the service was scheduled to start in just a few minutes. I couldn’t help but feel swept up in the energy of those around me, loud greetings and lively conversations creating a palpable hum of
anticipation, an excitement not unlike that of a bar on an early Friday evening—the buzz of friends to be seen, strangers to be met, possibilities to be explored.

I followed Julia into the sanctuary, struggling to keep track of her while I allowed my eyes to adjust to the darkness of the room. During the traditional Sunday morning service, it had struck me simply as clean and bright, an expansive ceiling stretching above white windowless walls and row after row of padded chairs, carpeted floor sloping gently downward toward the stage, much like a movie theater. Now though, dry ice billowed from the stage, brightly colored laser lights illuminating the curves and swirls of its motion. A wordless techno beat blared; voices hummed. I stopped, no longer able to discern the back of Julia’s blonde head bouncing in front of me. Someone I could barely see handed me a brochure. “Thanks,” I said, giving a quick nod of acknowledgement while I stood on my tiptoes, trying to see beyond the people right in front of me, desperate for some sign of Julia. I caught her eye, a few paces ahead, where she’d stopped and turned around, waiting. I caught up with her and followed her to a pair of empty seats.

The noise level made any real attempt at conversation impossible, so I smiled at Julia in an attempt to reassure both of us of my comfort level, then turned my eyes toward center stage. An electronic display screen flashed a countdown to start-time in pixilated red dots: 1:30, 1:25, 1:20. Apparently, I calculated, the official start time was 5:37, not 5:30. Strange. Was that supposed to be some hip twenty-something thing, I wondered. Why not just start at a normal time?

All around me people—I guessed there were some four or five hundred of them—streamed into seats, some alone, some paired off, many in large groups. As the countdown
hit the minute mark, the band began to trickle on stage: drummer, bass player, guitarist, pianist, several vocalists. The techno beat faded out, and the voices slowed and subsided, as if trained, into barely discernible whispers.

And then, as the display flashed zero, a female voice rang out a cappella from center stage, piercing the still dark room with its clarity. *Let go of all your fears. Let go of all your worries. Today’s a brand new day.* For a moment, movement stopped, all energy pausing to listen. *The sun is setting now. The stars they hang above you. They’re singing over us.* The last note hung over the hushed auditorium, its amplified resonance ringing and then fading, slowly.

But just as I braced myself for complete silence, just as I began to inhale deeply, bright white lights flashed onto center stage accompanied by a simultaneous explosion of drum and keyboard. The vocalist, now visible in the spotlight, gripped the microphone tightly with one hand and tapped a beat onto her leg with the other. *Lay your burdens down. All the weary come.* Her voice was clear, but faster now. *Trade your sorrows for his love.*

I sang along with the words, now visible on two giant projection screens, one on either side of the stage. In the darkness of the place, I forgot about the parking garage and the nameless masses, allowed myself to be carried away by strength of the vocalist, the rhythm of the bass and the drums. It was a far cry from the acoustic guitar and bongo drums of my college days, but I felt drawn to God here too—in a loud, energetic, rock concert sort of way. And as I gained confidence in my grasp of the song’s melody, my sense of self-awareness faded, melting into the voices of the hundreds of people, similar to me in age and situation, all singing to the same God. Once again, He felt near, as He had when I
was a little girl dancing in the back of the fire hall. My heart swelled with gratitude, with a desire to stay in His presence.

But, soon enough, the worship time ended, and the pastor began going through some announcements for the week, talking about upcoming missions trips and how to get involved in small groups. He gave a short sermon on a topic I can’t remember. Had I been truly interested in joining a church, I probably would have explored the small group options, began to develop friendships with a few people among the masses. I might have grown to love McLean Bible, as many of my friends do. But I was still convinced that organized church in general and megachurches in particular were at best misguided, at worst un-Biblical. I feared that at MBC, it was far too easy to attend meetings, enjoy spiritual experiences, and then leave, never having truly become part of a community.

To me, this was tragic because I felt convinced that Christian community was supposed to be at the center of life, not simply one of many aspects of life. This was obvious to me partially because it felt right and because in college, I had experienced the good of living in this way. But it also seemed obvious to me Biblically. The book of Acts, written by the apostle Luke, records the development of the early church and lays out what I perceived to be a model for the ideal church. What I read sounded like an intense and deeply integrated community, not like people who happened to follow the same religion and occasionally attended common meetings:

And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who
believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved. (Acts 2:42-47)

This was the kind of church I wanted to be part of. And though I couldn’t see McLean Bible fitting the description, I had high hopes for Career Corps.
CHAPTER TEN: CAREER CORPS

“He breaks me down on every side, and I am gone,

and my hope he has pulled up like a tree.”

--Job 19:10

The first Career Corps meeting of that fall was held on a Sunday afternoon in an Alexandria, VA suburb, at the rented townhouse of three girls who all intended to be part of the group. I’d met Karla and Jana once when I visited over the summer, but I’d yet to meet their new roommate Megan, who’d just arrived from Iowa to complete her student teaching assignment in DC. And I’d never been to their house.

On the way there, I felt nervous, partially because I remained fearful of the weaving and speeding nature of Beltway traffic and partially because I didn’t know what to expect out of this group I was about to meet. Of course, I had expectations of what it would be like, but I didn’t actually know the people. I wanted them to become my friends, but they were only acquaintances and strangers. And I’d never been one to enjoy meeting new people. I wasn’t very good at throwing myself out there. If only Kristy had found a job, I thought. Then I wouldn’t have to be doing this myself.

I turned into the girls’ neighborhood, winding my way through streets lined with parked cars, past houses of fading pastels and lawns of sparse, weedy grass. I registered this
with surprise, contrasting these aging homes with the luxury townhouses in my current neighborhood and with my image of what life should be like in the richest county in the nation. I had yet to understand that like DC, Fairfax County is an area of unlikely contrast, that beneath the veneer of wealth and perfection, there is a middle class, even poverty.

The girls’ house was nice enough on the inside though. Against the standard rental décor of white walls and beige-grey carpeting, I noted a haphazardly cozy collection of second-hand furniture and assorted pictures and knick-knacks I assumed represented three individual decorating styles. I said hi to everyone I remembered from the previous visit and was introduced to Megan and to another new guy, Dave, a University of Pennsylvania football player who had just started Teach for America in DC. I noted with satisfaction that I would not be the only teacher in the group; it would help to have people around who understood the unique pressures of the teaching profession.

After a few minutes of mingling, we all settled into chairs and couches and got started. The meeting was led by Phil, a married man in his fifties, and Connally, a single woman in her forties. Both of them were on staff with the Navigators and were focusing their ministry efforts on helping twenty-somethings to view their jobs and lives as a ministry. While I can’t recall the particular topic or focus of that first meeting, I do remember hearing different people talk about their jobs and their particular challenges and about the people they were meeting and trying to reach out to. Karla, who’d grown up in a small Iowa town, talked about a guy from her work who’d recently gone hiking with her and some of the other people from the group. She wasn’t sure, she said, with a shy smile crossing her sweet, round face, if he was more interested in Christianity or in her. Rudy, who waved his arms wildly
when he spoke, Cuban eyes flashing with the vibrant energy of his Miami hometown, talked about his job at the World Bank and the deep philosophical conversations he was having with co-workers there.

I felt encouraged. These were people who seemed to share my passion for making their jobs count, not just as a means of earning money, but also as a means of sharing about Jesus with those around them. Plus, they seemed to care for each other and spoke of social things they’d done together in the past. This could work.

“Okay, why don’t we get started?” Phil said, a few months later, his calm voice rising above the chatter bouncing around the conference room of the Navigator offices in Ballston where we’d decided to hold our weekly Career Corps meetings. The room smelled of grease and spices, remnants of the El Pollo take-out we’d shared for dinner. As conversations faded to whispers, he continued, “Tonight we’re going to be talking about vision and why we’re all here.”

I looked around the circle as people settled into a haphazard collection of chairs, surveying the faces before me. In addition to Phil and Connally, there was the younger crowd: Rudy, Karla, Megan, Dave, and some other people I was just getting to know. Among these were Jana, an electrical engineer who grew up on a farm in upstate New York; Steph, a somewhat spastic interior designer; Dustin, who worked for Senator Chuck Grassley; Kristy, who’d found a job at a mortgage bank and was now settled in our McLean townhouse; and myself. We were all Christians, all transplants to NOVA, just getting
started in our careers, but the more I learned about the people in this room, the more I
realized how different we really were.

“So what do you think?” Phil persisted. I wasn’t exactly sure. I’d known these
people for a few months now and had spent every Monday night meeting with them, talking
about how Jesus impacted our lives and our relationships. The discussions had been
centered on God’s pursuit of the lost, the way in which Jesus had been sent into the world to
save sinners. I’d enjoyed our talks, found them helpful in terms of clarifying my sense of a
personal call to evangelism, but I’d come to DC expecting much more—meals together with
different group members during the week, activities on weekends, a desire to meet each
other’s friends and enter into one another’s worlds. So far it hadn’t really happened, at least
to my liking, and I too was beginning to wonder why we exactly we were all there, or at least
why exactly I was there on a Monday night when I probably should’ve been home grading
papers.

“I don’t know Phil,” Dave teased with his typically boisterous intensity. “Why don’t
you tell us? You’re the leader.” He sat forward attentively, resting his elbows on his knees.
I noted the lingering dampness on his shorts and t-shirt, remnants of late afternoon football
practice.

Phil was thinking, folding in his lower lip in concentration. “Well,” he said finally, “I
guess for me Career Corps is about training you guys to be influencers and to make a
difference wherever you go. After college, you don’t really get to experience community
anymore, so I think it’s important that you learn how to live the Christian life as kind of a
Lone Ranger.”
My face flushed, and my stomach muscles tightened. I couldn’t have imagined a worse answer. Was he saying that my dream of community was impossible, that college was the only time in life where you could experience that? What about the smiling faces on the brochure, the invitation to “come join us”? He couldn’t be serious. And yet suddenly things began to make sense. If our goal was to become Lone Rangers, why should we spend time together outside these meetings? Why bother building relationships?

I looked around the room, scanning faces for signs of confusion or disagreement. I waited, hoping someone would speak up, voice their desire for something more. Only silence. I had to say something.

“But,” I ventured, voice quavering, “aren’t we supposed to be building community? Isn’t that one of the main things in the Bible? You know, like in Acts, the early church was together all the time and God added to their numbers daily those who were being saved.” I took a deep breath, trying desperately to hold back the tears I felt pooling just below the surface.

“Yeah,” said Kristy, nodding in my direction. I relaxed a bit, feeling grateful that she at least was on my side. “I mean Jesus always sent his followers out in pairs, two by two. Not as lone rangers.”

Blank faces stared back at us in silence. I felt panic setting in, the way it does in my classroom when I can tell no one has understood the lesson, when I’m suddenly convinced that not only does everyone misunderstand me, but they also think I’m absolutely crazy.

Steph finally spoke. “I’m just not really interested in community,” she said, with a casualness I found hard to understand. “I mean I have lots of social circles going on–work,
church, roommates, friends from high school and college, etc. To me, it’s more fun to jump in and out of a bunch of worlds.”

“Yeah,” said Connally, more gently, “I think it’s really hard to have community in a place like DC, where people are transient, fragmented, and spread out over a huge metropolitan area. I’m not saying it’s impossible, but I’ve lived here for awhile now. And I haven’t really seen it happen.”

I nodded, pretending to understand, to be okay with that answer. I didn’t have the energy or capacity to fight the group, so I sat, arms crossed, and tuned out the rest of the conversation. It was clear that, apart from Kristy, no one understood my desire for community. I felt a sudden affinity for my parents and their church struggles, sensed a separation from the group that was supposed to be my spiritual home.

Of course, I was overlooking what should have been an obvious fact, that the leaders and most of the people in Career Corps had never had any intention of our little group serving as a replacement for church. In fact, most of them were involved in local churches of their own and saw the group as simply an opportunity to share ideas with people who had a similar ministry vision. With the busyness of my first year teaching schedule though, I didn’t think I had time for both church and Career Corps. In reality, I probably didn’t. But even more importantly, I didn’t want to make time for church. Nor did I consider the possibility that dropping Career Corps and joining a church might be a better use of my time. Based on my experience with my childhood church and my visits to places like MBC, I had already determined that organized church was also a far cry from Acts 2. As a result, I
felt I was left with only one option: to somehow try and make Career Corps fit my expectations, regardless of whether or not everyone else shared them or even understood them.

After all, I rationalized, the Career Corps brochure had described “living life together with close friends.” Maybe it wasn’t a problem of vision after all. Perhaps, I thought, these people had just never really tasted life in community. If they could only see what I’d experienced in college, they’d want to drop their isolated, fragmented lives and make community happen. I just had to find a way to show them.

Within a few months, the seemingly perfect opportunity would present itself.
CHAPTER 11: THE ROLLERCOASTER OF DREAMS

“The light of the eyes rejoices the heart,
and good news refreshes the bones.”

—Proverbs 15:30

One of my Navigator friends once told me, after we’d lived and worked together for a summer, that I am a person of high highs and low lows. She meant it as a compliment, I think, an attempt to communicate her own desire to be more in touch with her feelings, to let them more easily come to the surface. But had she meant it as a criticism, it would have been a valid one. For me, life can easily feel like a roller coaster of dreams realized, dreams shattered. And in those low points, what I tend to look for is a glimpse of the peak just ahead, around the next bend. What I tend to forget is the stability of the seat beneath me, the strength of the car around me, the grip of the buckle holding me tight.

In spiritual terms, you might say that at the points when I most need to hold onto Jesus, when I should be aware of Him holding me, drawing me closer, I so often hold on instead to new dreams, new plans, my own ways of rescuing myself from the pit.

Just when Kristy and I felt we were at a breaking point with Career Corps, we found out that some of our friends from Penn State Navigators were planning to move to the DC
area over the summer. Kristy’s old roommate Bethany was interested in filling the spot that would be left in our townhouse when one of our current roommates got married that summer, and four of our guy friends were hoping to find a place together nearby. All five of them were still living in Pennsylvania and either working or finishing their degrees, but sometime over the summer, they planned to arrive in DC.

