

The background of the entire image is a repeating pattern of small, stylized yellow daisies with dark yellow centers, scattered across a light cream-colored background.

and Still She Laughs

DEFIANT JOY IN THE DEPTHS
OF SUFFERING

kate merrick

*and
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Laughs*

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*For Britt: We did it. You and me. We
survived, and I love you more than ever.*



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“She is clothed with strength and dignity,
and she laughs without fear of the future.”
—Proverbs 31:25



INTRODUCTION

There's a bird's nest just outside my house filled with a family of chicks. I love to watch what's going on in the life of my bird family. Little bald babies make little *peep peep* noises. The mama bird works tirelessly, flitting back and forth, always taking care of her puny chicks, smashed together in their gross nest caked with droppings. She's amazing. As she's giving her little ones what they need, day by day the chicks grow less helpless, less scrawny, less ugly. They are slowly becoming strong and beautiful.

As I was watching this real-life nature program the other day and musing on the stillness of a California evening in the country, I realized that often I feel like one of those baby birds. All scrawny and weak and featherless and pathetic, unable to get my own nourishment, mouth open wide, crying for something, anything. There I am, sitting in shambles, poop everywhere, unable to fly, crying out for something to get me through—to move

INTRODUCTION

me beyond this state of helplessness. Jesus has been to me like that mama bird: taking care of me, feeding me tirelessly while I'm sitting scared and stuck. Day by day he helps me to grow shiny feathers, until I will become nourished by truth and ready to fly.

Real life has proven strange. There has been tragedy and comedy, defeat and victory. I'm pretty sure it's not what I signed up for, pretty sure I got someone else's lot. But after pinching myself nice and hard, I am assured that this is indeed my life. No, my soul is not trapped in the body of another. This is my actual body. This is my actual life. So what shall I do? I shall look up, open my mouth, and allow my All Sufficient One to feed my soul. Looking to the Source I shall rejoice with laughing, and mourn with weeping. I shall give from my emptiness; I shall receive the offer of abundance. And I shall keep right on going, moving ahead in life, taking steps of faith, and keeping my eyes on the One who is invisible—who has, in his generosity and continuous provision like that mama bird, taught me to laugh without fear of the future.



one

AND SUCH IS LIFE



The days and weeks following Daisy's earthly departure were of a strange sort. Hovering in our home was an empty feeling, much like when a door slams shut in your face. You feel the rush of air forcing your hair back for a brief moment, then a wall directly in front of you, so close up that everything else is out of focus. We sat around that first day, drinking coffee and looking about the room, blinking for lack of recognition of our surroundings. We said good-bye to her in the night, and sat in the darkness together as the remnants of the gloomy wee hours surrendered to the gradual appearing of the winter sun.

I found myself staring into nothing, moving sloth-like, actions and words suspended in midair—both requiring more effort than I could afford. All drive had been released from me, like a burst tire. I was flat, slow, nearly useless.

Death had come for my daughter. The words made no sense. To me they sounded like a different language. One I didn't know. Death. Dead. Deceased. I couldn't compute. I couldn't understand it. I couldn't grasp how she was here chattering in her sleep just hours ago, and so I stared.

Hours passed in our living room, where family joined us in the sorrow. It's too strenuous to look someone in the eye during times like this, so I fixated on a stray fiber in the rug, refilled my mug, found reasons to close my eyes for extended periods. Maybe it would all disappear.

After the initial blow settled in, there crept up in me an amplified hatred of all things that reminded me of Daisy's cancer treatment and subsequent suffering. In a frenzied brief burst I rid my home of all medical paraphernalia. I hastily threw away all bandages, needles, sharps containers, medications, tubes, pumps, and alcohol wipes, shoving them deep into the trash can, slamming down the lid. What I couldn't throw away, I stashed out of sight while we waited for the medical supply truck to pick it up: various machines for pumping drugs into Daisy's veins, a commode, a tiny wheelchair. The very sight of these accoutrements of torture turned my stomach, and they couldn't be gotten rid of quickly enough.

Toward the afternoon, I spent some time in her tiny bed that had been at the foot of our large one: the one she died in, the one we crowded together on as a family while we cuddled her empty body in the night, while we said our last good-byes as a family of four. It was an old pine bed my dad had built for me when I was a toddler. Daisy had still been so small she fit perfectly in it, like a little mouse in a pocket. The bedsheets smelled of her,

and I wanted to breathe as deeply as possible, as if the act would magically bring her back.

The following day, though, Britt and I dismantled the bed. We knew that if we didn't, we would both continue to lie there individually, folding our bodies into the last place she had breathed, unwilling to accept the truth. It would become an idol to us, an altar of suffering, a pitiful attempt to keep things the way they were and not let them out of our desperate grip.

After the house was rid of physical reminders of the toll cancer takes, I was left fumbling with my hands—empty arms that for twelve years straight had been busy holding babies, making messes with preschoolers, or caring for my cancer-riddled daughter. I felt naked, exposed, and strangely self-conscious. The fight had ended, and I was the loser.

Days went by, all melded together. How does one go through the motions of life when death has swept through your world? It was like trying to speak, but emitting barely a squeak; trying to walk, but wading through quicksand; trying to breathe, but choking on life.

C. S. Lewis says in *A Grief Observed*,

Grief still feels like fear. Perhaps, more strictly, like suspense. Or like waiting; just hanging about waiting for something to happen. It gives life a permanently provisional feeling. It doesn't seem worth starting

anything. I can't settle down. I yawn, I fidget, I smoke too much. Up till this I always had too little time. Now there is nothing but time. Almost pure time, empty successiveness.

I felt suspended, waiting, helpless, incredibly self-conscious in those early days. The awkwardness has taken a few years to subside.

Like a pair of old jeans with a memory of its own, that once fit every curve, I had to relinquish life as I knew it before Daisy left for heaven. I had to get used to a new pair, a new life. A new pair with different faded spots, different belt loops, different worn parts. No longer a family of four, we had become a family of three. No longer a balanced bunch, I had become the only girl in the house. No longer a crusader for healing, I had become a bereaved mom. No longer Daisy's best friend and fiercest defender, I had been stripped of my immediate mission. Instead I became bored and lonely. They fit now, this new pair of jeans, this new life without her. They fit. Though I want my old jeans back.

And yet, though hollow in the missing of one of its crucial members, my house is filled with gifts. Gifts that speak to me when I'm uncomfortable in my own skin, when I'd rather leave and never come back. The toy mouse she hid by the stairs to frighten unsuspecting passersby, complete with a mouse hole made from

construction paper. A grocery list in the drawer—all her favorites written in her quirky spelling style—*keewee*, *rut beer*, *q-cumbers*. Her tiny leopard-print leggings folded on the dryer, each glance I give them flooding me with memories of the way she looked in them—a tiny booty and bird legs, sticking out from underneath tie dye. And the graffiti. My darling angel would draw a pile of poop surrounded with buzzing flies or an anchor-tattooed hairy-chested princess on her grammar worksheets, sufficiently raising the bar on inappropriate artwork. Once in a while I run across a tragically moving journal entry she wrote, hopeful and optimistic for the future. But really, anything she wrote is my favorite, because not only did she touch the paper, but what was tucked in her heart came out onto the page. Though Daisy is gone, she left love notes at every turn. It has taken two years to go through the things in her room, two searing years of a little here, a bit there.

I look for these little treasures every day. From time to time I run into something new and enjoy the memory flood, no matter what type of tears it brings. It's a weightless feeling, walking through grief. The body still needs food and sleep, the house still needs to be cleaned, the family still needs attention. It's almost like there is such a deluge of emotion all the time, it's easier to shut it out and become a zombie of sorts just to get on with the necessities of life. I may be robotically going through the

motions, yet when I happen upon a treasure, I experience a brief spark of life.

