



HOPE HEALS

A TRUE STORY OF OVERWHELMING LOSS
AND AN OVERCOMING LOVE

KATHERINE AND
JAY WOLF

FOREWORD BY JONI EARECKSON TADA

ZONDERVAN

Hope Heals

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FOREWORD

Before You Begin . . .

So there I was, sitting near the back of the room, listening to Jay and Katherine share their story. I wasn't expecting anything too new, given that I'm also in a wheelchair and Ken and I have a similar story. Plus, I have heard hundreds of couples talk about overcoming accidents and injuries. But this time, something felt different . . .

Part of it was the way they looked. Jay sat next to his wife, looking handsome, measured, and reasoned—the picture of thoughtful intelligence. On the other hand, Katherine spoke raspingly and loudly, and with sweeping gestures that made me fear she might fall out of her wheelchair. This was a fascinating couple to watch.

A brain stem stroke did all this? I wondered what they would say.

As Katherine shared about her first Thanksgiving out of the hospital, she described a poignant scene. The kitchen and family room were filled with people laughing, setting the table, and fixing dinner. Katherine sat in a corner, slumped in her wheelchair with her chin on her chest, staring at it all. She watched as her family fussed over her baby. Then, as if reliving the moment, she said, slowly and in a half whisper, "I looked at the scene

before me and thought, *I don't think this world will work for me . . . It won't work.*"

This world won't work for me. How many times have I felt and said the same thing, given my own struggles with paralysis! Tears flooded my eyes, for here was a woman who had reached into the most tender part of my soul . . . and *touched* it. From then on, I was totally gripped by everything Katherine and Jay said from the platform. Although our situations were different, her story was my story. Her pain *fit*. She was able to look right through me and say, *I understand. I get it. I resonate with you.*

Isn't that what we all long for? Someone who will meld our heart with theirs? Someone who can validate our pain and assure us that if God got them through their mess, He'll get us through ours?

Besides, we all identify with pretty things that get broken. We sigh and feel sad when youth becomes horribly marred. We shake our heads and say, "What a shame!" if fate scrapes a beautiful smile from a fair innocent, leaving a damaged grin. We hate when that happens.

And *this* is why the book you hold in your hands is so powerful . . .

For if awful things *do* happen to you, you now have a guide. You have two seasoned warriors in Jay and Katherine who understand. You have two friends who can escort you through the grief and loss and out into the broad, spacious plain of peace and contentment. *Hope Heals* may well be your most treasured companion through great trial and pain. So please, don't plow through it too quickly. Read the Wolfs' story prayerfully and act on their counsel intentionally.

And I need to make a correction. Katherine's grin is far, *far* from damaged. Spend time with her and her husband, and you begin to understand what true beauty is all about. You understand how hard-fought-for their smiles really are, and that

makes Katherine's grin the sweetest, most endearing expression you will *ever* see.

Does your world work for you? If not—or if it could be better—join me in the back of the room and listen to Jay and Katherine. Do not assume you've "heard it all before." Theirs is a story so raw, visceral, and impossibly real that you can't help but identify. You cannot help but resonate. So flip the page and get started. And as you journey beside Jay and Katherine, I pray that this hope—the kind that really heals—will touch the deepest part of *your* soul.

Joni Eareckson Tada,
Joni and Friends International Disability Center,
Agoura Hills, California,
Spring 2016

Chris Eckstein



PROLOGUE

Katherine

I imagine most of us have fairly straightforward pictures in our heads about what our lives will look like and who we will become. These pictures are mostly of wonderful things that happen at exactly the right time and make oh-so-much sense. When something happens that is not inside the four corners of that picture, we view it as a detour and hope to get back on track as quickly as possible.

So what happens when you take a detour and can't ever get back on that original path again?

I can tell you. The greatest detour anyone can take in life, I imagine, is a near-death experience.

Six months and five days after our beautiful, big-eyed baby James was born, I nearly died of a massive brain stem stroke. My family's journey over the past seven years has been arduous and so achingly slow that at times my husband and I have wondered how we could go on.

I've had eleven surgeries since my stroke. I've fought my way back to being able to do the most basic things again, and yet many disabilities remain. I can't do so many things I used to do and long to do now, and there is a profound sense of loss that lingers. Sometimes it feels like I'm an observer of my own life.