As soon as I heard the news, my mind began spinning, full of memories of these five friends and excitement at the possibility that each of them would be joining us soon. I hadn’t known Bethany well in college, but she and Kristy had shared an apartment our senior year. So when Kristy and I went back to visit, we usually stayed with Bethany, and I’d grown to love her bubbly personality and ability to make anything, no matter how simple and everyday, an occasion for fun. Whenever we visited, we lounged around all Saturday morning in our pajamas, drinking coffee and talking. Bethany laughed a lot, told great stories with hilarious accents, and was prone to use original words like “smidge,” best defined as a small amount of something. But what drew me to Bethany most was the depth of her faith. Her mom had left her family when she was a teenager, and she’d battled anorexia in high school. Walking through these hard things and seeking God in them had given her a genuineness I appreciated, an ability to care for people who were suffering, and a passion for redemption, for seeing God work good in the midst of pain. Even then, before I was truly willing to see or deal with the depth of my own brokenness, I believed that God was a God who had compassion on the hurting, and I valued people like Bethany who shared that aspect of His heart.
For different reasons, I was equally excited about the four particular guys who were thinking of coming to DC. Flynn had been a close friend since we met at an after Navs bonfire early on in our freshmen year. We’d talked for hours that night about high school friends, mission trips we’d taken, our families. And over our college years, we’d spent a lot of time together through various Nav activities. A math major, Flynn loved solving problems and accomplishing tasks, but he also loved people and sports and Jesus. He made friends easily and kept them well. Then there was Chris, who like Flynn was faithful and steady and kind, but unlike Flynn, loved computers and playing with electronic circuits and wore tie-dyed jeans and multi-colored sweaters. Chris had grown up on a farm in Wisconsin, the son of two professors at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and his parents mailed him frequent shipments of dried apples, honey, and jams they’d made at home. Though he’d been raised without religion, Chris had become a Christian in high school and was serious about figuring out how to live a life that honored God. I had deep respect for each of these guys and felt honored and cared for in their friendships.

The third member of their group was Bart, a quirky science education major from Pittsburgh, who loved to run and had a penchant for repeating random words and phrases he for some reason found amusing, phrases like “ju-jitsu” and “check on the quiche” and “wolf,” the latter spoken with a particularly ferocious and high-pitched intensity. With Bart, things were always unpredictable. Like when at the end of the night, to avoid the extended awkwardness of goodbyes and goodnights, he’d make us all do a “bust out,” standing in circle like a sports team before the game, piling our hands atop one another and shouting “bust out” before we split to go our separate ways. When I first met Bart, I thought he was
the most random person I’d ever known, but I quickly grew to realize that he was also one
of the most genuinely caring friends I’d ever known, great at asking hard questions about
why I didn’t go to church and whether or not I really thought that teaching middle school
was worthwhile. At first, I was stunned by his audacity, but then I realized he really wanted
to know what I had to say in response. I liked the way he challenged me.

And then there was Bretton, who I barely knew. He was older than the rest, just
finishing his master’s degree in speech communications, teaching undergraduate classes as a
TA. Though I’d met him only a few times, my impression was positive; he seemed quiet,
intelligent, deep, mysterious, and, I had to admit, rather cute. Another dream began to form
in the back of my mind. Perhaps if the guys moved down to DC, Bretton and I might hit it
off, might fall in love. It was an exciting possibility. Not certain, by any stretch of the
imagination, but hopeful.

What was certain though, I thought, was that if these friends did move to DC, our
lives would get much better. To Kristy and I, the conclusion was obvious: God had seen
our need for ministry partners and was sending us reinforcements. Together, we could show
the Career Corps group what community was really about. Hope sprung anew.

As it turned out, all five Penn State friends did move to DC in August, but from the
beginning, things were a whole lot more complicated than we’d ever anticipated. The guys
had a hard time finding jobs and a place to live. Feeling sorry for them, we offered to let
them stay in our finished basement until they could straighten things outs. This meant
Bethany would have to give up her bedroom for the time being and share one with Kristy.
But it was only for a week or two, we thought. Plus, what could be cooler than eight awesome people living together in one house? We could eat meals together, hang out together all the time, stay up late talking. It’d be, I thought, like college all over again.

“Abby!” I heard Bethany’s voice from below as I stepped out of the upstairs shower one August morning, just a day or two after the whole Penn State crew had moved in. The two of us were home alone that morning, as everyone else had all gone off to jobs or interviews. I was still on summer break, and Bethany had decided to stay in and work on her resume.

“What?” I shouted back, wrapping a towel around my still dripping frame and opening the bathroom door just enough to stick my head out into the hallway.

“There’s water leaking through the dining room ceiling,” she called, still standing at the bottom of the steps. “I just noticed it dripping down from the chandelier.”

“Oh oh,” I said, “hold on one sec. I’ll be right down.”

I squeezed the extra moisture out of my hair and threw on some clothes. When I walked into the dining room, Bethany was busy toweling up a puddle of water that had pooled in the center of the wooden dining room table. “I was reading in the living room, so I didn’t notice until just now,” she explained. “It’s slowed down now that you’re out of the shower.”

I nodded, noting the moist circle in the center of the dining room ceiling and the water still dropping periodically from the lowest point of the aging, faux-gilded chandelier.

“I’ll call the landlady.”
When the maintenance man arrived a few hours later, the news was bad. The whole bathroom needed to be redone. We wouldn’t be able to use it for the next two or three weeks. Translation: for the remainder of the guys’ stay, seven people would have to share the basement bathroom. Seven people would need to use the same small space for late night teeth brushing and early morning showers.

“I don’t think I can do this anymore,” Bethany confessed to me one evening a week later, when we took a walk around the neighborhood after dinner.

I nodded. She’d said what I’d been thinking, but felt afraid to say.

“I mean,” she continued, “I don’t even have my own bedroom or bathroom. Or space of any kind really. And people are always eating my food.”

“Yeah,” I said, “it is getting old. I feel like the house is always a mess, no matter how hard I try to keep things neat and organized.”

“And tonight,” she continued, “Bretton asked me to pay for dinner. Pay for dinner! I mean how many times have I cooked for those guys in college? I don’t want to pay for some stupid pasta I don’t even really want to eat. He just assumed I’d chip in.”

I nodded. “And what’s up with Bart? I thought he was going to live with his aunt so there wouldn’t be so many people here. But he just started staying here. He never even asked.”

“I know!”

We walked in silence, enjoying the quiet of dusk, the time away from the chaos of our house. I felt guilty. It had been my idea to let the guys move in. I still loved each of
them, but having them as roommates, even temporary roommates, was bringing to the surface a side of them I’d never seen before. How, I wondered, could we function as community if we couldn’t even stand each other for a week? Wasn’t a good community supposed to be easy, fun, painless?

“It will get better soon,” I promised Bethany. “When they have their own place, things will calm down. Wait and see.”

Sure enough, within a week, the guys had all found jobs and were settled into a townhouse two doors down the street. Without the pressure of having to share a bathroom and make a household of eight work, things calmed down, and we settled into a more comfortable routine, one that in many ways was exactly what I’d hoped it would be. In the mornings, we headed off to our various jobs, waving to each other in the darkness as we scurried to our cars with backpacks and lunchbags in hand. In the evenings, we functioned like lifelong family, running back and forth between each other’s houses to chat or borrow an ingredient for dinner, sharing meals, borrowing movies, playing games, watching TV. Those of us who were teachers had less free time than the rest, but on the weekends, we spent almost all of our time together, playing poker, watching movies, hiking, rock climbing, going to church, watching football. And we also made an effort to include friends from our various workplaces in our activities. We wanted them to experience Christian community, to see in us something of Christ. For the first time in almost a year, I felt like I was part of a team. Penn State had come to me.
The only thing left, I thought, was to integrate this community with the Career Corps
group. Then, everyone would finally understand what Kristy and I had been talking about.
They’d see the beauty of community in action and realize that they too wanted to be part of
it. And then we’d be able to do what I’d come here to do, show a watching world just what
it looked like when Jesus transformed people’s lives. We’d be a much more effective witness
together, I was convinced, than we could ever be apart.

Early that fall, the Career Corps group gathered one Saturday for a welcome
barbeque at Connally’s house, a quaint brick three-story, nestled in one of Arlington’s older
and more affluent neighborhoods. Though a few people had moved away over the summer,
most of the gang was returning, and Kristy and I were excited to introduce our Penn State
friends to everyone.

The sun was still bright when we arrived, some in small groups, some as individuals.
We found our way quickly to Connally’s back porch, took shelter in the shade of the trees
that enveloped most of her lawn a cool and protective embrace. Someone fired up the grill,
and a few people worked in the kitchen, slicing and arranging lettuce, tomatoes, and cheese
to add to the potluck spread growing steadily on the dining room table. The rest of us sat
outside and talked, enjoying the relative stillness of the gathering twilight.

We sat on white plastic chairs, coated in a summer’s worth of dusty film, and cracked
open beers and hard cider and a bottle or two of wine. There was something comfortable
about this neighborhood, something refreshing in the simple fact that it had been here
longer than we had, that it lacked the startling uniformity of Fairfax’s newer neighborhoods
and strip malls. This house and those around it had existed in the fifties, and there was a sense of that here, of a time when life was simpler and slower and people really did sit on the porch sipping lemonade and talking.

I settled back in my seat and looked around. Dave was making conversation with Flynn, the two of them bonding over teaching and sports. Steph was talking to Bretton, drawing him out about his new job at a mass mailing company. And Chris was chatting with Brad, another brand new Career Corps attendee, about their common Midwestern roots. I smiled. It was happening. I could see it.

That fall, we spent a lot of time in our weekly meetings talking about our identity in Christ, trying to understand who it was that God had made each of us to be. God used our weekly discussions to show me that I wasn’t simply a boring rule-keeper, that I was drawn to beauty, art, and writing. He also began to show me that He valued those parts of my heart, that perhaps my future might involve pursuing them in some way. Monday nights became a place where I felt comfortable sharing about my journey, where I was encouraged to see other people becoming increasingly vulnerable about their fears, sins, and hopes. I knew about Jana’s struggle to treat others with patience and grace. I’d walked with Dave through the process of dating Ellen, a friend from Teach for America who now attended Career Corps with him.

And as I’d hoped, we began to see more of each other outside of the Monday night context. In October, we took a weekend retreat at my grandparents’ beach house in Bethany Beach, deepening our relationships through times of prayer, lengthy meals, and a rollicking
swim in the still-warm ocean waters. In December, we gathered for a Christmas party at our house. We exchanged ridiculous white elephant gifts, enjoyed shared laughter, and gathered around the couch for a group picture that is still hanging on my living room wall. Although it was still far from perfect, some real community was being built. In the words of Connally, there was some real there there.

And yet, even as life settled into a comfortable routine, even as I began to feel some sense of belonging to Career Corps, the familiar sense of dissatisfaction crept back in. I still felt like we weren’t doing all we could be doing to function as a team. I wanted more. Deeper sense of vision and purpose. More collaboration on ministry projects. More depth in our conversations. Plus, I was becoming increasingly aware that Career Corps was not a long-term solution to my church questions. It had been designed as a two-year program to help Navigator college graduates transition into the real world of jobs, cities, and churches. It had not been designed to somehow replace church or to build a community that would sustain the same group of people year after year. Though this should have been obvious to me from the beginning, it had not been.

I’d expected Career Corps to be something I fell into easily, as I had with the Navigators in college. Instead, I’d spent a year and a half working hard to build some real relationships. And as much as I enjoyed those relationships, I realized that they were destined to be short-term. As is typical in the highly transient DC culture, people were always moving on, to marriage, to a new job in some other city, to a different suburb and a different Christian community. Already, Megan and Karla had moved back to Iowa, and in a few short months, Kristy was being transferred to Phoenix. Two couples in our group were
engaged and were looking to get involved with their local churches after they got married in the summer. Not wanting to be left behind, not wanting to settle for a less than ideal community, I felt the familiar urge to leave, to move on to something new, and of course, better.
This time, the new thing was National Community Church, otherwise known as NCC. A few of the Career Corps people attended this church, which met in a movie theater in Union Station, a beautiful, historic building within walking distance of the nation’s capitol. I’d actually started attending services there back in the fall, just after our Penn State friends arrived. Unlike Kristy and I, most of them had been active in churches in high school and felt the need to find one, even if they were going to attend Career Corps small group meetings. Because going to a new church was far better when you didn’t have to sit by yourself, I decided to tag along. Back then, I was far from being ready to commit to any church, but I still enjoyed the chance to worship with other Christians.

Throughout the fall, the whole group of us attended pretty regularly. It quickly became clear that NCC was non-traditional in more ways than the movie theater location. Founded just a few years prior by Mark Batterson, a young, energetic pastor from Illinois affiliated with the Assembly of God denomination, NCC offered Krispy Kreme doughnuts and Starbuck’s coffee before every service, high-tech “movie trailers” for upcoming sermon
series, and small groups based on any common interest members might share, including an Old Testament survey class, a dance party group, and math study help. The services were hip: skilled musicians playing stylistically complicated worship songs and messages often accompanied by video clips from the latest popular films. And the churchgoers were predominantly young—college students and single professionals in their twenties and early thirties. There was a notable absence of kids and an even more notable absence of gray hair.

Like McLean Bible, NCC was full of energy and vitality, a far cry from the accusation leveled at so many mainline churches of being old and dead. And the pastoral staff was serious about reaching people with the Christian message. They had plans to expand to multiple movie theater locations in metropolitan DC and to open a coffeehouse near Union Station, which would provide a natural place for the church and the community to meet and mingle. This sense of vision appealed to me and to many of the other Penn Staters. Plus, the congregation was smaller than McLean Bible and seemed more manageable, a little less corporate. We kept coming back, piling into two cars each Sunday morning, trekking down Route 66 and Constitution Avenue into the still-sleeping city, enjoying the service and then grabbing lunch together in the Union Station food court before returning to McLean for our various Sunday afternoon activities.