Even so, God has provided. He didn't leave me to grieve alone—I have a family who suffered the same loss. And in his kindness and generosity, he gave me the gift of another daughter to wrap my arms around. The gift of someone new to love, a diversion for the family, a little someone to care for in her sister's glaring absence. A generous gift.

I don't journal much, but I found this entry I wrote while I was pregnant and still reeling from loss:

There is a stretching pain both in my heart and in my body. The kind that pulls the fibers so thin that some of them snap, finding refuge in the curling, hiding where they came from. Most waking moments, sometimes hours, are spent wondering at the audacity that life goes on, remembering what has happened to my Daisy, feeling simultaneous pain and hope, depth of belief. Yet the breaking and retreating of various fibers of my soul are not quite ready to be grown to this point, not ready to carry the weight of the life gone from this world into the next. The life of my girl, whom I love so much, whom I can't see anymore, touch anymore, who is not dependent on me anymore.

Yet I believe God gives me glimpses into her existence, an existence I won't understand until our flesh

AND SUCH IS LIFE

embraces once again. One of possible time and space, of flesh as we know it, and of what is visible to the eyes God has given us. Strange, that the fibers of my soul should mirror the fibers of my body, growing, stretching, painfully preparing to carry the weight of new life. A life that is dependent upon me for oxygen, food, even elimination.

There is new life inside me, already mixed with aching and joy and wonder. A life that will give us new reason to love, to sacrifice, to share. A girl to bring joy and brightness, to give us opportunities to laugh, pray, cry. As certain as we are that we will hold the little one making her home in my womb, we will hold the little one who has made her home in heaven.

As my heart and body go through conflicting changes—heavier, lighter, made stronger, weak fibers tearing, making room for love, pouring out and being poured into, wondering, praying, moving in the realm of God's provision—one thing is certain. In the midst of darkness, in the still gray of dreariness, in the depths of sorrow, God has given us sunshine.

Such is life. A mixture of sunshine and rain, mountains and valleys, births and deaths. When Job's wife suggested he curse God and die, he responded with something simple but so profound: "Should we accept only good things from the hand of God and never anything

bad?” It was time to walk in everything God had destined for us, and to do it with guts.

You know how sometimes we convince ourselves we are the only souls to walk the earth who have ever _____? You fill in the blank. Been cheated on? Been stolen from? Been abused? Lost a child? Personally, I know the drama can escalate when I’m self-focused to the point of believing no one else has ever even had a pimple, much less a bad day. We too often make ourselves the center of the universe. That’s exhausting.

Being around someone like that is incredibly annoying, and slowly but surely, I have come to realize I am that annoying person. God is dealing with me and giving me a restored perspective. He has informed me that, no, I’m not the only woman on the planet to experience such heartache. There are plenty more, an entire community of women who have suffered, perhaps even more so than I. News flash to me.

He is kindly leading me into a community of the suffering, and it’s surprisingly comforting. Mortifying, but comforting, because in order to work through stuff we have to be aware of it first. I have been known to point out the speck in another’s eye while there was a giant sequoia in my own. Oops.

The community of suffering is a heroic bunch. A strong, effective, hilarious, rock-solid bunch I would be honored to be lumped in with when I grow up. Perhaps

on the surface it doesn't seem like the best of company. After all, the community I'm talking about consists of a woman who was used for sex, and whose infant son died. There's a woman with a reputation as an adulterer and deluded liar, who witnessed her son's brutal murder. There's a woman who slept with her boss's husband and got pregnant, and there is a rich old lady known for laughing at inappropriate times, as well as getting busted for lying.

I'm talking about Bathsheba; Mary, the mother of Jesus; Hagar; and Sarah, the wife of Abraham. Women who suffered. Women who made a difference. Women like me and you. God surprised me with these lives of faith and, using them as guides, I gently walked through the years following Daisy's departure. These women's stories are filled with pain, yes, but thankfully also with honesty. Honesty that is crucial to healing, crucial to repentance, crucial to walking tall and strong.

Remarkably, I have gained an appreciation for suffering. Not in a sick, masochistic way, or even as a desperate undertaking for attention, but in a clearer understanding of the deeper things. Things like love, faith, eternity. I have learned not to fear suffering, because it's not my enemy but my teacher. I've encountered a deeper love of God than I thought possible, like a marriage that weathers the storm—both souls grateful to have held each other tight while the ship heaved unsteadily. Beauty is

AND STILL SHE LAUGHS

seen more crisply than ever before through the eye of the sufferer; gifts are heartily received and rejoiced over by the one who is able to take what is given. I never thought I'd say it, but suffering has been life-giving for me. I just never recognized it before.

God has taken me from that inability to move, that zombielike existence, to one of fullness of joy, one of dancing feet and swinging arms. Come with me while we uproot the plank out of my eye—while I display the cards I've been holding too closely to my chest. I pray you find some comfort in my community, that you can let down your guard.

It's time.



two

TINY PINE BOX



You know, it's funny. No, not ha-ha funny, but "I just came out of the church bathroom with the back of my skirt tucked into my undies and now the entire congregation has seen my unfortunate nethers on the way back to my seat" funny. A euphemism for something rotten. Rotten occurrences that come frequently—like a pattern that seems sickeningly typical of my life.

Remember the birds I told you about? Well, what I didn't tell you was that just as those darling birds were almost grown, almost ready to leave their smelly but precious nest, I went out to check on them. I was feeling lighthearted that morning, glad to be alive, grateful to be free and, well, feeling like things were going my way for once in a really long time. It was one of those days when you begin to forget the past heartaches and some of the present troubles, a day when you see fit to be brave and take a chance on life—sun shining, deep breath of ranch air in your lungs. I was feeling perky in my pretty jammies and a messy bun.

So, chai tea in an Anthropologie *K* cup in hand, I checked on my feathered friends. I couldn't see them over the edge of the nest, so I kept moving closer to get a better look. Just a little closer . . . One more foot . . . So

excited to get a glimpse of these delicate creatures God had kindly placed in my life. I inched up on my tiptoes, enjoying the warmth of the mug and of a pretty morning, of life. Convinced “my” birds knew and loved me and desired me to come hear them sing a personal concert, I was shocked when they popped their itty-bitty fuzzy heads up and looked at me in panic.

All three freaked out and jumped out of the nest, frantically flapping their adolescent, partially grown wings. Unable to fly. They landed in the nearby lime tree, and that’s where they stayed, eyes wild, huffing and puffing their tiny bird chests. There was nothing I could do. Their mother would reject them if they had my scent on them, and they couldn’t make it back to their nest on their own. I had killed God’s nature gift to me; theirs would be a drawn-out death of starvation and helplessness.

I felt so lame, so defeated. I had only been enjoying the little shred of beauty found in such a simple thing, innocently wanting to delight in the gifts God had placed about me. Then, just like that, I knocked them to their doom.

Too often the joys we experience are so fleeting, so small, so easily spent. Relationships end, homes burn, bills pile up. Seems like summer always comes to an abrupt halt, plopping us into the stark and hungry landscape of winter, when all we were expecting was endless warmth, endless green, endless fun. Life, real life, with all

its complicated and unsavory problems, with all its precariously balanced departments, never fails to surprise.

And then we find ourselves questioning God when things go awry. We shout beneath the stars and in the darkness of our cars as we drive. Questions run down our cheeks, onto our bodies in the shower, and slip down the drain. But then more well up and hover just beneath the surface of our skin, looking for a way of escape, a satisfactory answer.

Why suffering, God? Why sin? Why are you letting them get away with this? Why such darkness? Why the crushing of dreams on a regular basis? And why me?

Silence.