For a time, this felt fine. I was impressed that I was turning into a regular church attendee. But by Christmas, as I was beginning to realize that Career Corps would never become a long-term spiritual home or ministry team, I started to wonder if perhaps I might find what I was looking for at NCC. I realized that attending a Sunday morning service with my college friends had little to do with actually becoming part of a church. Each Sunday, I
passed hundreds of people on my way into and out of the service, and I had no idea who they were. If I were truly going to get involved, truly establish some real sense of connection with a church, I needed to meet the people there and become a part of their lives. I decided it was time to join a small group.

I wished that some of my college friends would come with me, would have loved if we could have settled into a church together, but at the time, none of them were interested. Bethany and Flynn, now dating one another seriously, had started attending a different, more family-oriented church in the suburbs. I’d visited, but it was a little too stale for me. Bart, Chris, and Bretton seemed content with attending NCC on Sunday mornings and Career Corps on Monday nights. Kristy was busy getting ready to move. For the first time in my life, I had to face the church question entirely on my own.

The night I was to attend my first NCC small group meeting was dark and blustery. I wrapped my scarf tightly around my neck and buttoned my coat over my bulky sweater. It had been a long day at work, and there was nothing more appealing at the moment than staying home and watching some TV with my roommates, tucked under a fleece blanket in my favorite green recliner and sipping hot cocoa. There was nothing less appealing than heading out to a cold car and driving to a place I’d probably get lost trying to find, then getting to know a bunch of people I’d never met. But, I reminded myself, I’d decided to visit this small group. If I started making excuses now, I’d never do it.

“Bye girls,” I shouted as I headed for the door. Their greetings echoed back to me, Julia’s from upstairs, Kristy’s from the kitchen, Bethany’s from the living room.
“Have fun.”

“Can’t wait to hear about it.”

“See you later.”

I took a deep breath and braced myself for the cold, then opened the door and made a dash for my car. The Mapquest directions were, for once, clear, and I made only one wrong turn during the ten minute drive from McLean to Falls Church. When I got to the condominium development though, I wasn’t sure where to park. The person I’d e-mailed to get the address hadn’t said anything about parking, and the only available spaces I could find were in the garage for the development. I wasn’t sure if I was supposed to have some sort of special pass or something. Afraid of getting a ticket, not wanting to ask for help from people I didn’t know, I kept circling the area until I found an available space on the street. As I walked toward the condo, I muttered under my breath. “I hate this area. Why can’t it be like Pennsylvania where there’s always a space to park? This stresses me out.”

My knock on the condo’s door was answered by a muffled, “Come in!” I opened the door to find myself in a hallway with a pile of shoes in all shapes and sizes. I couldn’t see anyone, but I could hear scattered conversation somewhere beyond the hallway wall. A male voice said, “Who is that? Andrea?” And I knew I had to go in, had to face the room full of strangers. Here we go, I thought, game time.

I rounded the corner into a sparsely decorated living room, which I immediately perceived to be clean but rather sterile. Like so many DC apartments I’d visited, empty white walls loomed above beige carpet, the monotony broken only by a random assortment of furniture (hand-me-down meets Ikea).

I introduced myself to the group, then settled into one of the cold metal folding chairs arranged in a circle. “Ok, well since Abby’s new, let’s all go around and introduce ourselves.” Eric said. He was still wearing his suit and tie and looked every bit the part of group leader.

One by one, each person in the group shared their name and a little bit about themselves. Included were a mathematician, a teacher, a movie theater manager, and some others I couldn’t remember. People seemed nice enough, but there was no one I felt particularly excited about getting to know more, no one who had the look of a potential friend.

After the introductions, Eric stood up and inserted a CD in the stereo system behind him. “Ok guys, it’s time for worship.” The CD began playing a song I was familiar with, and everyone started singing along. Surprised, feeling awkward about the somewhat forced idea of worship led by recording, I closed my eyes and tried to forget my surroundings, tried to remember that God did not change, that He was present everywhere, even when I was stuck on a folding chair in an apartment full of strangers. I tried. But it certainly didn’t feel that way. I still had a tendency to assume that God was only present when the circumstances were right, when I felt good. I still thought that the right Christian community would make me feel that way most of the time.
As it has a way of doing, winter turned to spring. And just about every week, I went back to that small group, trying my best to be warm and friendly and to allow myself to open up to the people there. It was never easy, yet I held onto to hope that in time, it might feel more like a spiritual home. And I continued to enjoy my Career Corps and college friends. In many ways, in fact, I was able to enjoy them more than ever since I’d released them from the pressure of my expectations. No longer did I require them to meet all of my needs; I began to simply enjoy them as friends. I still had a lot of unanswered questions about church and community, but for the first time in a long time, I was starting to feel okay with that. I was taking steps. Things would clear up in time.

Then, one spring afternoon, all forward momentum came to crashing halt. I was on my way home from an after-school tutoring session when I got a call from Bethany. I thought at first that she might be calling to see what my plans were for dinner or maybe to ask if I wanted to go for a walk before I headed off to the NCC group. But as soon she started speaking, I heard a catch in her voice, and I knew it was something far more serious. She wanted to know if I was coming home, wouldn’t tell me anything until I got there. I was on my way, I promised.

She hung up, and I drove in stunned silence, aware only of the deafening roar of cicadas coming from the trees lining both sides of the highway. Many horrible scenarios played their way across my mind: our house had burned down; someone had died; Bethany and Flynn had called off their engagement. But from the beginning, I was pretty sure it was about Bretton. He’d been depressed since he’d moved to DC, was often distant and
withdrawn from the rest of the group. A few months earlier, he’d asked Chris to take him to
the hospital because he felt suicidal. They’d put him back on meds, and we’d thought he
was doing better. But now, with the urgency and fear in Bethany’s voice weighing heavily
upon me, I was certain he wasn’t doing better at all. For the excruciatingly long twenty
minute drive back to the house, I pictured ambulances lining the streets of our
neighborhood. I pictured Bretton’s body on the floor in a heap. I pictured his funeral,
wondered what I would say to his parents.

When I finally got home, Bethany sat me down on the living room couch and told
me the details, her face tense, her voice dry and emotionless, her tone almost matter-of-fact.

“Bretton’s in the hospital again,” she said.

I nodded. “Is he okay?”

“Yes, he’ll be fine. He tried to kill himself, but he’ll be fine.”

I breathed deeply, trying to release the tension I’d built up on my drive home. “Oh
my gosh. The whole way home I thought he was dead.”

Bethany’s face showed none of the signs of relief I expected to see. I realized that
she wasn’t finished. “Abby,” she said, “there’s something else I need to tell you.”

“Okay,” I nodded, bracing myself.

“You know how I told you a few months ago that when Flynn and I started dating,
Bretton stopped talking to me.”

I nodded. I remembered the conversation, but I hadn’t thought much of it at the
time. When people start dating, their friendships change. No big deal.
“Well I didn’t really tell you the whole story then because Bretton didn’t really want people to know. But he has had a crush on Flynn since they met a few years ago.”

Bethany paused, allowing the news to sink in. My head started spinning. Flynn and Bethany were engaged now, their wedding date just a few months away. And Bretton liked Flynn? I wondered how long Flynn had known this, why he’d bothered continuing his friendship with Bretton. And why hadn’t I known anything about this? Bretton had never said anything to me about being gay, and to my knowledge, Bart, Chris, and Kristy were equally oblivious.

Bethany continued. “This is hard for me to say because I’m still so angry about it. But last night, Flynn woke up in the middle of the night, and Bretton was in his room, kneeling down.”

She paused, nearly gagging on the words. “Touching Flynn’s penis.”

I swallowed hard and bit my lip, nodding for her to continue. Why? My thoughts screamed silently the words my mouth would not say. Why? As is human nature in the face of inexplicable tragedy, I tried to reestablish some control by thinking about how it could have been prevented. What could Bretton possibly have been thinking? What had Flynn been thinking when he agreed to be Bretton’s roommate? This should have never happened, especially not among Christian friends.

Bethany continued. “When Bretton realized Flynn was awake, he ran downstairs. Flynn woke up Chris and told him to go downstairs and check on Bretton. He knew he was going to hurt himself, but he was still too shocked to help. When Chris found Bretton, he
was in the basement laundry room, blood splattered on his wrist, the sink, the floor. He took him to the hospital and checked him in. That’s where he is now.”

“How’s Flynn?” I managed.

“I don’t really know,” she said. “Somehow he went to work today. I just found out about all of this an hour or so ago. We’re going to talk now, try to figure out what we should do.”

I nodded, vaguely aware of a sense of relief that someone else was going to do something. I didn’t have any idea what to do. I wondered what one was supposed to feel at a moment like this, when one person she loves has done something inconceivably awful to another person she loves. My categories failed me.

“Abby, are you okay? Do you need me to call someone? I don’t want you to have to sit here by yourself while I’m gone.”

“I’m okay,” I replied. “It’s fine. I need some time to process anyway.”

I paused as my plans for the evening suddenly reentered my mind. “I don’t think I can go to small group though. There’s no way I can tell the people there about this, and I just can’t pretend that everything’s okay.”

“Why don’t you call and tell them you can’t make it?” she said. “They’ll understand.”

Bethany left to talk to Flynn, and I made the call, explaining that an urgent situation with a friend had come up and that I needed to stay home. Eric said it was no problem, hoped they’d see me again next week. I managed a vaguely positive reply before hanging up.
Then, I sat, rooted in my spot on the couch. The news took some time to seep in, numbness only gradually replaced by tears and then sobs that forced my body into a curl. A deep darkness gripped me, and I knew that my life would never be the same again.
CHAPTER 13: STUMBLING FORWARD

“I have sewed sackcloth upon my skin
and have laid my strength in the dust.

My face is red with weeping,
and on my eyelids is deep darkness.”

--Job 16:15-17

Later that night, at Flynn and Bethany’s request, the whole group of us gathered in the guys’ living room. When Bethany had called to ask if I could make it, I’d felt relieved, eager even, to discuss what had happened with the people closest to me. But when I walked in the front door of the guy’s house, everything was dark, brightened only slightly by the dim light of the two fish tanks Bretton had set up in the room, one tropical, one fresh water. So many times over the past nine months, the group of us had gathered in this room to talk, play cards, watch movies, build a fire, or just hang out. Those times, we’d laughed until we cried, talked into the wee hours of the morning.

But tonight, everything was different. No one knew what to say. No one wanted to make eye contact. The atmosphere was subdued and somber, and we interacted with one another like we might have at a viewing, exchanging hushed small talk, feeling helpless in the
face of all the sadness. We sat on the edge of our seats, unwilling to be comfortable in a moment like this.

Finally, Flynn broke the silence, his voice cracking like an adolescent boy’s as he spoke. “I know most of you have heard already,” he said, “but I think you need to hear from me exactly what happened last night.” He paused. I nodded, hoping to communicate my support for his courage.

“When I woke up,” he said slowly, methodically, as if he still couldn’t believe it had actually happened, “Bretton was touching my penis. I don’t know how long he had been there. When he saw me awake, he left the room. I knew he’d probably do something to hurt himself, but I couldn’t bring myself to follow him. So I went and woke up Chris. Chris went down to the basement and found him in the process of slitting his wrists. He drove him to Fairfax Hospital, where he is now.”

We sat in heavy silence. “I don’t ever want to see him again,” Flynn said. “And if he comes back to this house, Bethany and I have decided that I’ll move out.”

More silence. Heads nodded. I was surprised. I hadn’t thought much about the future, but I hadn’t expected we’d cut Bretton out completely.

“And I’m not sure the rest of you guys should live with him either,” said Bethany. “He’s a danger to himself, and for all we know, he could be a danger to you as well. Flynn and I are thinking about applying for a restraining order.”

Until this moment, I hadn’t even considered the possibility that Bretton wouldn’t be coming back. I understood Flynn and Bethany’s concern, but I wondered what Bretton
would do. He had no other friends or family in the area. It certainly wouldn’t be healthy for him to live alone.

“I agree with Bethany and Flynn,” Chris stated. “I mean seeing all that blood this morning; I don’t know if I can handle it again.”

“It makes me really uncomfortable too,” Bart said.

“So what’s the time table?” I asked. “When might he be released? What are we going to do when he comes back?”

“I called today and tried to find out,” Flynn replied. “But we’re not family, so apparently we have no right to know. I tried to explain the situation, but they wouldn’t budge.”

“When I dropped off some of his clothes today,” Chris said, “I got the impression that it wouldn’t be any time soon.”

“So what do we do?” I asked. I felt scared, terrified. Something had gone dreadfully wrong, and it seemed no one was showing up to make things right. Somehow, all of the Bible verses I’d memorized, all the teaching I’d heard seemed distant from a situation of this magnitude. It seemed we’d have to figure this out on our own.

“I mean, you can’t just kick him out. Can you?” I asked. “Where else is he going to go?”

“I think he made his choice,” Bethany said. “He should’ve thought of that before he did what he did.”

“But what are we going to do with his stuff?” I wondered out loud. “What about the fish?”
“I don’t care what happens to the damn fish,” Bethany snapped. I stared, silenced, at the nameless clown fish in Bretton’s aquarium. I felt conflicted, trying to understand both Bethany’s anger and Bretton’s pain, wondering what God would have to say about a mess like this. I couldn’t really imagine Him being part of it, felt that He, like me, probably wanted to run away from something so dark and twisted.

The days that followed were a haze of sleepless nights, fake smiles to the outside world, and a mind constantly churning to make some sense, any sense of it all. Somehow I made it to work each day, welcoming the sunny classroom, the playful antics of my middle schoolers, the busyness of my job. But each night, as I drove into the neighborhood after work, I felt a wave of nausea rising to my throat. I dreaded the thought of seeing Bretton again, hoped he had not yet been released, wondered if life would ever feel normal again.

The guys slept at our house that whole week. They couldn’t bear to be in their own house in the dark, couldn’t stomach the thought of going into the basement even during the day. Though someone had scrubbed the laundry room sink with bleach, the blood had stained it permanently—a rusty pink. We huddled together in our living room and talked, trying to figure out why it had happened, what we had done wrong, reliving the past year in our minds. Everything seemed different now. What had felt innocent and fun at the time now seemed blackened forever by something dark and twisted.

Part of me wanted to yell at Bretton, to scream at him with the full force of my anger. How dare he do this to Flynn, to all of us! How dare he betray our trust! But in other moments, I pictured him in his hospital room, his head buried in his large, strong
hands, weeping. In one short moment, he had lost so much – his friendships, his home, his self-respect. Phil, our Career Corps leader, visited Bretton in the hospital and told us that all Bretton could say was that he was sorry.

When I heard this, I felt a gnawing doubt about our plan to kick Bretton out of the guy’s house, to pack up his stuff and send him away. Jesus called his disciples to love their enemies and pray for those who persecuted them. While I agreed that Bretton probably needed a change in circumstances, I wasn’t sure that kicking him out without a goodbye was very loving. I agonized over whether or not I should go to the hospital to visit him, pictured hugging him and telling him it was okay, that Jesus could forgive even this. I wanted him to know that I still cared about him, that I believed that even now, he was not beyond the reach of God’s grace, that in the end, God counted his sin of sexual assault as equal to my sins of pride and selfishness.

But when it came down to it, I wasn’t so sure I really believed it. In worldly terms, making an arrogant comment to someone was very different from sexually assaulting him. I thought perhaps that what Bretton needed most was distance, time to realize how what he’d done had hurt so many people. In other words, I thought that he might need to be punished. He’d plunged all of us into a darkness deeper than any I’d ever known, and I thought perhaps that in this kind of situation, God could forgive him, and the rest of us wouldn’t have to.

I wish now that I had gone to see Bretton in the hospital, wish I would’ve known God’s grace in my own life deeply enough to extend it to my friend who desperately needed to hear it. I wish I’d understood that what I saw as a failure of community was actually a
God-given opportunity to be community to Bretton when he needed it most. But at the
time, I just felt confused, uncertain of how I was supposed to handle anything. “Dear God,”
I wrote in my journal. “I thank You that even though I don’t feel you right now, You are
here and You promise to protect me from all evil and keep my soul. Thank You that You
are with me. God I’m scared. This whole Bretton thing has me totally freaked out, and I
don’t know what to do.”

Within two weeks, Bretton was discharged from the hospital and came back to the
house to collect his stuff. While Chris was there to meet and help him, the rest of us–some
intentionally, some unknowingly–stayed away. And then he was gone, and we were left,
trying to push our way back to life as normal. The guys found a roommate to replace
Bretton. We threw Bart a birthday party and helped Flynn and Bethany with final plans for
their July wedding. Slowly, laughter and life and hope returned. We talked less and less
about Bretton, and whole days and even weeks went by when I didn’t think about him at all.

And yet, as the weeks and months passed, I couldn’t let go of the experience,
couldn’t completely push away the nagging questions it had raised. I couldn’t make what I’d
experienced fit with what I believed to be true, couldn’t get past the assumption that any true
religion wouldn’t allow for something so horrible to happen between its followers. Perhaps,
I began to think, the problem was with the Biblical teachings against homosexuality. I knew
Bretton would have been taught that homosexuality was a sin, both by the Navigators and
by the churches he’d attended in Pennsylvania and in Virginia. But I also knew what most
of my co-workers and non-Christian friends would say if I told them the story, knew they’d
think that Bretton’s depression and suicide were a direct result of the homosexual desires he’d been forced to repress by his prejudiced religious community. And I had to admit that there was much in this explanation that seemed plausible. After all, my college roommate Caroline, who’d been allowed to openly express her sexuality, seemed to be happy and well-adjusted. Perhaps if Bretton had been encouraged to pursue a homosexual relationship, none of this would have happened. Perhaps all of us would be better off.

And yet, embracing this explanation seemed to involve letting go of so much else. If I was willing to call the Bible wrong on this issue, what else might it be wrong on? Christ’s virgin birth? His miracles? The very existence of God Himself? All of my life to this point had been lived based on the assumption that these things were as the Bible said they were. And I’d seen much good come from this set of beliefs. I’d seen people who embraced them find hope and healing, seen their lives characterized by a humility and selflessness I had yet to discover elsewhere. I wasn’t willing to throw it all away just because Bretton’s actions didn’t fit my paradigm. But I also recognized that I lacked a means to explain the mess around me, to reconcile it with my current understanding of a good and loving God who had established the church to reflect His power and glory on earth. If this was who God was, why had things with my friends gone so desperately wrong?

A good theologian might have provided a possible answer, might have gently reminded me that the Bible says we are saved by grace and not by works. He might have taken me to the gospels and showed me that Jesus Himself said he came to call not the righteous, but sinners, that it is not the healthy who need a doctor but the sick. He might have graciously pointed out that the reason things were going so desperately wrong was
because we were a bunch of sinners, each of us desperately in need of God’s grace. He
might have reminded me that as both Jesus and Paul had made clear, becoming a Christian
didn’t exempt anyone from suffering. Sure, we’d submitted our lives to God, but that didn’t
mean we were perfect, didn’t mean we wouldn’t sin against one another in deep and
profound ways. What it did mean was that we were forgiven, that God promised to
conform us to His image with ever-increasing glory, to bring redemption in even the deepest
and darkest of places.

But alas, even if there’d been a good theologian around, I probably wouldn’t have
been listening to him (or her). I was more aware of the ways our group had failed to meet
my expectations than I was of the way we’d failed Bretton. Instead of focusing on what was
wrong with me, I was focused on the fact that once again, my dreams for Christian
community had come crashing down around me. And I didn’t know where to turn.

Career Corps was designed to be a two year program, and my two year mark was
approaching rapidly. NCC was fine, but even after attending the small group for almost five
months, I didn’t sense it was a place where I could truly trust people, where I could open up
and share the Bretton story and all of the doubts about God it had raised in my heart. I
realized also that Bretton had been attending NCC for almost a year, and yet no one there
knew about his situation, no one was there to walk through it with him. Ironically,
considering my own response to Bretton, I wanted to be part of a church where people were
known and cared for, where they felt safe bringing their fears and sin into the light. Maybe, I
thought, NCC wasn’t that kind of place. I began to wonder if, once again, I needed to move
on.
One summer afternoon, when I was home in Pennsylvania visiting my parents, my cell phone rang. I was surprised to notice that it was Eric, the leader of my NCC small group. While I sat in the patch of sun streaming through my parents’ dining room window, we exchanged pleasantries, chatted briefly about our summer plans. “Hey,” he said, finally getting down to his reason for calling, “I was wondering if you’d pray about being a co-leader for our small group this fall. Kara wants to step down, and I think you’d do a great job of helping me out.”

I was shocked. I barely knew Eric, barely knew anyone in the group. I wasn’t even a member of the church. “Can I get back to you?” I asked Eric. “I’m not sure, and I need some time to think and pray about it.”

“Absolutely,” he said.

In reality, I didn’t need much time to think or pray. While I was flattered to be asked to help lead, I was worried that I’d been selected for that position without ever having met the pastors or spent a significant amount of time with Eric. Sure, I might be able to come up with intelligent answers in our small group meetings, but there was a lot I was dealing with that the rest of the group knew nothing about. I wasn’t sure I was in a great place to be providing spiritual leadership for anyone. And it made me wonder if the current NCC leaders were either. I was all for pursuing creative ways to advance the gospel message and for offering lots of small groups, but I didn’t think that should happen at the expense of providing real and meaningful care for believers’ souls, especially after what I’d seen happen with Bretton.
I hated the idea of leaving yet another church, but by the time I called Eric back to decline his offer of the co-leader role, I already knew that I would once again be moving on.
For me, visiting a church for the first time is much like going on a first date. I’m a little nervous going into the service, uncertain of what I’ll find, whether or not I’ll feel comfortable. As things get started, I’m running everything through a mental checklist, looking for the traits that are important to me, making note of anything that bothers or annoys me. Are the worship songs being sung with energy and passion? Do the announcements of the week’s activities reflect a church engaged with the surrounding culture? Is the teaching Biblical, interesting, challenging? As I would on a date, I’m also paying attention to my general emotional reaction, my gut sense of whether or not there’s any potential for the future. When it comes to church, the answer for me has typically been
no. It might be enjoyable once or twice, but it’s not a forever kind of thing, not something to which I’m ready to give my life.

That’s pretty much how I felt the first time I visited Sovereign Grace Church of Fairfax. Situated about fifteen miles southwest of DC, the church is less than a mile from George Mason University, its property adjacent to the Fairfax Country Club and surrounded by a sea of suburban developments. I’d looked it up when I first moved to the area, knowing it was connected to the group of churches my parents had left when I was thirteen. Though that break had been painful for me personally, we’d maintained generally positive relationships with the people in both the Hershey and Lancaster congregations, and when my parents talked about good churches, those connected to Sovereign Grace were still near the top of the list. In fact, they were the ones who’d encouraged me to check out the Fairfax church, and I’d decided it couldn’t hurt.

At the time, my group of friends from Penn State had yet to arrive, and since Kristy wasn’t interested in coming with me, I’d been left with no choice but to go it alone. I left our house at about 9:30 Sunday morning, Mapquest directions in hand. Outside, the weather was cold and overcast, sun trying to break through hazy clouds of grey. I drove south first, navigating my way around the increasingly familiar curves of the Beltway, then west on a tree-lined route, which I followed for miles past a host of subdivisions and strip malls. At least here, I thought, things had been in existence for twenty or thirty years. The trees had been allowed enough time to grow up around buildings, enveloping the seemingly endless human development in their natural beauty.
Finally, I saw a small, professionally painted sign for the church and turned right into what almost seemed to be a paved driveway. I could not see any sign of a church building, but noticed instead a tiny Buddhist temple on my left, nestled back from the road in a protective cover of trees. Intrigued, I kept driving, rounding a bend that put Sovereign Grace Church of Fairfax in full view. It was large and relatively modern in design, built into a hill, with red brick at its base and off-white siding stretching up to what appeared to be a peaked second story. The parking lot was already filling up and appeared to be sufficient to accommodate two to three hundred cars. Nothing about its appearance surprised me, as most of the Sovereign Grace churches I’d been to in my childhood met in schools or hotel conference rooms. Though it was clear that this facility had been built as a church, it still had an almost industrial feel, designed more for function than for aesthetic. As I’d suspected, there would be no pews, no stained glass windows here.

After parking, I followed scattered groupings of families and couples up the hill toward the main entrance, wondering if I stood out as a newcomer. I was greeted warmly but briefly with a handshake at the door and ushered into a window-lined lobby, which stretched two stories to the building’s roof. People were milling around, chatting and laughing, but I felt awkward, the party newcomer who has yet to be introduced to anyone and doesn’t know how to make her way into the conversation. So I pressed my way through the crowds and headed into the sanctuary, taking my seat in the last row of plush burgundy chairs.

In front of me, musicians were beginning gather on stage, testing their instruments, arranging their music. Here too, the ceiling stretched up both stories, accommodating a
balcony already filling with people. Around me, the air buzzed with conversation as people
stood in groups scattered across the wide sanctuary. Children were everywhere, some held
by their parents, some sitting quietly in their seats, others chasing each other back and forth
around the room. I took it all in, noting the simple wooden cross hanging center stage and
the scattered fake plants which were the only natural element in the large, windowless space.
So far, I thought, there was nothing terrible, nothing great. I’d have to wait and see what the
service was like.

As if on cue, the musicians began to play, and everyone returned to stand in front of
their seats. I stood up to join in singing. Stylistically, little had changed since the days when
my dad was pastoring the church in Hershey. There were still drums and guitars; the music
was still loud; and people still raised their hands. But as we sang song after song I didn’t
recognize, I realized that the lyrics had undergone a subtle shift. Instead of focusing on the
worshipper’s response to God (“Give me one pure and holy passion,” “I have a destiny;”
“Lead me on and I will run after you”), they emphasized instead God’s response to us
(“Jesus thank You for the cross”; “Upward I look and see Him there, who made an end to
all my sin”). I didn’t like the change. Sure, I thought, Jesus died for me, but wasn’t it more
important to express my response to that? Wasn’t the Christian life more about growth than
sin?

After over half an hour of singing, worship ended. One of the pastors welcomed
guests and asked them to stand so everyone could greet them. I’d known about this
Sovereign Grace tradition from my dad’s years as a pastor, but I hated it. Sure, it was great
to make sure new people were greeted, but drawing attention to them when they already felt

123
awkward? That didn’t seem welcoming to me. Always one to do what I’m told though, I
stood begrudgingly and smiled along with a few other guests while everyone turned and
stared at us, clapping eagerly. I sat down as quickly as seemed polite and listened while the
pastor went over several announcements, all of which seemed focused on the life of the
church, not on any sort of outreach or community involvement. I was disappointed.

There was a short break between the announcements and the sermon, so that the
parents could take their children to their classes. During that time, an older couple seated
beside me introduced themselves and asked me some introductory questions. They were
warm and friendly, and with teenage children of their own, I could tell they were concerned
about me being far from home and family. They gave me their phone number, told me to
call them anytime I wanted to come over for a home-cooked meal. I was touched and
thanked them politely, but I had a hard time imagining myself actually taking them up on
their offer. In my youthful arrogance, I assumed that I couldn’t have anything in common
with a random family. How, I wondered, could they in their comfortable Fairfax world
possibly understand my dreams of ministering to the poor and broken outside the church
walls?

We finished chatting as a different pastor appeared on stage, ready to begin the
sermon. I listened as he used big words like propitiation and justification to talk about how
much we had sinned and how much we needed God’s grace. For the most part, I could
follow what he was saying. But I wasn’t so sure about anyone in the audience who didn’t
come from a church background. As best I could tell, they’d feel confused and out of place.
And I wanted a church where I’d feel comfortable bringing my friends from work who
weren’t Christians. This didn’t seem to be the place, and so I left after one visit frustrated, convinced once again that Career Corps or something like it had to be the place for me.

But that had been almost three years ago, and after trying McLean Bible, Career Corps, and NCC, as well as visiting a few other churches, I’d yet to find a Christian community that excited me. The whole Bretton situation had made me realize that I needed to be part of church where people were deeply involved in caring for one another, and though I hadn’t loved everything about Sovereign Grace Church of Fairfax, I had gotten the distinct impression that it was a real and functioning community where people were actively involved in one another’s lives. Plus, when my brother Joel had been in town for a visit at the end of the summer, we’d gone to visit some old family friends at the Sovereign Grace Church in Maryland and had attended church with them. I’d actually enjoyed myself, and knowing that my time at NCC was drawing to a close, I decided to give the church in Fairfax another chance.