I have yet to hear the reason why. Oh, I've heard "answers" from the well-meaning. Answers that leave me thirsty and malnourished, sickened, or downright angry. I've heard every cliché, every Bible verse taken out of context, every flimsy offering of comfort said hurriedly with hopes of plugging up neatly what is spilling out of every crack of my being; sloppy, messy, dangerous. Things carelessly thrown about, hoping to gloss over the whole soiled lot.

"The Lord gives and takes away!"

"So many will be saved from your testimony!"

"Isn't it great her suffering is over?"

"God is good all the time!"

"He has plans to prosper you!"

Piles and piles of answers . . .

But I haven't gotten an answer from God. In fact, at this point I'm pretty sure I won't get one until I see him face-to-face. I have searched the Scripture, screamed until my throat was raw, turned the questions into a dirge, a lament, an empty wailing that evaporates into thin air. There is a reason why my God has not seen fit to reply to my very human questions. My best guess is that I am not ready for the answers.

My story is the kind of sad story we have all read about on a random blog that a friend has told us about, eyes wide, voice subdued. It seems like we all know someone in crisis, a person we're rooting for. We secretly love the drama, feel invested in the outcome. We cheer and say how good God is when things go their way, and we pray on knees when they don't. It's Stuff That Happens to Other People; it's horrible, put-your-hand-on-your-chest-and-gasp stories we "could never handle." It's repelling and addicting, and close enough to feel the secondhand pain but far enough away to thank God it's not happening to us.

But, alas, it seems that this time around it was me. It was my family. I was the one with the cancer kid, the one whose blog you followed, the one who received your teddy bears and cards and prayers. I was the one who learned what an oncologist was and how to give an injection, who held handfuls of my daughter's silky blond hair

as it fell out in clumps. I was the one who spent countless days and nights in a hospital room, cursing the incessantly beeping IV pole. I was the one who had to wake her twelve-year-old son in the middle of the night to tell him that his sister had gone to heaven.

Now I'm the bereaved mother you avoid in the aisles of Trader Joe's. I'm the one who has received puppy-dog-sad-face looks from countless well-meaning people, making me want to hide my head in the sand or pretend I don't notice. I'm the "unfortunate" who has weathered the kind of storm normal people do all they can to avoid. I'm the woman who handed her daughter's body over to men in suits in the predawn hours, who spoke at her daughter's funeral—the woman who, with every heartbeat, feels cruelly marauded by our enemy Death. The very thing Jesus wept over, roared at, and even experienced himself.

Grief is like a bathing suit. It fits every person differently. Some hang out a bit here, some a bit there. Some shouldn't leave the house with it showing, and others make it look fabulous. Some grieve privately, never inviting another soul in. You might never know how they really feel; you might start to think they have checked out or are callous and coldhearted. Others do it openly, blogging as therapy, sharing their tears because it feels cathartic, because they need to grieve in community.

How is anyone to know what to do, how to help, how

to survive? Some of the brokenhearted feel hurt if you don't ask after them, if you don't acknowledge their loss or their crisis. Others never want you to mention it, as if speaking of the lost loved one acknowledges the fact that they won't come back. What do you do? Do you "go there" with a hurting person? Do you risk the discomfort of snot and tears and a breakdown at the farmer's market or the coffee shop?

And then there's me.

In all honesty I'm still not really ready to be open with grief. It feels like a water balloon, and if I spring a leak and let a little bit out, I might explode all over the place. I carefully keep these surges of sadness to myself, occasionally sharing them only with my husband, because they're private and sacred to me. But I'm trusting you with these things that I'm writing. I'm trusting God to do a good work in the sharing of human feelings, the acknowledgment that we are emotional, created for love. That being said, this book, fortunately, is not about me. It's about Jesus, the Most Beautiful. But I share my life because we learn from each other, we are relational beings, and, well, it's what I've got.

If at any time you feel like throwing this book across the room, then go for it. I have thrown many books across the room at different points in the last several years. It's actually quite satisfying to bark "Grow up!" at the author while the cover yawns open with pages

ruffling willy-nilly until coming to a punctuated halt on the wall across from you. Harsh? Not really. Your story could be worse than mine. I mean, if you're reading this book and you have lost more than one child, do it now. Then go pick it back up. If you are still sitting in the ashes scratching your skin like Job, and if your grief is new and aren't ready emotionally to look up, chuck it now. Then go pick it back up. If you have ongoing misery, if you have a painful disease, if you have any reason to grit your teeth because you don't feel happy or clappy, pitch it. Then go pick it back up. Not because I want you to listen to me blather on, but because Jesus is worth it. He's worth signing up for, worth staying married to. He's worth the effort, worth the tears, the doubt, the confusion of life.

This book is not intended to take the place of grieving; rather, it speaks to what to do when the tidal wave washes past, when the sizzle from the burn settles, when we finally look around and wonder what's next. When we wonder if it is actually possible to come out of the paralysis of darkness and find laughter again. Really find it—the deep sense of peace and joy that leans into faith and away from the fear your experiences tempt you to live in. I want you to know—whether you have weathered a tempest, whether you are currently wading knee-deep in sin, whether you are disappointed, disillusioned, or disgusted—laughter is for you. Whether you're nursing relational wounds, fastidiously covering up your

self-inflicted scars, or if you're alive and have walked this earth long enough to stumble, crash, or burn, this is for you.

This book is not saying your life on earth doesn't matter. This book is not saying that you can never be sad. This book is not a manual on how to come through tragedy stronger than ever. This is not how to be happy in ten easy steps. This is not a theological case for laughter, or why there is evil in the world, but rather how God has worked in my life and can work in yours too. I may not be a scholar, but I do know what I've experienced. I've read the testimonies of biblical women and gleaned truth from their very real and imperfect lives. And because Satan the Accuser is defeated by the blood of the Lamb and the word of our testimonies (Revelation 12:11), I will offer mine.



I'll start at the beginning of the end. In September 2009, Daisy Love, my darling girl of five years old, was diagnosed with kidney cancer. It was a Monday, the third week of school. I was so excited that fall because for the first time in nine years I would have a bit of freedom. Both kids would be in school for the first time ever, and I had a fall bucket list all lined up. By far the best way I could think of spending that freedom, and what's always

at the top of my list, was surfing with my husband. He was a pastor and happened to have Mondays off, so we packed the car accordingly before we loaded up the kids for school.

It's mystifying to see the little ways God works in our lives. Sometimes it's a monumental, cosmically cool event, and other times it's as simple as the order of how things go in a day. On this Monday, we dropped off the kids and headed south on the freeway from Carpinteria, California, to Channel Islands, my husband's family's surfboard business. We headed into the factory to pick up a new board for Britt and a demo of a new model for me to try. My newfound liberation from mom duties that Monday made it fun to do even mundane-ish things, like hanging out in a dusty surfboard factory talking to old friends. Our loitering took longer than standard loitering does, and by the time we were in the car and heading to the beach, we got a phone call—the call we would have missed if we had left sooner and headed straight for the water.

“Daisy has fallen down and is not feeling well. She is vomiting and in pain,” our dear friend at the school said on the other end of the line. Daisy, our sunshine. Daisy, our creative and hilarious girl. Daisy, our freckled and funny and cool and kind and loving and full-of-life daughter. Hurt.

After many hours in the ER and a myriad of tests,

the pediatric doctor in charge of her case called for an oncologist. A nurse came in with a peculiar look on her face, setting down a box of tissues. I didn't know what an oncologist was, but I knew what the box of tissues was for. And so began the years of sickness, of physical and emotional agony, of soul-searching, of gut-wrenching real life. The kind I was convinced we were immune to.