I visited on a few consecutive Sundays and left with much the same sense as I had three years previous. I wasn’t sure this church emphasized the things that I cared about most—missions, social justice, outreach. Most of what they talked about had to do with the gospel message, every sermon connecting back to the idea that we were rebellious sinners saved only by God’s grace. I didn’t disagree exactly, but I thought perhaps the emphasis was misplaced. In my thinking at the time, the gospel was the starting point of Christianity, the teaching you had to accept to get in the door. It was true, but much less interesting than the growth and healing that happened after you became a Christian. I also didn’t know how
worthwhile how it was to preach it in such a way that people who weren’t Christians wouldn’t understand. But I had nowhere else to go, no other ideas to pursue, so I kept coming back and soon decided it was time to check out one of the church’s small groups. According to a brochure tucked inside the bulletin, the small groups for singles all met at the church building on Thursday nights. That was one of my few free nights in the week, so I decided to check it out.

Pulling into the church parking lot around seven, I felt nervous. Already, the world outside was dark and cold, and I wished I were headed home, to comfort and ease. It was one thing to slip into and out of a large church service on Sunday morning; it was quite another to try to integrate myself into yet another small group full of strangers. But I knew there was no way forward but to try, and so I walked across the lonely parking lot and into the dimly lit church basement. It was a large and open space, white walls above green carpet. The room was set up for what looked like a large group, rows of chairs for at least a hundred all facing the stage. It wasn’t quite what I’d expected when I was anticipating a “small group” meeting.

The brochure had said that the meeting began at seven, but I soon discovered that the first half hour was set aside for coffee and mingling. Apparently, most people skipped that part and just showed up at 7:30 p.m., when things really got started. I wished I’d known. I could have gotten more work done at school before I left, and at the very least, I could have avoided an awkward half hour of socializing. I poured myself a hot drink and chatted briefly with the few other people who were there. They seemed young and reserved,
and after a few minutes of forced conversation, ready to move on. Eventually, I gave up and took a seat, sipping my coffee and looking over the handout I’d been given when I walked in, watching people slowly trickle through the doors. Most of them were young, and based on the trendiness of their clothing, appeared to be college students. But there were older singles too, wearing suits, skirts, and ties, apparently arriving straight from work. Some of them looked like the stereotypically sheltered homeschooling Christians I’d tried to distance myself from—pants hiked high on their waists, hair pulled back in tight buns, thick glasses perched on their noses. But most of them appeared surprisingly normal. I hoped no one would notice me or feel bad for me sitting by myself; I just wanted to fade quietly into the background and watch what happened.

After what seemed like an interminable wait, the meeting finally started. In many ways, it resembled a condensed Sunday morning service, an hour filled by singing a few worship songs and listening to a short message. Then, the singles pastor explained, it was time to divide up into small groups. “If you’re new or visiting,” he said, “you can either go with the friend who brought you, or if you’re on your own, come talk to me about which group you should join.” At that, the group dispersed and began heading off in different directions. I found the pastor, and he introduced me to a girl name Chrystal and asked her to take me to her small group.

As we introduced ourselves to one another, I followed Chrystal through interior doors into the basement hallway and then into a small classroom. The walls were papered in pastel Noah’s Ark motif, and children’s uneven drawings were tacked onto bulletin boards and taped onto empty wall space. There were probably about fifteen people sitting in the
room, all perched somewhat precariously on blue plastic chairs designed for much smaller bodies. I smiled at the sight and then sat down in one of the chairs beside Chrystal.

One of the first things I noticed was the person who appeared to be the small group a leader, a tiny Asian man who introduced himself to me as Marcus. He spoke softly and with a British accent, and I was immediately at ease around him in a way that I hadn’t been either with Phil from Career Corps or Eric from NCC. I don’t remember much about the discussion, but I do remember dividing up into even smaller groups at the end and praying with several girls about my current boyfriend and my growing suspicion that I needed to break up with him. I remember thinking the girls were kind and genuinely interested in what was going on in my life. And I remember talking with Marcus after the meeting, learning that he’d studied creative writing as an undergraduate. Since I’d recently started a master’s program in the same field, we chatted about favorite books, and he asked me to e-mail him a copy of my latest essay.

By no means was that first meeting everything I’d ever dreamed a small group could be, but I left encouraged that I’d met a few people who I’d connected with and who seemed interested in getting to know me better. While I was still unsure of whether or not I could support the church’s theology and mission, I was thankful for some good conversations, some people I trusted. It’s a start, I reminded myself, a start.
That fall, I attended Sovereign Grace Church of Fairfax regularly, both on Sunday mornings and Thursday nights. After a month or two, I also began meeting twice a month with two girls from the small group, Chrystal and Mel, for what we called accountability. In essence, we got together and talked about our lives, where we saw God working, as well as where we’d been sinning and needed help growing. Chrystal talked about her struggles to be patient and kind to her roommate. Mel talked about maintaining healthy physical boundaries with her boyfriend. I talked about my difficulty in setting aside time for God in the midst of teaching and grad school responsibilities. I was thankful for the opportunity to develop some deeper friendships with girls at the church, but I still found it strange that we focused so much on the sin label. Why couldn’t we say we were talking about what God was

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"Those who sow in tears
shall reap with shouts of joy!

He who goes out weeping,
bearing the seed for sowing,
shall come home with shouts of joy,
bringing his sheaves with him."

--Psalm 126:5-6
teaching us? I wondered. Why did it always have to be about sin? It made me feel like being a Christian was about some sort of formula to avoid or manage sin, not about worshipping and enjoying God. I didn’t think this was right.

But I pressed on, reminding myself that no church was perfect, that I wasn’t aware of any better options. In January, I signed up for the new members’ class, an eleven-week course designed to give potential members an introduction to every aspect of the church’s theology. We met every Sunday before the church service, and over coffee and Krispy Kreme doughnuts, delved into topics including the gospel, the role of a church member, finances, and gender roles. Having grown up in a Sovereign Grace church, I didn’t find anything that surprised me, but I did find things I wasn’t sure I agreed with. For instance, though I was happy to attend one, I wasn’t sure church members should be required to join a small group. I agreed with both the church and the Apostle Paul that we were saved from sin, hell, and death by Jesus’ death on the cross, not by our own “good actions,” and figured if that was the case, we should avoid compelling people to do non-essential things. It made me nervous to consider being part of a church where people would be keeping tabs on whether or not I attended small group meetings. That, I thought, should be between me and God.

And yet, I felt a growing affinity to the people at Sovereign Grace. In February, Chrystal and I planned a party for our small group, held at my house. Everyone was asked to bring an artifact that represented something about themselves other people wouldn’t know. On the night of the party, we gathered in my living room to eat dinner together and to share our artifacts, which ranged from the poignant to the absurd. We smiled, amused, as
John showed off his model train set, erecting the track in the middle of my living room floor. We laughed when Marcus modeled his Hopkins homecoming king crown and sash. We listened, intrigued, as Stacie displayed her Europe scrapbook and Andy talked to us about an historic family Bible. And everyone was fascinated at my presentation of prescription medication for my excessively sweaty hands, awarding me the “You’re Weirder than We Thought” certificate.

As the evening drew to a close and people began heading home, I sat on the living room floor and chatted with several guys from the group about our favorite bands and concerts. As it turns out, we had similar tastes, and I was relieved to discover that (gasp!) some of the bands they liked were not Christian. While I loved Christian music, I was thankful to know that people in this church were not so sheltered that they ignored everything without a Christian label. We played some of our favorite songs on someone’s I-pod speaker system and sat basking in the glow of a night of good food, good conversation, and lots of laughter. For the first time, I felt free to be myself around the people from the church, began to think that these people weren’t as perfect as they first seemed, that while they cared about sin, they also cared about me.

But in spring, my doubts about the church once again came into clear view. Though I’d stopped attending Career Corps at the end of the previous summer, I’d been invited, along with Career Corps members past and present, to attend a Navigators conference in Raleigh entitled “The Shaping of Things to Come.” The speakers were Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, Australian authors of a book by the same name, and the conference was touted
as a chance to think critically about what it meant to live with a missional emphasis in a post-
Christendom culture. Though I didn’t understand exactly what all that terminology meant, I
was sufficiently intrigued to register for the conference and to buy and read the book before
I went. Frost and Hirsch’s main thesis was that we live in an increasingly unchurched
culture, and therefore, in order to reach unchurched people with the message of the gospel,
we need to reconceive the idea of church, embracing a more organic and less authoritarian
model. It sounded great to me. I was ready to meet these authors and hear their practical
suggestions for building that kind of church.

A group of us from the DC area drove down to the conference together. In a sense,
the weekend was a reunion of sorts, both with the Career Corps people I now saw less
frequently and with some old college friends now scattered across the country. My parents,
who still lived in the Hershey area and were still trying to figure out the church questions
themselves, were also in attendance. I stayed for the weekend with my old roommate Mary
Grace and her husband Christopher in their new townhouse, and at night, the whole group
of us gathered there, staying up late, catching up, laughing together as we watched Napoleon
Dynamite.

The daily conference sessions were also enjoyable. “We come from your future,”
Frost and Hirsch stated repeatedly, reminding us that socially and spiritually, Australia and
Europe were ten to fifteen years ahead of America in both declining church attendance and
increased spiritual interest. They challenged us to prepare for this same phenomena in
America. Were we ready, they asked, to reach increasingly spiritually hungry people who
were also increasingly disinterested in traditional church structures?
I wasn’t sure, but I saw their point. I couldn’t see the postmodern people I encountered daily on the job and on campus attending a place like Sovereign Grace Church of Fairfax, and as I listened to Frost and Hirsch, I realized that it fit their definition of a culturally irrelevant church. It adhered to hierarchical leadership, fostered a come-to-us stance, and emphasized a complexity of theology that would be off-putting to many “outsiders.” While I didn’t mind those things, the friends I was trying to tell about Jesus probably would. The more I thought about it, the more dissatisfied I felt about the idea of becoming a member of Sovereign Grace Church, felt that doing so might in fact be ignoring God’s call and vision for the church.

In the days and weeks after the conference, I continued attending the church in Fairfax, but each time I attended a service or small group meeting, I wrestled with whether or not it was really the church for me. It didn’t help that as a result of the Shaping of Things to Come conference, my parents and good friends from college, Matt and Kellie, were making plans to move to Lancaster City and to start a missional community there. I didn’t know anything about Lancaster City or about what missional community might look like, but I did know both my parents and Matt and Kellie quite well. And I knew that they shared my heart to invest deeply in Christian community and to minister to the surrounding culture as a team. Everything in me wanted to drop it all and join them, but I was only a year into a master’s program that would take at least three years to complete. For a time, I even considered transferring programs, but I would have had to spend more money to go to a less prestigious school. It made sense to stay. And so it made sense to keep going to the Sovereign Grace church. As far as I knew, there was no missional community springing up
in DC, and I needed to have Christian fellowship somewhere. For the time being, I reassured myself.

This was the same logic I used when I decided to move forward with the church membership process. Having completed the membership course, I felt that I needed to make a decision, either to become a member or to keep looking elsewhere. And though some of the Career Corps folk were kicking around ideas of working together on a community service project, the momentum was slow to build, and as Connally pointed out to me over tea in her office one afternoon, probably wouldn’t provide enough teaching and fellowship to serve as a satisfactory replacement for church. Reluctantly, I scheduled my membership interview, a meeting with two of the Sovereign Grace pastors required as a prerequisite to becoming a member. I felt nervous about the whole thing, wanting both to be done with the whole decision-making process and to delay the final commitment as long as possible.

A few weeks later, I was there, in a small office, seated across a coffee table from Vince and Steve. Both men were younger than my parents, but older than me. They were easy to relate to, and though I’d met each of them briefly during the membership class, spent the first few minutes asking questions and trying to get to know me.

“So how did you find the church?” Vince asked, settling back in his chair.

“Well,” I said, “my dad actually used to be a Sovereign Grace pastor of the churches in Lancaster and Hershey. So I’ve known about this group of churches since I was little.” I watched their faces carefully, trying to gauge their reactions. Sometimes, I felt like my past
history with Sovereign Grace was a dirty little secret. Everyone here seemed so happy with the church; I wasn’t sure I wanted them to know that my parents were pastors who’d willingly left it behind.

“Really?” Vince said, his eyes widening almost imperceptibly. “Why did he leave?”

I summarized the situation as succinctly as I could, explaining that my parents had felt called to spend more of their time ministering to the unchurched, that in order to do so, they’d felt it best to get involved elsewhere.

“And how do they feel about you being involved in a Sovereign Grace church now?” Vince asked.

“They’re supportive,” I said. “They’ve always said that if they felt called to return to a more traditional church, they didn’t think they could find anything better than Sovereign Grace.”

“That’s good,” Vince explained. “I only asked because sometimes in a situation like your’s, the parents are hostile toward Sovereign Grace, and that can make it very difficult. It’s wonderful that your parents are so supportive.”

I nodded, surprised that he’d mentioned a situation like mine, that my story was not radically unique. Before I could think of anything else to say, Steve took over, turning the conversation toward my conversion. He asked me to share my journey as a Christian, which I did willingly.

“So how do you know you’re a Christian?” he said.

“Well,” I said, trying to remember the points we’d discussed in the membership class, certain that in a church that emphasized theology, I’d better give the right answer.
“Because I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God who died for my sins and because I’ve received Him into my heart as Lord of my life.” I was referring to John 1:12, which says, “But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.”

“Spoken like a pastor’s daughter,” Steve said, smiling. I smiled back. It all felt a little formulaic to me, like something I’d read in a textbook instead of something that came from my core. The truth was that sometimes I wondered how I could know I was a Christian. I longed for the days of my childhood, when I danced before God without doubt. But I didn’t think then I could admit doubt in a pastor’s office, thought they were more interested in the right answers than they were in my heart. I know now this couldn’t be further from the truth, that both men are unthreatened by real and honest communication, desire to help broken people. But at the time, my pride blinded me from seeing both their compassionate hearts and my own brokenness.