While my son learned the multiplication tables, my daughter had a massive tumor removed from her abdomen. While her friends went to birthday parties, Christmas cookie parties, and ski trips, Daisy went to the clinic for chemotherapy and home to vomit. While my friends decided on which extracurricular activities would most benefit their little ones, I was deciding which beanie would most gently cover my little one's tender, naked scalp. While the rest of the world went to school and work—while life went on and plans were made—our family hunkered down. Our family washed our hands until they cracked, afraid of every germ. Our family was trapped in our home without visitors for fear of any virus that could kill my kindergartener, whose immune system had been obliterated by treatment. Our family counted on nothing further than today, when often the today was sketchy.

We spent three and a half years in treatment, three and a half years searching for a cure for the monster that kept coming back to take over Daisy's spare body. She

had multiple invasive and dangerous surgeries, countless sickening chemo treatments, and we fried her guts with daily radiation for weeks on end. We fed her sprouts and we juiced kale. We put her on a mostly low-sugar, organic, anti-cancer, grow-out-your-armpit-hair diet. We prayed and fasted and cried out desperately for healing, and when all else failed we traveled to Israel for three months seeking advanced experimental treatments. All to no avail. Her body was ravaged, ragged, full of tubes and patched together. It finally gave out altogether in February 2013, and she took her last breath in our arms. Her daddy and I overlapped with arms and legs and faces mingled with tears and murmurs of loving words too holy to repeat.

In our bedroom in the deep of the night we held her reed-thin body, never wanting to let go. We pulled out all the horrid tubes and wrapped her in her favorite soft blanket. We covered her little bald head and wept and kissed her face over and over. Then, as we fell to our knees and worshiped God—who had given her to us and to whom she had gone—we felt the presence of angels and knew we were not alone.

I never want to do that again.

My life is forever changed, and I am forever changed. I have aged in this deep grief, this unknowable experience. I have grown up. I have become different. One of the difference in me has been hiding silently for a while.

I don't know when this thing crept in, when I gave it a space to live, when I told it to pull up a chair and get comfy. This deceptive and subtle and poisonous thing called bitterness.

Just a teeny bit, just enough bitterness that I feel justified about it. Just enough bitterness that it colors my sense of humor and peppers my thoughts, but it doesn't show up on my face. Hidden so well I didn't even see it at first. I almost missed it. A slight hint of bitter, just a little on the side, for dipping into now and again.

It doesn't matter too much which things in life I've chosen to flavor this way. I haven't been a picky bitter person. But there it is. Bitterness at the desolation of life. Bitterness at people who apparently have no pain. Bitterness at women who have kids to spare. Bitterness because I feel like I lost. I lost the contest, the race, the fight.

I have been bitter at well-meaning people who see the new baby girl in my arms and say, "Oh, isn't that so amazing! It all comes full circle." Come again? They talk as if I had crashed my car and the insurance company paid for a brand-new one. Would you like it if I said that to you about husband number two? "Oh, it's not so bad now that you have a new husband. Forget about how you were cheated on and had your heart smashed to bits and were left alone in life. It's all totally cool now." Getting

a “new” whatever it is that you lost completely makes up for it, right? Wrong. As if!

See? Bitter.

I drown in my thoughts and memories of dark days, of excruciating pain, thinking, *Is this really how my life is going down? My daughter has died, and her body is wrapped in linen and buried in a tiny pine box in the local town cemetery. And there's nothing I can do about it except curl up in the fetal position.*

Thankfully, bitterness is not the only change in me, and it's not even the most obvious or most impactful. In fact, the bitterness was just the beginning—the pothole, the roadblock to moving forward. Moving forward is where I want to go—heavenward. But we can't do that until we look honestly at our situation—the good, the bad, and the nasty. Bitterness is bad, yes, but the good? It took some searching, some scratching the surface, some deep cleaning to find it. Becoming aware of my hindering attitude of bitterness started a chain reaction that has since led to those bigger things, better things—a deepening of faith, a realization that all things point to eternity; and this life, with all its troubles, is quickly coming to an end. I'm banking on this unseen eternity with my very next breath, holding onto the confidence that what I hope for will actually happen.

All I have endured and traveled through over the last six years has brought me much closer to Jesus, even while

AND STILL SHE LAUGHS

simultaneously it has flung me into the deepest crevice of loneliness and pain and confusion. It's the strangest dichotomy; this tarnished life has given me confidence and maturity and has at the same time shown me how small and foolish I can be. I'm daily trying to make sense of it all, trying to figure out how to live in grief while at the same time actually live.

We all have a story. We all have tragedies and losses and heartaches and miracles and real life, and while so much of life is glorious, sometimes it gets ugly. No one is exempt. We share in this thing called humanity, and I want us to feel—really face head-on—the reality of life with all its pimples and less attractive bits. I believe it makes the joy more vibrant, the laughter louder and stronger. So bear with me, cry with me, but please, please, laugh with me.



three

#BLESSED

I wear glasses. Thick ones. Coke bottles, really. It's completely cringeworthy, but I confess I was rather proud of the tinted ones I had that were so popular in 1985. You know them: gigantic, squarish lenses with a line of blue tint on the top portion, then clear in the middle, then pink on the bottom portion—ever providing the glamorous look of blue eye shadow and pink blush. Yeah, superhot in an eighties kind of way. If only my permed hair would've feathered out on the sides, then the boy with the parachute pants and cropped neon yellow muscle shirt who sat in the second row would have liked me.

Anyway, I got my glasses in the fourth grade and suffered through the rest of elementary and junior high with those sweet babies, along with braces and horrible hair, until I upgraded to contact lenses in ninth grade—thank you, Jesus. My point is not my awkward years, nor is it to garner your sympathy; it's that I'm incredibly near-sighted, so much so that I often see things distortedly. Yesterday, when I saw a piece of wadded up string that I was positive was a black widow, I quarantined the area and swooped up the baby lightning fast. Myopia can be a

problem, causing a girl to scream bloody murder without good reason.

As I've walked through my season of deep grief, I have come to realize it's not only my eyes that are nearsighted but also the sight that's in my heart and mind. While drying out from being blasted with a fire hose of Bible verses, so many hurtful clichés about loss, I've become aware that I can't see past my own nose, much less my situation of suffering. So when Romans 8:28—or some other supposedly confident and cheerful verse—is spouted by some well-meaning soul, I see it distortedly.

How can everything work together for good for those called according to God's purpose? Does Paul not know my daughter suffered and died? Does he not realize people are broken and abused and betrayed? How can these things be good? Is he nuts?

It's in this gradual realization of my own obscured vision, I've come to see how so many of us in Western Christian culture have such a skewed view of God's goodness. There is a selfishness in our Christianity—in the thoughtless, consumer-driven, #blessed culture we find on the shelves of Christian bookstores. We throw around the word *blessing* haphazardly, as if God is a supernatural Santa Claus just waiting to bring treats to good little girls and boys.

But what of truly suffering believers? What about the newly homeless family who has watched helplessly while

sickness settled in and took every last penny? What about the people forced to work the most disgusting jobs—in slaughterhouses, in public restrooms, in fields picking poison-covered produce—just to get by? What does our view of God and his blessings have to say to them? Have the homeless and destitute signed up for a different brand of Christianity than I? Is God’s goodness the same for the middle-class, Honda-driving, well-fed, and fully insured as it is for those who are devastated and afflicted? What does *blessed* even mean?



My adult life, and particularly my married life, was quite “blessed” for the first eleven years. It was very pretty, very Instagrammable. The highs were gloriously high, and the lows weren’t so low as to be deal-breakers. Not too long after we began to date, Britt and I started going to a Bible study. Two party animals by nature, we found Jesus together and were moved and transformed by God’s Word. My husband was born into a surfboard-making family, owners of the top brand in the world, and he was destined to take over the business. But upon hearing a different call from Jesus just three months after we married, Britt took over the college group at our church and became ordained as a pastor, thereby ending our careers as heathens for good. Attendance at the meetings

multiplied from eight kids to eight hundred. It was rocking, it was a blast, and, though we had the usual ups and downs in ministry, it was successful and amazing. The experience bred deep relationships and allowed us to witness many miracles.