Instead, I continued to communicate only what I thought was safe and correct. When Vince asked if I had any questions or concerns about the church that I wanted to talk about before I became a member, I didn’t feel brave enough to say anything about what I saw as an overemphasis on sin. I did mention my concern about a lack of missional focus and my sense that people in the church put a lot of energy into the church, but not a lot of energy into reaching out to the surrounding community. They acknowledged that it was a weakness of the church and informed me that it was one the pastors were well aware of, one they intended to emphasize growth in over the next few years. They encouraged me to talk to Dave, the newly appointed outreach pastor, to see what ideas he had in mind.
“I guess I’m just not sure,” I said, “that I’m supposed to be in a church that makes it so difficult for new people to enter. I mean, I don’t feel like most of my friends and classmates would be comfortable here because, well, because people are so intense.”

They asked me questions, tried to draw me out about my ideas. I felt heard, but not necessarily understood. What I wanted was for them to think as I did, to say something like, “Wow, you raise a great point. We *should* reorganize our entire church structure to accommodate missions and to make things less intimidating for unchurched people. Thanks so much for pointing that out to us.” But they did not say that. They were gracious. They explained their convictions thoughtfully and gently. But they did not waver in their belief that it was good for the church to have high standards about membership, to be deeply involved in the church itself, to share the gospel primarily by inviting people to come to church events.

As the meeting time drew to a close, the doubt must have been obvious on my face. “Why don’t you take some more time to think and pray about this?” Vince said. “Before you decide to become a member, we want to make sure that you feel confident that God’s called you to be here.”

“Okay,” I said, slightly reluctantly. I knew they were right, that I did need more time. But I hated dragging the process out even longer. Why couldn’t I just make a decision and feel excited about it like everyone else I knew? If this didn’t work out, what else could I possibly do? I wasn’t thrilled about joining, but I wasn’t thrilled about starting over with another church either.
Over the next several months, I continued to wrestle with the questions and returned two more times to meet with Vince and Steve. In the end though, I decided that I would become a member. The church wasn’t perfect, but it was good. I enjoyed the people; they were serious about serving God; and the teaching about sin, while I wasn’t sure I agreed completely, challenged me. It was definitely different from some of the other churches I’d attended, churches that only talked about God’s grace and goodness and our attempts to become more Godly. At the very least, I figured, I’d gain something from the experience. Plus, whenever my doubts crept in, the little voice in the back of my head said you’ll probably move back to Lancaster in another two years. This is just a place for now.

In August, eager to be closer to my job, my grad school classes, and the church, I moved to a townhouse in Fairfax with two girls from the church, one of whom was Chrystal, the girl I’d met on my very first visit. And a few months later, I stood in front of the church along with fifteen or twenty other singles and couples to be officially introduced as a member. The congregation cheered wildly, and I smiled back, feeling both satisfied that I’d finally made my decision and uncertain of whether or not it was the right one. It had been a long journey to this point, and though I did believe that making a commitment to an imperfect institution was okay, I was still trying to feel excited about it. When I’d talked with Connally a few weeks prior, she’d cheered me on, knowing how much it had taken for me to get to this point. Good for you girl, she’d said, good for you.

As I scanned the hundreds of faces in front of me, beaming warmly at those of us joining their congregation, I wished I shared Connally’s unreserved enthusiasm. I was excited, but I also felt scared.
CHAPTER 16: FORGIVENESS

“For such a one, this punishment by the majority is enough,
so you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him,
or he may be overwhelmed with excessive sorrow.
So I beg you to reaffirm your love for him.”

--2 Corinthians 2:6-8

Shortly after I became a member at Sovereign Grace, Vince gave a sermon explaining the church’s stance on church discipline. The more I’d gotten to know Vince, the more I’d grown to respect him. He’d told our singles group about his own troubled adolescence prior to conversion, how he’d paid for a girlfriend to have an abortion. Becoming a Christian had totally changed his life, and as best I could tell, he was happily married and a wonderful father to four kids. But when he preached, it was clear that his past had helped him to understand brokenness, that it had made him willing to face other hard situations with faith for God to work in them.

On this particular Sunday though, he spoke about how in the cases of certain sins, it was necessary for the church to— in essence— excommunicate members who were unwilling to repent. The way he explained it, this was a way of showing grace, of helping people to realize how serious their sin was so that they’d have a chance to repent. My thoughts
immediately went to Bretton. Since he’d left DC, he hadn’t contacted any of us to ask forgiveness for what he’d done. I wondered if he was walking away from Christianity, wondered too if he’d ever do to someone else what he’d done to Flynn. I still had a nagging doubt that we hadn’t handled the situation well, that we should have done something differently either before or after the assault occurred.

I decided it might be good to talk to Vince about the situation and see how he’d suggest applying church discipline in this case. The Career Corps group hadn’t exactly been a church, but it had been a Christian community. And something had gone dreadfully wrong. I hoped Vince would be able to help me figure out exactly what that was, both so I could resolve it in my mind and so I could ensure it would never happen again. I assumed he’d tell me that the whole thing never would have happened if I’d decided to be part of a real church, thought he’d encourage me in my plan to write Bretton a letter explaining why I was choosing to not be his friend anymore.

We sat in his office one afternoon while I awkwardly fumbled my way through the story, looking down often at my lap, too embarrassed about the whole situation to make eye contact. “So,” I said, attempting to draw the story to a close, “he left, and I haven’t seen or heard from him since. And I’m thinking maybe I should write to him and explain why I can’t be his friend anymore.”

I looked up, expecting to see Vince nodding in agreement with my suggested approach. Instead, he was watching me, eyes deep with warmth and tenderness. “Abby,” he said, “imagine what Bretton must be feeling. Imagine the utter guilt and shame that he is
experiencing, the way in which his whole world was shattered as the result of one decision. Just imagine.”

I thought for a minute, tears welling up in my eyes.

Vince continued. “And what do you think Jesus would say to Bretton? What would He do?”

“I think He’d love him,” I said, recalling with shame my nagging guilt over the way we’d treated Bretton. “I think He’d tell Bretton that He forgave Him, that He sent His son to die for those very sins. I think He’d hug him.”

Vince nodded. He opened his Bible and flipped through its thin pages until he found what he was looking for. “Let me read you one of my favorite verses,” he said. “It’s 1 Peter 5:18-19: ‘All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.’”

He paused and looked up at me. “Abby, you have a chance here to be a minister of reconciliation, to communicate God’s love and forgiveness to Ben. Is there any reason you wouldn’t want to do that?”

The only real reason I wouldn’t, I realized, is because I was proud. Though I said I believed Bretton’s sin was no worse than mine, this was not the case. I thought he’d sinned in a way I never had, sinned so grievously that all the Bible’s teaching about grace and forgiveness didn’t exactly apply. But as Vince had kindly helped me to see, this was wrong.
I needed to forgive Bretton, to offer him the same degree of grace that had been offered to me.

A few days after my meeting with Vince, I sat at my computer, attempting to draft a letter to Bretton to ask him to forgive me for the way I’d treated him two years prior. I didn’t know how or if he’d respond, but I knew I had to do this. I went through three versions of the letter, revising each time to cut out more of my judgmental tone, to add in more words of grace and hope. I told Bretton that I’d been wrong to ignore him, to cut him off from friendship. I apologized for my pride and self-righteousness and explained that in God’s eyes, I was equally sinful. And I let him know that if he was willing, I was desirous of walking through a process of repentance with him, of talking things through and making amends. In conclusion, I wrote:

Regardless of what you decide though, I want you to know that I forgive you, that I care for you, that I am sorry for the ways I have sinned against you, that I believe that God is big enough to redeem even this. And no matter what, I will be praying for you, that the gospel of God’s grace reaches into the deepest corners of your heart and that you will experience His transforming work in your life as you respond with faith and repentance. I love you.

Your sister in Christ,

Abby

Sadly, Bretton never wrote me back, but I still hope that one day, we’ll get the chance to talk and to see God reconcile our relationship. Even if we don’t though, I know that God used Bretton’s brokenness to help me begin to see my own pride, to show me that
while I said I loved God’s redemptive heart, I often lacked grace in the way I responded to others. As I had with Bretton, I tended to expect people to do the right thing, to be responsible for making community work smoothly and easily. When they didn’t live up to my expectations, I tended to quit and, on some level, leave them behind.

All of this should have clued me in to the fact that my choice to stay at Sovereign Grace had been a good one. It should have made me aware that on a scale much larger than the Bretton situation, God was trying to teach me something about humility and about grace. But I was still fighting.
CHAPTER 17: STAYING

“And if on some point you think differently,
that too God will make clear to you.

Only let us live up to what we have already attained.”

--Philippians 3:15-16

“For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking
but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.

Whoever thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men.”

--Romans 14:17-18

It was Sunday morning, March 2006, 10:15 a.m., almost six months since I’d become a member of Sovereign Grace Church of Fairfax. But this Sunday morning I was not at church. I was in Lancaster, sitting in the backseat of my parents’ cranberry red Ford Taurus, digital camera in my lap, McDonald’s coffee in my hand. My dad was driving, my mom in the passenger seat. Trickles of rain streaked the car windows, blurring my view of the farmland that stretched for miles around, bleak in the grayness of the sky and the confines of the season. The fields were dead, sickly yellow, the first touches of green still
too sparse to generate any real hope of imminent spring. My dad parked the car along the side of the road, and for a moment, I surveyed the scene in silence. This is it, I thought, this is where it really happened.

I had come to Lancaster to do some research on my great-great-great-grandfather, Jonas H. Martin, who in his day had been responsible for a massive church split between differing factions of Lancaster County Mennonites. The assignment was for a grad school project, but it was also deeply personal. Even as a church member, I still had many unanswered questions about church, still rubbed against many of the finer points of Sovereign Grace’s theology, like its emphasis on sin and its lack of community involvement. Though I had no plans of leaving, I sometimes thought I might have to, feared that when it came down to it, I just didn’t fit the Sovereign Grace mold. My research showed that Jonas’ dreams of a better church had led he and his followers to a church split, just as they’d led my own father to leave two churches in order to start his own. I wondered if I were destined to follow suit, hoped there might be another way.

From where I stood, I could see the landscape of the story I’d been researching. Behind me stretched the original homestead, still a working farm, of my distant ancestor David Martin, who settled here in 1727 after fleeing religious persecution by Swiss Calvinists and Lutherans. In front of me lay Weaverland Mennonite Church, first built as a small meetinghouse by Martin and his neighbors in 1740, now a large, red-brick structure with a parking lot packed full, a multi-colored assortment of cars. Beside me was the Old Order Weaverland Mennonite Church that the Jonas had founded when he’d split from the established Mennonite church. It was smaller and simpler, painted white, its parking lot full
too, row after row of cars, black only. For the more conservative Old Order church, any other color is considered too worldly.

The church buildings were less than three hundred feet apart, resting on opposing hills separated by a slight valley, lines of gravestones circling each like the moat of a medieval castle. To a casual observer, the proximity of these churches in a landscape otherwise dominated by farmland might have seemed coincidental, but I knew that to Lancaster County Mennonites, the story lay not in the nearness, but in the distance—physical, emotional, and spiritual—between the two.

For Mennonite historians, particularly those with close connections to Lancaster County, the story of Jonas H. Martin and his followers, known then and today as Yonies, is an uncomfortable milestone, one that does not fit the pacifist persona of Mennonite theology. The split, which scholars attribute to a difference of opinion on such matters as Sunday schools, the use of English in services, and the presence of a pulpit in the sanctuary, separated families and neighbors and ripped apart a community that had been integrated socially, economically, and spiritually. Writes Brian Martin in the introduction to an article about the two Weaverland churches, “Without question, the following story contains the most difficult era and the darkest hours of our 275-year history.” Fellow historian Eli Wenger provides a similar opening warning for his readers: “We are now entering an era in the Weaverland Mennonite Church life that is unpleasant and something we should all hang our heads in penitence to God [for].”

From the little bit I knew from my research thus far, I wasn’t certain of how to think about the split. To me, it seemed ridiculous to divide over such minor issues, to break apart
families and friendships simply because one faction wanted Sunday schools and another
didn’t. Nowhere in the Bible did it say anything about pulpits, Sunday schools, or English,
so I couldn’t understand why they were a big deal, why people couldn’t agree to disagree and
move on. After all, 1 Peter 3:8 commands, “Finally, all of you, have unity of mind,
sympathy, brotherly love, a tender heart, and a humble mind.” A church split definitely
didn’t seem to fit this description.

And yet, I saw a lot of the splitting tendency in myself. I wanted unity, but what I
really wanted was for other people to be unified in agreeing with me. When they weren’t,
my first thought was to quit, to move on to someplace else where my ideas would be
supported. What I still couldn’t discern was how to think about this tendency. Was it the
mark of a visionary, calling people to rise above mediocrity and fulfill God’s vision for the
church? Or was it simply pride, an unwillingness to cooperate when life didn’t go my way? I
was hoping that Jonas’ story would help me figure out the answer, knew that if I was ever
going to feel settled in my current church community (or in any church community for that
matter), I needed to decide when it was okay to stay and when it was time to go.

Two nights before our drive to Weaverland, I sat in my parents’ living room, just
fifteen miles away, sprawled out on the wine-colored couch, my Dad on another couch
opposite me. It had taken me four hours to get here, to their house in Lancaster City, two
hours longer than normal because of the Friday afternoon DC traffic.

I was tired, but not tired enough to prevent my curiosity about Jonas and his story
from spilling to the surface. “So why did Jonas’ family come here in the first place? Why
did the Mennonites leave Europe?” I asked, attempting to get a sense of the bigger picture, the larger history that both Jonas and I are part of.

“They were being persecuted,” my Dad explained. This I knew already, having heard mention of it at family reunions and in various conversations with my grandparents. Until recently, I’d been satisfied with this answer, but now I needed to go deeper. I needed to understand why he’d turned out the way he had.

“But Dad,” I persisted, “why were they being persecuted? Who was persecuting them?”

“The Lutherans and Calvinists were after them,” he explained. “Because they didn’t believe in infant baptism.”

“Really?” I questioned. Sovereign Grace leaned heavily on the theology of Luther and Calvin, one I associated with the doctrine of salvation by grace alone, not necessarily with infant baptism. I couldn’t believe I’d never heard about this before.

“Luther himself encouraged killing the Mennonites,” Dad continued.

I was shocked. Until this point, I’d always heard Martin Luther described as a kind of hero of the faith, the first man to challenge the unnecessary rules and regulations of the Catholic Church. But suddenly I wasn’t so sure. What theological differences could matter enough to lead people to kill one another? I wondered. And how did this history shape Jonas into a man who would eventually lead a church split over whether or not there should be Sunday schools?
Finding the answer required digging deeper. After all, Jonas’ story was part of a larger story, the story of the Anabaptist faith, which first emerged in sixteenth century Europe. On October 31, 1517, Martin Luther posted his 95 Theses on the door of All Saints Church in Wittenburg, Germany, kicking off the Protestant Reformation and initiating perhaps the most significant church split in history. For the first time in centuries, the Catholic Church experienced a major challenge to its doctrinal authority. Luther and his contemporary, John Calvin, with their emphasis on leaving behind the excesses of Catholicism in favor of a grace-based theology, quickly gained a wide following, particularly among the emerging urban bourgeoisie. The door had been opened for more individual interpretations of the Bible, and the result was the appearance, within just ten years, of another distinct theology, one that was neither Catholic nor Protestant.

The early Anabaptists lived primarily in Switzerland, Germany, and the Netherlands. Like the Protestant reformers, the Anabaptists believed that words, things, people, and places were not, in and of themselves, sacred, and emphasized a radical, individual call to discipleship. Their perspectives on faith, redemption, and the authority of the Scripture were almost identical to those of Luther and Calvin. However, the Anabaptists took the reforms even further than other Protestants, expressing convictions against the infant baptism practiced in both Catholic and Protestant churches. They preached that salvation involved a personal decision that could only be made by an informed adult and that baptism should therefore occur only after an adult profession of faith, not as an attempt to force conversion upon an infant.
The Mennonites, who took their name from sixteenth-century Dutch leader Menno Simons, and other Anabaptist groups, including the Amish and Hutterites, suffered greatly for their separation from the two dominant theologies of the day. Religious leaders were frightened by the presence of a group who saw themselves, not the established Christian church, as true Christians. Luther himself offered vehement opposition to the Anabaptists, writing in a 1536 pamphlet, “When it is a case of only upholding some spiritual tenet, such as infant baptism, original sin, and unnecessary separation, then ... we conclude that ... the stubborn sectaries must be put to death.” His supporters, along with members of the Catholic Church, followed his lead, demanding higher taxes and confiscating land so that many Mennonites in Switzerland and Germany had to resort to living in caves. Between 1525 and 1540, the persecution was so intense that it resulted in some five to six thousand deaths. Being a pacifist people, most Mennonites did not retaliate but instead moved on to the New Continent, establishing colonies first in Pennsylvania, then in Ohio, Indiana, Virginia and Canada.

From the beginning, Jonas’ ancestors defined themselves in opposition to the surrounding culture. They were not Protestant, not Catholic, and they were willing to die because they believed their way to be the right way, the only way. Unlike their opponents, they expressed their convictions through non-violence rather than through persecution, but their fervor was equally strong. Central to the Mennonite religion was a certain degree of pride, a conviction that to compromise was to fail, to fall from grace.

In the New World, a country which proclaimed religious freedom for all citizens, the Mennonites found themselves surrounded by neighbors (including Quakers, Dunkers, and
Amish), who as fellow victims of religious intolerance in other European countries, were quite content to leave them alone, even if they did disagree with some of their beliefs. For the first time in Mennonite history, there was no clear enemy. It seemed the perfect opportunity for peace. Instead, as I quickly discovered, the conflict turned inward, and the same convictions that had sustained a persecuted people began to destroy them.

Born in 1839, Jonas arrived just over one hundred years after his ancestors’ emigration to America, and certainly his growing-up years were filled with tales of their trials, both the persecutions of Switzerland and the challenges of life in the New World. While he roamed the banks of the Conestoga Creek, fishing and swimming with older brothers Abraham and Levi, while he visited a shop near his house to watch massive Conestoga wagons being built, Jonas must have constantly been reminded of his unique heritage, must have seen his own German language as a sign of his separateness, his family’s distrust of the world outside the Mennonite church.

But in 1849, when Jonas was ten, the Assembly of Pennsylvania passed acts instituting free public education. For the Mennonites, this meant a shift from church-sponsored schools to state-sponsored schools and from German language instruction to English language instruction, changes many feared because they brought the worldly language and control of the government into their homes and communities. In 1851, Brecknock Township, where Jonas’ family lived, adopted the public school system, and so it is likely that Jonas would have attended a public English school in his teen years, at least for a few months in the winter when his help was not required on the farm.
Eventually, as Jonas moved into his teens and twenties, the controversy over the use of English in schools spilled into the Mennonite church. The number of Jonas’ peers who were leaving the church in favor of other Protestant denominations was steadily increasing, and many felt the lack of English in the Mennonite services was at fault. Leaders from this camp thought the solution lay in reforms; they wanted to draw the younger crowd back by introducing Sunday schools and English services as well as by allowing ministers to officiate in the wedding ceremonies of young people, even if they had not yet made a decision to join the Mennonite church. Traditionally, marriage had been defined as a relationship between two people belonging to the same church, but reformers hoped that marrying non-members within the church would somehow keep them there.

To a modern audience, these reforms might seem trivial, but to many Mennonites they were a radical departure from the theology their ancestors had passed down to them at great cost. For example, the introduction of Sunday schools seemed to mark a departure from that which made the Mennonite Church unique. Historically, Mennonites believed in principles of equality and community, while Sunday schools separated people into groups based on age, gender, and ability. Mennonites believed in adult conversion, while Sunday schools emphasized converting children. Mennonites believed in the role of ordained leaders, chosen by lot to serve the community, while Sunday schools encouraged lay leadership. And perhaps worst of all, in the eyes of those with deep ties to their church and their heritage, the addition of Sunday schools marked a shift toward alignment with the same Protestant groups the Mennonites had historically stood in opposition to.
Poised on the brink of change, Lancaster County Mennonites were faced with a choice: allow assimilation and maintain a unified front, or fight, at a cost yet unknown, to preserve time-honored traditions and truths?

I knew what Jonas would eventually choose, knew he would decide to value his doctrinal convictions over maintaining his community. But I also knew that he spent much of his adult life wavering, serving for some eighteen years as a minister in a church that was divided on these issues. He did not want to leave, tried for a long time to make staying work. Perhaps, I thought, my choice to stay at Sovereign Grace was like this. Perhaps I was simply delaying the inevitable.

For Jonas, the conflict in Lancaster eventually came to a head several years after he had been chosen by lot to serve as Bishop of the Lancaster Conference churches. One of the churches, Lichty’s, became involved in a devastating controversy over a pulpit at their new church building. Things had been bad at Lichty’s ever since the building project started. The owner of the first site the congregation had selected would only sell the property if the church agreed to prohibit Sunday school, singing school, and evening meetings, all considered liberal reforms at the time. Some members had no problems with these limitations; others did. Eventually, a second site was chosen, less than a mile and a half away, but church members remained dissatisfied, even chasing one another with shovels during the laying of the foundation.
Then, as building began, the conflict shifted to the architecture of the building, specifically whether or not there should be a pulpit in the building. Historically, ordained Mennonite leaders sat behind a table at the front of the room, not elevated above the rest of the congregation, with the floor sloped upward so everyone could see. However, more progressive churches had begun to install elevated pulpits in their sanctuaries. Jonas refused to use a pulpit, instead standing in front of one when he visited a Lutheran church. To Jonas and other conservatives, the presence of a pulpit symbolized a mentality of elevating church leaders above other members of the congregation, a mentality that went against the brotherhood spirit they believed integral to the Mennonite church.

As the Lichty’s church neared completion, the building committee went ahead and had a pulpit installed without consulting church leaders. The committee argued that the pulpit was for the benefit of preacher John M. Zimmerman, who only had one arm and therefore experienced difficulty preaching from a conventional table. Church members on the opposing side were understandably outraged at this decision being made without their approval. Jonas was quoted as saying, “It came in; I don’t know how; and I wish it would go out; I don’t know how.”

Though Jonas’ wish would indeed come true, the results were more devastating than he could have imagined. Sometime during the night of Thursday, September 26, someone entered through a small sanctuary window, tore the pulpit out, and filled in the hole with floor boards. In the place where the pulpit had stood, there now rested an “old-fashioned, poorly constructed preacher’s table.” When the painters arrived the next morning and discovered the switch, the response was immediate, intense, and vocal. Many, knowing
Jonas’ distaste for the pulpit, blamed him for having it removed. He denied any role in the affair, but the accusations continued, shifting toward claims that he was protecting the guilty.

Jonas established committees to investigate the matter, but these resolved little. Rumors of all kinds circulated. Some blamed Martin M. Zimmerman, who lived next door to the meetinghouse. Others accused Weaver Burkholder and Menno Zimmerman, who were overheard making suspicious remarks. Jonas begged the people to forget the whole thing, but rumors only continued to grow. The controversy even caught the attention of the local secular newspaper, the Lancaster Examiner, which reported, “Nothing has ever stirred such a profound sensation in the old sedate church in the county as this.”

A group of eleven men continued to argue that Jonas was protecting the true culprits, so Jonas, in what even he would later admit was a brash move, had all eleven excommunicated from the church. Included in this number was the accused Martin Zimmerman. Not until nineteen years later would Anna Zimmerman, not related to Martin, confess that she and her family were responsible for the pulpit theft and that her deceased husband had built the preacher’s table which replaced the pulpit. Only then, after nineteen years of being denied church membership for a crime he had not committed, after long battles with depression and alcoholism, would Martin Zimmerman be restored to the church.

From this point, things went downhill quickly. A series of conflicts arose between Jonas and the reformers, who continued to push both for Sunday schools and for Jonas to take responsibility for the pulpit theft debacle. Finally, Jonas felt he could take it no longer.
On October 6, 1893, he told other bishops before a conference meeting that he was prepared to take a stand on several issues. They asked that he not share his concerns because it would disrupt unity, but he went ahead, apparently convinced that he could compromise no longer. At the counsel meeting, he introduced himself as follows:

I am in harmony with the old ground and counsel, but not with the new things that have been introduced. Giving together in marriage such that are outside of the church and with the Sunday schools that are not held in peace nor with those that made it thus am I not at one. If something is passed that is not good, one can change it again, one needs not let it be so. I have for a long time already agreed to these things against my conscience and I want to continue to no longer keep house this way.

After Jonas’ speech, the other seven bishops withdrew to hold counsel. They agreed that Jonas had sinned by expressing his self-will and decided he would have to recant and confess his error. Jacob N. Brubacher, who was the Conference Moderator, pulled out a watch and allowed Jonas ten minutes to make a decision. Jonas would not back down. He said, “I want to be understood correctly. I would be satisfied with the old ground, but not with the school and not with the giving into marriage of such as are not members.” He was told that his ministry would be revoked and his membership in the Lancaster Conference would be suspended.

And with that, the years of tension officially reached a breaking point. Jonas walked out the door of the Conference meeting and convened with his followers under a tree before heading home. Nine of the fifteen ministers under Jonas’ authority decided to leave the
Lancaster Conference with him. The following Sunday, Jonas met with these and other followers, continuing business as usual by baptizing twenty-two new members into the church.

Unfortunately, the split was anything but peaceable. Neighbors were set against one another. Families were divided as some children went along with the split and others did not; other families moved from Juniata and Snyder counties to join Jonas’ group. And both Lancaster Conference and Old Order Mennonites worked hard to recruit to their side families who in the years before the split had stopped going to church all together.

Things turned even worse in April of 1894 when the Old Order Mennonites showed up for a Sunday service at Weaverland only to find themselves locked out of the building. Historians still disagree as to who exactly was responsible for the lockout—the caretaker or the anti-Martin faction—but Christian Zimmerman, a Yonie present that day, offers an eyewitness account. “We asked the man [the caretaker] why he takes the authority to lock the house and the land, since we have the right to the house and the land, and loaned him a small house, for opening and closing the meeting house for us, and keeping it clean, as his rent. Then he answered that he has it from headquarters, which we understood to mean the bishops.”

Though Jonas himself had paid five hundred dollars of his own money so that the Weaverland building could be completed debt free, his group was forced to hold services outdoors that damp, misty day, and one woman caught pneumonia and died as a result. Plans were immediately begun for a new Weaverland church, to be constructed only four
hundred yards from the old. By November 2 of the same year, the first Old Order service was held in the new building.

Other Lancaster Conference churches followed suit, denying the Old Order groups access to their buildings, forcing them to build new meetinghouses, often in close proximity to the original buildings that both sides had worked together to build. Some say that the fights over the church buildings caused more pain than the church split itself. Though both groups continued to live and work alongside one another, they were no longer one in spirit. As Eli Wenger put it, “Thus came a sad climax to a controversy that had been waging for a number of years. During the week we can help and work together at funerals, filling silos, and many other secular duties, and well that we do. But come Sunday morning, we pass one another going to our separate places of worship, to our own churches.”

In the basement library of the Lancaster County Mennonite Historical Society, a small brick building tucked in along Rt. 30 between Lancaster Mennonite High School and a drive-through Starbucks, I read these lines and felt, as I often did when researching Jonas’ life, sad. I knew this kind of division was not how God had designed His church to function, and yet it happened frequently. I’d personally experienced it, on a much smaller, but still painful scale, when my family had left my Dad’s church in my teens.

And yet, I was beginning to see, Jonas’ world was very different from my world. It was a world where people were born, lived, and died in the same small town. It was a world where Christianity and culture were enmeshed, where a change in one equaled a change in the other. In this world, giving up German services and introducing Sunday schools were
not simply matters of preference; they were symbols of something far more important to
many Mennonites, of a way of life that had been preserved at the expense of many lives. I
could picture the sadness in old eyes as the youth talked about reforms, the heartbreak at
realizing that their children wanted to become more like the very Protestants who had once
persecuted them. And I could sympathize with their desire to fight for the old ways.