Within six years we had our son, Isaiah, became pregnant with Daisy immediately after a miscarriage, and obeyed a new calling to plant a church in our hometown. Four hundred people came to the first service—and Reality, our very own church baby, was born. It was wonderful and fulfilling right off the bat. We lived in a pretty house in a cute neighborhood and neatly filled our three-bedroom, two-bathroom fortress of hardwood and wainscoting with cute kids: one boy, one girl. Our marriage was solid and satisfying, and my husband was exemplary, always working hard, rising at four a.m. and putting in thirteen-hour days while still giving us his all when he was home. We had surf dates, picnics by the lake, and fly-fishing trips to the family cabin in Montana. Blessed marriage, blessed kids, blessed house, blessed life.

Then *bam!* Right in the middle of all that pretty, cancer snuck in the side door, dropped its drawers, and made a mess all over. Caught off guard by the hovering nearness of death, the change in atmosphere turned foul. I found myself asking where all the blessing went. Why was I suddenly sprawled out on my backside, legs flayed,

scratching for control like an overturned turtle? Suddenly all the blessings looked, well, cheap.

Strangely, the abrupt switch in circumstances generated a humiliating feeling. It's uncomfortable to be so vulnerable. One minute you're cruising the Pacific Coast Highway with the top down, wind gently tousling your perfectly layered hair, and the next it's raining on your leather seats, you have a flat tire, and you're waiting for the tow truck. You wrap your arms around your knees as the other cars fly by, filled with passengers safe and warm, bopping to their favorite songs while you just hope you don't get recognized.

After all my years as a Christian and living in this great country where we are stuffed to the gills with plenty, I've come to realize that *blessed* means something completely different to God than it does to us. We want it to mean that everything is perfect all the time. No speed bumps, no bruises, no pain. Not even a bad hair day. But unless I want my soul to disintegrate under the heavy hand of loss, I find that as I live another day and face another heartache, I need to open my eyes and see beyond. I need to see with sharp focus what the Bible really says about blessing, God's goodness, and living an abundant life.



You know, Jesus' disciples crack me up. They seem like

my kind of people. They were working folk, sinners, a brotherhood, and—well, let’s just say they kept it country. I love how they could be so teachable one moment, learning from the lips of the Messiah about his coming suffering, death, and resurrection, basically the most pressingly important thing, and then the next moment they were pulling Jesus aside to ask for special recognition and honor, for their definition of blessing.

“Sure, Jesus, that’s nice. Now, back to me.” (See Mark 10:33–37.)

Really, guys? Unbelievable!

But aren’t we just the same? We tend to nod and say “yeah, yeah” to so many of the most important things he wants to tell us. Then, as quickly as possible, we try to refocus the conversation on “what really matters”: our own wants and desires. It’s easy to point the finger, to laugh out loud at Peter’s foibles and James’s and John’s zealous and thunderous proclamations, but that is you and that is me. We are the same. We see things through an unfocused, muddled lens, not as they really are.

Jesus is so loving, so warmhearted and tender. I always imagine him gently guiding me to a better place after I’ve failed to see clearly: “Maybe if you feel like it, Kate, or feel led, or feel called, would you want to journal about seeing things from God’s perspective, possibly looking just a teeny bit past your own? Only if that feels right to you while you’re having your fair-trade coffee and

gluten-free croissant. And yes, I'll be your boyfriend and hold your hand and affirm your musings while you fill the pages of leather journals with the incredibly important feelings from your heart."

Or sometimes, I imagine him good-naturedly shaking his shoulder-length, naturally highlighted hair, thinking, *Aren't they cute? Aw, they'll learn. Just kids.* Then he picks us up and swings us around, never wrinkling or spoiling his white robe and light blue sash.

But as I've dug more deeply into Scripture, I've found it to be a different story. In Matthew 16:21–23 Jesus again predicted his death and resurrection to the disciples. Peter took Jesus aside (first red flag—I mean, who takes Jesus aside?) and reprimanded him (what?!), saying, "No way! Heaven forbid that this should happen." Peter was filtering the terrifying but lifesaving words of Jesus through his own lens, his finite, natural, man lens. Can't say that I blame him, by the way. It would also seem to me that the torture and murder of the Son of Man would be the most deplorable of things to happen; but the well-intentioned Peter was about to get the smackdown from the gentle Lamb of God.

"Get away from me, Satan!" Jesus said. "You are seeing things merely from a human point of view, not from God's" (v. 23).

Um, did Jesus just call Peter "Satan"? It seems that my imaginary pushover Jesus is just that: *imaginary*. This

was no wink of the eye, no waving away of errant thinking, but a solid rebuke. I mean, getting called a jerk is a bummer, and liar or thief or tramp is never good. But Satan?

Jesus meant business. He was about to do the hardest thing in the history of the universe, to embrace pain and suffering and hardship, and he didn't need any of his buddies tempting him to do otherwise.

Just like Peter, we flinch at the slightest prospect of discomfort. We've been conditioned to expect ease as a sign of God's blessing, but that is not how Jesus would have us live. It's not how he lived. The last time I checked, he came to give life—abundant life—but maybe that looks a little different than what we thought.

I need this new vision; I need this rebuke. I still find myself momentarily lost in memories driven mercilessly by my darkest moments, when my tongue is thick in my mouth as if numbed by novocaine and my heart is lodged firmly in my throat. I relive the long nights at the hospital in flashes, the burning sensation of fear taking over my skin. My eyes prickle, face hot, when I think of Daisy's sunken eyes, her weak body, her inability to lift her head. And I feel the emptiness in my body caused by the moment when her lifeless shell was taken from my arms and left them hanging like an old rusty swing, nodding in the breeze to no one in particular. That is my life.

And it feels anything but blessed.

I think the core of how we define blessing, is how we feel the love of God—tangibly with the way our lives shake out, with what we receive. If life goes well for me, then I am blessed. God must love me. But if things don't go according to plan, suddenly I am thrown for a loop. Doesn't God promise to care for us? Isn't his love shown most clearly when he blesses his children with good things?

In Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, he tells us not to worry, convinces us we are far more valuable than the birds God provides for, lacking nothing. He promises that if God cares so wonderfully for the wildflowers, he will certainly care for us. And by the way, why do we have so little faith?

I'll tell you why: because Daisy died. My daughter endured brutal sickness, died a tragic death. Because God allowed much tragedy in my family. Because he appears not to have heard our cries, because he turned his face from our deepest desire. Because my sparrow fell, and he seems not to have noticed. That's why I have so little faith. That's why it's difficult to believe I am valuable to God.

But here's where I'm wrong. Here's where I have exchanged what I see dimly for what God is crystal clear about. Here's where I shake up our Western understanding of blessing. Whether we are aware of it or not, we tie God's love directly to the tangible presence of what we

consider to be good things. But what if his care for us means something else entirely? What if my life turning out exactly the way I wanted it to doesn't equal God loving me? I didn't feel God's love for a while in my grief, but it was there. I had just forgotten the truth.

Remember how I was so irked by Paul and his "all things work together" spiel? I was so busy asking Paul snarky questions that I missed how he himself had a tough row to hoe. Mere days after his conversion on the road to Damascus, he started receiving death threats. In the coming years, he was beaten with rods, whipped, given thirty-nine lashes five different times, imprisoned, shipwrecked, stoned. He knew hunger, thirst, heat, and cold, faced dangers in cities, deserts, and on seas. Paul knew suffering.

Yet he wrote this in Romans 8:35, 38–39 (emphasis mine):

Can anything ever separate us from Christ's love? *Does it mean he no longer loves us* if we have trouble or calamity, or are persecuted, or hungry, or destitute, or in danger, or threatened with death? . . . I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from God's love. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow—not even the powers of hell can separate us from God's love. No power in the sky

above or in the earth below—indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Exhale . . . The love of God is outside of circumstances. I had believed a lie.

Most of the American church believes this lie. Blessing does not mean we get our life dished out on a silver platter. No, it means that while we were enemies of God, he loved us. Lose sight of that love, and we miss out on a whole world of real life. When we hang on to false ideologies, it kills our joy. It makes us stoop down to whatever the current state of affairs is, rather than stand tall in the confidence of one who is secure in love.

But when we humble ourselves and ask God to show us the truth, we will find that after the initial sting of seeing our shortcomings comes the sweet release of repentance. Peter knew firsthand those precious words: “Repent so that times of refreshing may come.” And so, I have found myself waking up like the blooming coral sunrise peeking through the canyon I live in.

It does not happen overnight; these things take time. Even just last night I sat on my patio, watching the sun burn and sizzle lazily down behind the horses in the pasture, quenched by the ocean beyond the hill. As I watched the stars timidly tiptoeing out one by one, I felt bare before the Creator. Bats flitted around the stark silhouette of the

eucalyptus trees, the crescent moon hanging delicately in translucent lavender and indigo, and I remembered yet again that he sees things not as I do. I am so small. I am one of seven billion, and yet he knows my name, knows my hurt, knows my future. Wrapped in the same creamy white, downy blanket that I often wrapped around my sick Daisy, I just sat. Prayed. Repented. And let the truth of his love wash over my tired soul.

I needed, and I need, time alone with him. I needed, and I need, to look up. We all need to look up. Please, for the love of your Maker, look up. Look up from the screen, the chores, the distractions, the things that make us believe we're less than blessed. Look up from the unnecessary things we cram into our lives, the things we tightly wedge in every corner to keep us full. Give God a chance to speak; allow yourself to be alone with him, creating space to see the way he is loving you beyond your human understanding of love.

It takes courage; it takes honesty. It takes willingness to be convicted, to repent, and to be healed. It takes willingness to be softened, willingness to face your demons. It takes guts. But that's where the healing begins, in the counterintuitive place of surrender, and in that place of perspective.

It's time to see things not from our human point of view but from God's, and to let Jesus call us out. We need to know how to navigate the open wounds and the unmet

heart desires of this risky and dangerous life, but we have not been left in those hard and confusing places on our own. We are free to thrash and mourn and be human in our heartbreak, but when it's time to set the anguish aside, there is a way out of the pit of despair. We have the key, the map. We have the correct lens prescription. We are the recipients of ancient mysteries privy only to the friends of God.

I'm not sure if Jesus would say, "Get behind me, Satan," to my blindness, but I do know that he desires us to be on the same page. True fellowship begins here. Like with a bestie or a spouse, the more we exchange ideas and truths and show who we really are, the more deeply we will come to know God's love. I've found that the more I press into this, the more I don't hinge God's blessing and love upon my circumstances. And that sparks hope.

So I dialogue with God, I read his Word, I listen to his voice. I crowd closer to him so that I can hear more clearly, so that I can understand more fully. This purposeful rearrangement of my point of view has given me wings. My faith has always been there, but the way I see things has changed; it has aged, matured, cured to a fuller and more developed flavor. Instead of reactive living according to circumstances, I have learned to peel back a few layers, to see what the heartbeat behind this crazy life is all about. I am discovering the way Jesus seeps from tears of sorrow

and joy alike. I am finding security in his undeniable love,
and it makes my heart sing

Let's shift our thinking from merely human to divine.
Let's trade in our Coke-bottle glasses for the lenses of
truth. Let's adjust our definitions of *blessings* and *trouble*,
to live abundantly and purposefully, walking through the
shadow of the valley of death. This life isn't all just a
beach, but that doesn't mean it isn't blessed.



Wind rushed fresh in my face, and my hair flapped behind
me like a carefree kite tail. With the sun on my shoulders,
I leaned forward into the experience. Then I heard it out
her car window: "Nice ride!"

It came from a wizened old woman in the middle of
the Trader Joe's parking lot. I had hopped on the cart right
out the gate, careening straight toward my Honda Pilot,
and I was booking it. Smiling to myself at her encourage-
ment, I rode that thing like the wind all the way through
the parking lot, then gratefully filled my trunk full with
food God had provided, whispering prayers of thanks.

I had gotten used to going to the grocery store wear-
ing a baseball cap and sunglasses. Head down and feet
dragging, hoping not to make eye contact with any-
one. But now times of refreshing had begun to come.
Understanding God's love outside of circumstances

BLESSED

sparked a flicker of light, a brightness that comes with the readjustment of perspective. A freedom that makes a girl feel loved, even while she grieves.

I can feel the atmosphere beginning to change again. This time from the stifling covering of gloom to one steadily giving way to joy. I can feel the emotional cloud cover beginning to burn off as the sun shines brighter. To practice enjoying the sweetness of life is a wondrous thing. I think I'm off to a great start.





four

CRAZY MESSY



Everyone has a story. Some stories beam bright and pretty but secretly hide darkness that is yet to be revealed. Others are openly dredged in sorrow and make you cringe at first glance, but then the light shines through so brilliantly that there is no mistaking something wonderful lies underneath it all. Stories teach, whether the heroine is unshakable or the protagonist is a blind fool, whether the outcome is comedy or tragedy. We learn from others' experiences. There is precious value in sharing and hearing the stories of our lives, extraordinary importance in the laying bare of the soul.

God has met me through story. He has introduced me with fresh eyes to the reality of life on earth and the goodness of Jesus through the stories of other women's lives. Women of scripture who appear to have it all, or who have enormous reputations for godliness, or even women who have sullied reputations. He has invited me to investigate open-mindedly, to shed my preconceived notions, my prejudices against these ancient ladies.

It's as if he said, "Kate, I want you to meet some people. You have more in common with them than you realize, so why don't you head down to the beach and hang for a bit? Get your bronze on, and go deep."

And so, I've enjoyed getting to know some women of the Bible a bit better. I've enjoyed spending time with them lying in the sand, Ray-Bans reflecting the sparkling Pacific. Together we have spilled our guts, so to speak. With them I have found solidarity, encouragement, sympathy, and rebuke. Thank you, God, for introducing me to true grit.



The Bible is full of women I look forward to being friends with, as well as a few I can live without. (Jezebel, anybody?) One woman in particular fits both categories. Almost all of you know her, and you're either on her team or you want to kick her to the curb. She's the perfect woman, the pinnacle of femininity and strength, the zenith of amazing. You know who I'm talking about. You can find her in Proverbs 31. There she is, perched in all her literary glory, all any woman can be and do wrapped up in twenty-one little no-pressure verses—the unattainable, overly long list of what makes a woman excellent.

Right now I'm sure there are many who are bristling at the very mention of this passage of Scripture. Give me a second and let me try and win you over. We all need biblical instruction. We live in a wishy-washy culture shaken and stirred by loud voices selling opposing versions of what it means to be a woman. Meanwhile

we carry the baggage acquired from personal experience and navigating the truckloads of Christian books written about what a godly girl should be. We have found ourselves in a confused whirlwind state on the topic of femininity, which has got to stop. I'm convinced it's not as complicated as we have been led to believe.