From my modern vantage point, however, I wasn’t sure a split was justified. I
believed Christianity was bigger than any one culture, loved that a common belief in the
gospel of Jesus Christ could unify Pentecostals in Africa, Catholics in South America, and
Episcopelians in Virginia. As much as I understood the desire to hold on to tradition, to
value things that other people didn’t consider important, I was beginning to wonder if 1
Peter 3:8’s call for unity took precedence, if being a disciple of Christ sometimes meant
dying to one’s own preferences and desires for the sake of advancing His kingdom. It was
easy enough to apply this idea to Jonas’ life, a little harder to see when it came to my own.
This chapter could not have been written without two tremendous resources on the life of Jonas H. Martin: Raymond and Elizabeth Martin’s Bishop Jonas H. Martin: His Life and Genealogy (Baltimore, MD: Gateway, 1985) and Amos B. Hoover’s The Jonas Martin Era (Denver, PA: Hoover, 1982). Though both books contain valuable primary source and genealogy information, each begins with a brief biography of Jonas, and these texts provided most of the information for this essay. In addition, the translations of Jonas’ letters to Jacob Mensch provided in Hoover’s book were particularly helpful as they allowed for my only glimpse into Jonas’ life through his own words. I am indebted to the fine work of these scholars.

Several other sources provided important information specifically on Jonas’ role in and relation to the 1893 church split:


Lee, Daniel B. Old Order Mennonites: Rituals, Beliefs, and Community. Chicago, IL:


On the history of the Mennonite faith, both in Europe and in America, I conducted personal interviews with my father, Jerry Martin, and grandfather, Amos Martin, and referred to:


CHAPTER 18: AMONG THE BROKEN

“Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I come not to call the righteous, but sinners.”

--Mark 2:17

As the months and years passed by, I continued both in my membership at Sovereign Grace and in my struggle to feel at home there. Though my sense of belonging improved dramatically when I started dating CJ, a guy I’d gotten to know in my small group, I still found it difficult to relate with many of the other people I met. I attributed this problem to their lack of vision and capacity to engage people and was often tempted to think that if I found a church with a vision more similar to mine, all of this wouldn’t feel so hard.

One man in our small group made me particularly uncomfortable. Leonard attended almost every meeting and even showed up early, eager to learn and to be around people. In many ways, he was exactly what you’d want in a fellow church member—faithful, enthusiastic, willing to serve. But to be completely honest, I didn’t like Leonard. On a purely superficial level, he didn’t look cool. To stand next to him was to be associated with much that repulsed me—thick, yellowed glasses, tucked in t-shirts, too-tight shorts that are
pulled, always, directly across the center of his middle-aged gut. To a lover of beauty like myself, this was a visual offense, an affront, but it was one that I’d been willing to overlook in other cases. My own father, in fact, was notoriously guilty of similar offenses, and while my brothers and I found his fashion impairment a wonderful topic for good-natured ribbing, I’d never considered it repulsive.

No, with Leonard there was more. As much as I hate to admit it, the honest truth is that what really made me uncomfortable about Leonard was his mental disability. I noticed it the first time I met Leonard, almost as quickly as I noted his fashion faux-pas. It was clear immediately that something was not quite right. First of all, he didn’t seem bothered by or even aware of the fact that he was nearly twice as old as the rest of the young adults in our singles group. And then there were the little things. His comments in our discussions didn’t always make sense. He stumbled over words when he read out loud. And the few times we talked one-on-one, he leaned in too close, repeated the same ideas over and over again. I didn’t know exactly what was wrong, but I knew something was wrong. And so I backed away, cut our conversations short, and basically just tried to avoid him.

There was no room for Leonard did not fit the self-centered vision of church I’d generated in my teens and early twenties. In my grand dreams, church was a place where I should be comfortable, where people should make me feel welcome and accepted and warm inside. Of course, I didn’t have any illusions that they’d all be just like me. I wanted them to be different, unique, diverse in the ways that make any community really beautiful. In my internal vision of church, there was room for many types of people: the nurturing, motherly type, the intellectually and artistically stimulating type, the make me laugh until I cry type,
even the want to follow in my footsteps type. But of course, I thought, they’d all be cool and energizing and fun. They’d be different, but not that different, not uncomfortably different. Not like Leonard.

Now of course, being a good Christian, I realized that it would be completely uncharitable, not to mention impossible, to kick Leonard out of our group or even to be outright unkind to him. And I recognized too that if the church could not provide a safe and comfortable home for someone like Leonard, it wasn’t being much of a church. After all, if I expected a church to welcome and encourage me, shouldn’t it offer that to everyone, even people who didn’t seem to have much to offer? I’d read enough of the Bible to know that God’s heart is moved by the plight of the poor and the needy, that Jesus spent much of His time on earth being with and touching and healing people just like Leonard. So I was glad that there were others in my church who seemed to be befriending and caring for Leonard. I just didn’t feel like I needed to be one of them. Which was convenient, because I certainly didn’t want to.

And were it not for my boyfriend CJ, I probably would have continued this approach indefinitely. However, before CJ and I had ever gone out, CJ and Leonard had developed a friendship. At the time, CJ was leading the small group that all three of us were part of, and therefore Leonard had grown to see him as a protector and provider of sorts. CJ made sure Leonard felt part of our discussions, and he smoothed things over when Leonard said something wacky or confusing. When Leonard had questions about the sermon, he’d ask CJ. When he wanted to plan a social event, he’d get CJ to help him with the details he couldn’t manage. He liked to sit next to CJ at church. And though I could tell it sometimes
flustered him, CJ generally responded to all of this with a degree of poise, patience, and compassion that was foreign to me. All of this greatly increased my respect for CJ and was one of the many reasons I said yes when he asked me out. But it didn’t immediately change my attitude toward Leonard; it just meant I had more opportunity to watch CJ interact with Leonard and more opportunity to see just how much I still really didn’t want to be around him.

So when, a few months into our relationship, CJ told me that Leonard needed help buying a plane ticket to a church conference in Louisville, I secretly hoped CJ would find a way to send him with someone else. We already had our tickets, and it was supposed to be just the two of us, enjoying a leisurely day of travel. I’d never flown anywhere with a boyfriend before, and I’d imagined the whole experience as a romantic one, going off on our first big adventure together, snuggling on the plane, having CJ’s undivided attention for the entirety of a day.

“You know,” CJ said, “if there are tickets left on our flight, I’m probably going to have him fly with us. Is that okay?”

My heart sank. At this point, we had not really talked about my feelings toward Leonard, so I felt trapped. I knew what I wanted, and I knew what was right. They were not the same thing. “That’s fine,” I managed, holding onto a silent hope that our flight would be full.

It wasn’t. I struggled. I confessed to CJ my feelings of selfishness and pride, and he admitted that he’d also hoped we could travel alone. But he encouraged me to see this as a God-given opportunity to serve Leonard by meeting his very practical need for travel
assistance. So we prayed together that He’d give us the grace to do it well and maybe, perhaps, even to enjoy it.

By the time the weekend of the trip actually arrived, I had started to think of myself as a martyr. I’m doing this to honor God, I thought; surely, He will be impressed with my sacrifice. So I put on a bright smile as the three of us loaded the car and attempted to carry on a conversation with Leonard on the drive from Fairfax to Baltimore.

“So have you ever flown before, Leonard?” I asked.

“Yup. I live real close to Dulles,” he answered, ending the sentence, as he often did, with an irritatingly loud inhalation of breath through his nose. “Hey CJ,” he added, “why aren’t we flying out of Dulles? It’s much closer you know.”

“Yes Leonard,” CJ explained, “That’s true. But we could get a direct flight this way. If we flew out of Dulles, we would have had a long lay-over. So in the long run, it’s much quicker to go this way.”

“Oh, okay.” Leonard inhaled another loud breath and appeared to ponder this for a moment.

“So Leonard,” I said, turning my head around from the passenger seat to look back at him, “What are you looking forward to about this weekend?”

He inhaled. Loudly. “Seeing people. Like Scriv and Tim.”

“Cool,” I said.

“Hey CJ,” Leonard continued. “I think Scriv and Tim are flying out of Dulles. I think maybe we should have flown out of Dulles. It’s much closer, you know.”
“Well,” CJ answered, his voice steady, “maybe next year you can fly out of Dulles too. But I thought it’d be better to fly out of Baltimore this year. Is that okay?”

“Okay.”

I reached over and squeezed CJ’s hand in an expression of solidarity, then continued.

“So Leonard, what other plans do you have for this summer?”

“Wanna go see Mike in Richmond. You know Mike?”

“No,” I said, “I don’t know Mike.”

“He’s a good buddy,” Leonard explained. I nodded.

“He used to go to our church,” CJ added.

“Cool,” I said. “Are you going to drive to visit him?”

“Yup. Drive. Not fly.” He paused for a second, then continued, “Hey CJ, I think next year I’m gonna fly from Dulles, okay? It’s right beside my house. It’ll be much quicker. Won’t have to drive so far like we are now. I don’t like driving so far.”

“Okay Leonard,” CJ said, his steadiness fraying into slight impatience. “You can do that.”

And so it went for much of our journey to Louisville. I oscillated between trying to engage Leonard, which usually made me frustrated, and ignoring him, which always made me feel guilty. I wondered what people thought as they watched the three of us standing in line, eating lunch, finding seats together. Because I am an avid people-watcher myself, always speculating on the lives and stories of the people I see, I tend to assume that everyone in a public place is doing the same thing. I tried to imagine their hypotheses. Did
people think he was an uncle? Or maybe that he was a client of some social services agency
CJ and I were employed by? Did they pity us? Admire us? Or worst of all, think we were
actually friends with this guy? That we were like him? After all, a friend is defined as “a
person attached to another by feelings of affection or mutual regard.” I certainly didn’t feel
that way about Leonard, but I knew he would proudly say he was our friend. He was happy
to be with us. I felt terrible that I couldn’t say the same. Yes, I was doing the right thing,
and certainly, I wanted people to notice and admire me for it. But my heart was far from in
the right place. I was not truly loving Leonard.

And yet, if I’m perfectly honest, I’m not sure I even realized this at the time. I think
I felt I was doing the best I could, was doing more, in fact, than a lot of other people. I was
getting by, doing my duty, and that was enough. It was enough for me throughout the three
days in Louisville, enough to sustain me on our journey back to Baltimore, enough to make
me smile every time Leonard talked about flying out of Dulles next year. It was enough until
a quiet moment, near midnight, when the three of us were in the car, driving back to Fairfax.
CJ had kindly asked Leonard if he could be quiet so I could get some sleep while we drove.
I had to be up at six the next morning to prepare for a long day of teaching middle school
students, and he knew I’d be exhausted, wanted me to get as much rest as I could.

Leonard was happy to comply, and I tilted my seat back and closed my eyes, hoping
to ease quickly into sleep. Instead, I became increasingly alert, aware of each slight turn of
the car, each moment of acceleration, each time CJ tapped on the brakes. I kept my eyes
closed, determined to sleep, but I could not. I thought back over the weekend, tried to
reflect on what exactly I was learning or taking away from the time. I’d heard lots of great
sermons the past few days, but I wasn’t sure, on a practical level, how they’d impacted my understanding of the Christian faith. Instead, I heard Leonard’s steady breaths in the back seat, and I wondered what he was thinking about now, what this weekend had been about for him. I thought, as I had several times throughout the day, about how hard it must be for him to always be dependent on others, to not understand exactly what was going on, to trust that those around him would look out for his best interest and protect him.

And suddenly, as if God Himself were speaking to me (and I believe that He was), a thought entered my mind: *You know, Abby, Leonard is worth just as much to me as you are. I delight in him just as much as I delight in you. He offers me just as much as you do.*

I was floored. Here I’d been spending the whole weekend thinking that I was offering Leonard and God this great service, that I was such an amazingly kind and generous person, but in actuality, even my so-called service was an act of pride. I thought I was better than Leonard, had questioned why God would burden me with his presence, and had even felt like putting up with this burden was an act of true Christianity. The depths of my heart had been laid bare, and they were found wanting. Tears slid through my still-closed eyes while I wrestled with my pride, wrestled to accept what I believed to be true, that Leonard and I were created in God’s image with equal value and purpose, that we were equally sinners and equally in need of saving grace. I knew it was true, but that didn’t make it any easier to accept.

A few weeks ago, CJ was sick, and so for the first time in a long time, I found myself attending a church service without him by my side. I entered the sanctuary just as the first
song began to play and found a place close to the front, next a woman I recognized but had
never met. She was older, apparently alone, and I felt self-conscious sitting next to her, very
aware of her disheveled clothes and greasy hair, of her too eager laugh and her too loud
singing. I put my coat on the chair beside her, closed my eyes, and started to sing the
familiar words. *Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but
now I’m found. Was blind, but now I see.*

As we finished the first verse, I opened my eyes to discover that Leonard had taken
his place on the other side of me. He too was singing loudly and earnestly, hands raised in
front of him. For a moment, I stopped singing and listened to his voice. *’Twas grace that
taught my heart to fear and grace my fears relieved. How precious did that grace appear, the hour I first
believed.* I thought about what Leonard’s faith meant to him, about how much he loved Jesus
and desired to worship him, both in singing and with his life. And I thought once again
about the fact that God loved me no more and no less than Leonard, than the greasy-haired
woman, than all of the other church members I found it so easy to judge.

As the music changed tempos and shifted into a new arrangement of the familiar
hymn, I began to weep. I raised my hands high to the God I’d danced with as a child, to the
God who’d carried me through the trials of adolescence, to the God who was even now
allowing me to see His vision of what church should be. And I sang, my quavering voice
mingling with Leonard’s off-key tenor and with the greasy-haired woman’s soprano and with
the harmony of the entire congregation. *My chains are gone. I’ve been set free. My God, my Savior,
has ransomed me. And like a flood, His mercy reigns, unending love, amazing grace.*
Through the tears, I smiled. At last, I knew. I was in good company. I was home.

And I wasn't leaving anytime soon.
REFERENCES


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CURRICULUM VITAE

Born in 1980 in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, Abigail Martin attended The Pennsylvania State University, Schreyer Honors College and in 2002 received a B.S. in Secondary English Education. She worked as a middle school English teacher in the Fairfax County Public School system for five years. After three years as a part-time student, she has spent the past year as a full time student and teaching assistant at George Mason University. She anticipates that she will be graduated in May of 2008 with an MFA in Creative Writing. Her concentration is nonfiction writing.