I'm asking you now to walk away from any notions that have been stewing around in your heart and mind since you got your first period and realized there was no going back on this womanhood thing. Set down the movies, books, well-meaning church ladies and aunties, pop stars and nuns, and pick up your Bible. Bring on the pure Word of God, not another person's interpretation. Don't be stuffed in a box made by human hands or be burdened by another era's or individual's version of femininity's rules.

There is freedom when you only care what one Person says about you and your womanhood. Let's check it out for ourselves with fresh eyes, and give this woman another look.

Admittedly, Proverbs 31's description of the ultimate woman feels both aspirational and completely unrealistic at first. She works hard, she brings in cash, she has foresight and intelligence, she's generous, she has a great reputation, she's creative and industrious, and her Etsy shop is going off. She even wears beautiful clothing she

made herself. She's so cool . . . but she's also the girl we love to hate!

She's like all the pins in your Pinterest account. She's the hairdo that you're itching to try, or the picture of the girl whose yoga pants make her butt look so good it brings inspiration to your "workout" board. She's the salads and smoothies you want to make with all the produce from your local organic farm, or maybe the maple bacon cupcakes or gourmet vegan doughnuts, or whatever you're into. This mystery Proverbs 31 woman is the ultimate Pinterest pin for awesomeness. Strength, dignity, bravery, trust, creativity, ingenuity, kindness—she's legit. I have mad respect for her and all, but, honestly, she bugs me with all that amazingness.

My husband, who knows me better than I know myself, has gently informed me that I'm defensive when it comes to correction or any type of conflict. (No, I'm not!) I can't stand the thought of not being awesome, and naturally awesome at that—the very inventor of awesome. I want to be an awesome wife, an awesome mom, an awesome daughter, an awesome friend, an awesome Christian, an awesome person. Yet when you stand me next to the biblical zenith of female awesome, well . . . let's just say it's why we don't want to hang out with the bride too long at a wedding. Radiant beauty makes everything around it appear shabby. Thanks, Proverbs 31

woman, for making the rest of us look bad. I'm sure you didn't mean to.

I know every single one of us fears or at least is aware of others' opinions. It's not just me. None of us wants to expose our own mangy selves to the watching world. We post pictures of carefully made-up faces, body shots taken at angles most flattering. We show off our party decor, our brightest days, our Sunday best. Fabulous is the new normal.

I've historically gone with the opposite strategy; I don't want anyone to think I'm someone I'm not. I tend to take extreme measures to ensure people get what they see, because I don't want to disappoint people down the road as they get to know the real me. I've even gone so far as to behave like a cavewoman on the first date with my now husband.

I've always been a girl who could pack it away. I like food, and when you've spent the day surfing and running around on the beach, you can work up a fierce hunger. So, at dinner that first night, I ordered whatever sounded good to my growling stomach—unlike the *modus operandi* of women in America, who prefer to appear dainty and order “just a small salad, I'm really not that hungry.” Liars. A whole country of single women lying to potential suitors.

Not me. I decided I didn't want this guy to realize one day that I wasn't who he signed up for, so I went for it.

We sat there, and I slurped and gulped and relished and licked the bowl. Okay, I didn't lick the bowl in a public place, but I've got no shame at home. Meantime, he sat across from me, having ordered a small plate of lasagna. He wiped his mouth in between bites like a gentleman. So cute.

Later, when he brought me home to have dinner with his parents, I again opted for my usual portion: piled high. His mom is a great cook, and I was nineteen with the metabolism of, well, of a nineteen-year-old who is super active. Again, I enjoyed every bite. We had a lovely dinner. I charmed Britt's dad with a comment about how he looks just like Eric Clapton, then later said good-bye while blithely leaning against my powder blue '71 VW Squareback. I wore Doc Martens, thrift store 501s for men, a maroon mock turtleneck bodysuit, and a bomber jacket. Super hot in a nineties kind of way. What I found out later was that after I left, when Britt asked his parents what they thought about me, his dad said, in his deep, contemplative voice, "Well, son, you should be careful about a girl who eats more than you do."

So much for attempting to avoid letting others down. Issues. As a side note, I have since entered the twenty-first century and cleaned up my manners, but I still tend to be very transparent—whether I'm meeting someone for the first time (what would you like to know about my checkered past?), speaking from a pulpit (I have been known

to talk freely about regrettably embarrassing things), or with old and dear friends (lamenting formerly perky body parts, anyone?). No surprises here, people.

But hey, before we succumb to our own puny issues, before we hate on our P31 girl for making the rest of us look bad, let's just remember that she wasn't an actual person! She was a description of the ultimate woman given by a wise mama to her kingly son.

I'm sure, when the time comes for my son to marry, I'll encourage him to shoot for the best. He is my son, after all . . . I would do anything for that kid. No really, anything. Like, I'd scratch the eyes out of any girl who would break his heart or treat him badly. I mean it. And I'm sure this queen wouldn't think twice before putting a fair maiden who wasn't fit for her prince in a headlock.

So when we read about P31 girl and her awesomeness, let's not berate ourselves because we don't measure up. Let's be grateful we have a good model. We learn by example, and if we didn't have stellar examples to aspire to, we would likely aim for mediocre. So even though this model woman sounds annoyingly unrealistic, you know what they say: Shoot for the moon, and even if you miss, you'll land among the stars.

Take a look at this passage again, freeing yourself from cultural implications. Set aside your personal preferences and experiences, and you will be inspired by the strength, the creativity, the honor given, and the wisdom

and purpose this woman possesses. Go ahead. Read it. I think you'll be pleasantly surprised.

When I read this passage with an open heart, what I really home in on, what helps me not get hung up on all the perceived commands, is verse 25: "She is clothed with strength and dignity, and she laughs without fear of the future."

Laughing without fear. I have such longing to be in a place in life where I can indulge in this seemingly simple activity, this innocent and lovely thing. I absolutely love to laugh. Until 2009 I would say it was a defining characteristic of my whole life. I've been known to laugh at inappropriate times—such as, but not limited to, funerals (story coming) and weddings (I once had to crawl under the table because I could not stop crying/laughing). I was raised to have the most fun humanly possible, to surf my guts out and dance at weddings, to giggle for sport.

But the reality is, the recent years have been about crying. Shedding tears is such a frequent occurrence it has become part of my identity. Sorrow has cut deeply into my previous life's goal of carefree fun.

I know it's true for some of you too. Some of us are identified by tears of tragedy, and some by tears of sin. Life is harsh. We walk around with scarlet letters on our chests. Mine is posted large and loud for my small town to see—the glaring *B* for bereavement. Others bear the quintessential *A* for adultery, or the *I* for infertility.

Perhaps some have a blazing *S* for substance abuse, or the excruciatingly prevalent *D* for divorce. We the broken are easily identifiable.

We haven't all been the Proverbs 31 woman. She's not even on the radar for some. Most of us can't say our choices have been so good, so godly, that we have no fear of them bringing anything other than blessing. I would bet each one of us has made a few messes in our lives. I have. The effects linger, begin to show up on our countenances—lines and blemishes that weren't there before. It's a very real thing to read about this fictitiously flawless woman and think, *I'm not her. In fact, my choices stink, and my life shows it. I wouldn't even know where to start, how to scrub clean and bandage the wounds enough to get to the business of godliness.* Sometimes it's tempting to throw in the towel and give in to darkness, give in to foolishness, give up.

But even when we do all we can to meticulously make the right choices, to fill our charts with gold stars, the poop still hits the fan. Loyal spouses suffer betrayal, healthy people become debilitated in accidents that weren't their fault, talented and hardworking people lose their jobs when the company sells . . . Even moms who do everything they can for their sick little girls end up with their hearts broken. Without warning we can lose the very things we grasped with every ounce of strength. It seems, sometimes, that this life is far out of our control.

Sometimes, maybe even most of the time, it's difficult to believe God's goodness to us. All the felicitous promises from the Bible fall on deaf ears, only to bounce off and roll under the couch, lost among the dust bunnies and missing puzzle pieces. Who can actually laugh when life is so cruel? Apparently not someone who has lived any real life.

I'm tempted to think of the writer of Proverbs 31 as a girl who is naïve, silly, inexperienced in reality. Come on—who on earth writes this stuff? Who is this bright-eyed and bushy-tailed champion of holiness and optimism? Let's just say the answer to these irascible questions is a tad unexpected.

Many Bible commentators agree that the writer of the last chapter of Proverbs was most likely Bathsheba. Remember her? You know that girl. What's she famous for? Bathing on the roof of her house. Yeah, I totally have the visual too. Beautiful spring day, long luscious locks, pre-baby body. That's probably how most of us remember her. The girl whose beauty and nudity enticed a handsome king to warm his bed for a night. Not the best of first impressions.

We can make our judgments about her, we can call her all sorts of colorful names, but the bottom line is—the 2 Samuel account does not tell us whether she was showing off or attempting to do her thing modestly. I'm not gonna lie; it does sound sketchy. I mean, in my

imagination she was running water through her hair, head tipped back like a risqué shampoo commercial, not so much scrubbing her armpits.

Did she have a servant holding up a sheet, or was she secretly pleased to be watched by a handsome king? We don't know. What she was doing was bathing in the *mikveh*, performing the ritual cleansing bath Jewish women take when they are finished with their monthly period. It signified that she was purified and ready for her husband after two weeks of abstinence. So on the day Bathsheba was beckoned by the king, she was supposed to have been home with Uriah—her strapping, soldier husband—making babies, but he was away at war.

The Bible is silent as to whether or not Bathsheba welcomed an adulterous relationship with David, but the more I get to know Bathsheba, my guess is his advance was scary and unwanted. Chances are she didn't have much of a choice. After the whole sordid experience, she undoubtedly felt heavy under the weight of sin, having been used by the king for a night of pleasure and then forgotten. I'm casting my vote in favor of Bathsheba's integrity, but if I find out one day in heaven that she was just as much at fault as David, well . . . none of us is better than she. Most of us have made some pretty heinous mistakes. I've decided I love her regardless of blame and admire the woman she became, which is the whole reason we are even talking about her.

Apparently, after the infamous escapade, her pregnancy was the only reason that Bathsheba's involvement with David went any further. Enough time had gone by for her to realize the consequence of their illicit union, and she sent word of her pregnancy to the king by way of a note. Can you imagine? I mean, what do you say to the dude who made you his booty call, got you pregnant while your husband was out risking his neck for the kingdom, and then went on his merry way?

Did she want to pour out her heart, claim his love? Did she want to let him know this was not her usual, that she was not that kind of girl? Did she want to cuss him out? Were there tear stains on the note? Perfume? Was it folded carefully in the shape of those notes we passed in high school? Or was she worried the messenger would read it and feel the need to divulge the most iniquitous secret she held? It seemed her very fate was sealed up in that little message, that terse note that said simply, "I'm pregnant."

Bathsheba's husband Uriah is described as one of David's "mighty men." He had been out fighting that spring with the rest of the Israelite army, so there was no valid excuse for the origin of her growing child. I can imagine the terror Bathsheba felt, the sickening guilt, the desire for cleanliness. I imagine she felt like a trapped animal, caged and awaiting a formidable master. Trembling at the consequences of a sin that would soon become

obvious, that would make her an outcast worthy of the death penalty.

But the Lord knew. He knew there was more for this precious woman than being used for a one-night stand, more in store for her than a lifetime of regret and fear and hunger and shame. He had more of life for her to experience: highs and lows, joys and sorrows, and a calling marked by dignity and wisdom. There was forgiveness and more heartache to come, but most of all there was a chance in the future to bring God glory. A chance to encourage women over the millennia, a chance to walk again, her head held high with the beauty of strength and wisdom and purpose.

We don't know everything about Bathsheba, but we do know for sure that she had much to cry about. She was not only scandalously used by the king and illegitimately pregnant, but her husband, Uriah—who apparently was a great guy, serving his country and refusing to flake out on his men even when David offered him leave to come home and sleep with Bathsheba—was murdered by David to cover up his sin. The baby boy she conceived with David died soon after he was born, and Bathsheba became one of David's many wives. She was taken from a good life with a good man to live a lonely life amongst many other women who were used and kept like property. Pretty sure I'd hate to live in a harem that shared a husband, regardless of all the free swag.

God eventually comforted Bathsheba's numerous losses with a son: Solomon. Someone to love and care for, someone to share closeness and affection, someone to raise up and encourage. Years later when he became a grown man and king, his loving mother wrote words of wisdom to him. And so we have the last chapter of Proverbs, in which she describes the internationally famous, worthy woman of nobility and kindness.

Bathsheba didn't have a perfect life free of sin and bummers and tragedy. Despite being a wife of the king, she did not live on easy street. But she grew up. She became the mother of the future king, and there was something stirring in her that said, "Look, this is what is good. This is where you want to be; this is what's wise and beautiful and full of honor." She had seen pain and sin and betrayal firsthand and suffered consequences out of her control. She had felt the devastation of love and death and despair. She had mourned the murder of her husband and the loss of her infant son. The woman had some street cred, which changes everything for me when I read her words to Solomon, her description of an excellent woman.

No longer do I balk against these lofty verses. No longer do I desire to throw them out, assuming that the writer was judgmental, legalistic, and riding a high horse. Instead, I accept them, respect them, desire to live them

out. The woman behind them was real, broken, and had risen above.

Real-life stories bring salve to a wounded soul. Knowing Bathsheba and I share in some sad experiences draws me deep into her life, and seeing her rise from the ashes buoys my confidence in God's goodness—that I, too, will survive the great loss.

I stumbled upon Bathsheba in the months following Daisy's death, after the laziness subsided and the bitterness began to settle. It was a kind of grief support group; we shared stories, compared lots. Like when you get a sponsor to see you through the hardest months of healing from addiction, she was there for me. When I was the only woman I knew who experienced death so close to my heart, I remembered how she had too. In the quiet hours of a house bereft of the shouts and footsteps of a child, she whispered strength, dignity, fearlessness. When I was comforted with a pregnancy, I remembered she had been too. She showed me how to be loyal to another child while grieving the first. She held my hand in the gloom, leaned close to my ear, and whispered, "Me too."

On the days that I felt publicly conspicuous, the unfortunate *B* emblazoned upon me, she walked beside me wearing the same letter. I was not alone. I started to look up, to see and understand that there is life beyond the hurt. I felt some of the heaviness lifting at the very thought of sharing in such hardship.

Because I had a friend in Bathsheba, because of her story, I could count on her example. The first few times that I had opportunity to laugh during those early days of mourning, it felt foreign. It felt wrong, sacrilegious, amiss. But I had seen her mourn, I had read her story of strength, and I had experienced the reality of her loneliness and shame. I knew that she would one day tell her son that an excellent woman laughs without fear of the future—not because she is perfect, or because her life is perfect, but because it is good and right and honors God. So began my freedom to giggle, my freedom to reclaim the goodness of the life God had given me. A beginning that opened up the way to healing.

Perhaps my favorite thing about Bathsheba and Proverbs 31 is that after her crazy messy life she can tell you that the future is worth smiling about. Dignity and strength are beautiful, and kindness wins over manipulation and harshness. The Holy Spirit through Bathsheba is worth listening to, I think. I want to breathe the air she breathes, laugh the way she laughs. I want to say with all confidence that I, like Bathsheba, can come through some of life's most brutal beatings and still be kind, still be strong, still laugh without fear.



IF: GATHERING

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