Surprisingly, on the far side of our tragedy, refined versions of our prior selves remain, ones that have walked with God through the fire but have not been consumed. Yet scars remain also, and it's been painful in ways I never thought possible. Having a small child makes it even more heartbreakng. Sometimes I feel so alone, even though I know that nothing is

further from the truth. I *still* can't believe this happened to me, even though I've had years now to settle into my new reality.

Everyone asks if I've ever had a moment of total despair or hopelessness. The answer is yes and no. My feelings were hurt badly when this happened to me. At times I felt like God had made a mistake, and I struggled to make sense of all the pain. Several times I thought I should just end this. *I'm caught between life and death*, I reasoned. *This could not be what God planned for my life*. In those darkest moments, however, God spoke into that mess and revealed truth I already knew: He sees the entire picture, and HE DOES NOT MAKE MISTAKES. He knows this is part of the story He is writing for me, for my family, and for all of the creation He is making right. It is not a plan B, and I trust that.

Still, no amount of catharsis or perspective finding will change the fact that our situation is terribly sad and deeply broken. I can give God the glory, and it can still hurt. I used to cry myself to sleep every night. But I have learned, above all other lessons, that healing for each of us is spiritual. We will be fully restored in heaven, but we are actually healed on earth *right now*. My experience has caused me to redefine healing and to discover a hope that heals the most broken places: our souls.

What has happened to me is extreme; however, it is not that different from what everyone deals with. I am a sort of microcosm for what we all feel. I can barely walk, even with a cane, but who feels free even if they can? My face is paralyzed, but who feels beautiful even when they look normal? I have no coordination in my right hand, so I can't hold things, even my child, but who feels like a competent parent even if all their faculties are intact? For months I could not eat, and even today I have difficulty swallowing, but who feels fully satisfied even if they can enjoy every delectable treat they desire? I am tired almost all the time now, but who always feels energized to engage fully in their life? My voice is messed up, but who feels understood

even if they can speak plainly? I have double vision, but who sees everything clearly even if they can see normally? My future is uncertain, but whose isn't?

So no matter the situation, universally people feel what I am living out. They don't feel free. They don't feel understood. They don't feel satisfied.

I believe that pain is pain, no matter what the form, but perspective is also perspective. Ultimately, ours is a story of a life overcome by hope. We are discovering joy even in the sadness and *choosing* contentment when it is very, very hard. For that, and for countless other blessings, I am so grateful to God. In some ways, Jay and I have been blessed to suffer greatly at such a young age because it informs the way we live the rest of our lives. We have learned that when everything else is gone, hope remains.

Perhaps some detours aren't detours at all. Perhaps they are actually *the* path. *The* picture. *The* plan. And, perhaps most unexpectedly, they can be perfect.

PART ONE



Marielu Wehrenberg

THE DREAM BROKEN

Katherine

I lay in bed at 4:00 a.m., unable to shake the sickening feeling. I had been up with James for a feeding an hour earlier and noticed then that something was off. I felt nauseous and spacy, and my head was pounding. My upper neck and shoulders were throbbing. Some of these feelings had been commonplace during my pregnancy, so I concluded that I needed to get my hands on a pregnancy test sometime the next day.

I tried to fall back to sleep despite the terrible nausea and an intense headache, knowing I had only a few hours until James would be awake and hungry again. The lack of sleep had deeply affected Jay and me in those first six months. Our marriage was in a tense season as we navigated life with a newborn. We still felt we were living in a bit of a dollhouse and should be able to turn off the crying switch on the baby doll's back. Instead, we lived in a sleepless haze and wondered when we'd ever feel "normal" again.

I finally drifted off, only to wake up a couple hours later, feeling like I could have slept for at least another eight. Still, I looked forward to a rare "free" morning of doing my son's endless laundry and cleaning up the apartment before heading out to the post office so I could get a bunch of thank-you notes in the mail. My grandmother and mother had instilled in me a thank-you-note-writing mentality, and as a true Southern belle, I could not enjoy the gift until the thank-you had been sent. At the three-week mark since Jay's and my annual joint birthday party, it was beyond time to mail the notes. I knew the consummate, etiquette-following lady never went to bed after receiving

a gift until the note was written and ready for mailing the following morning. Yeah, right! Was this true once she had her babies? Did she somehow squeeze in note writing before 3:00 a.m. newborn feedings?!

After hitting the post office, we stopped at the grocery store, where I grabbed the ingredients for the meals I was planning to make for two families who had new babies. Back at home, with my baby boy settled in for his morning nap, I took the pregnancy test and was relieved to see the negative sign. *So what's wrong with me? I wondered. Food poisoning? Some weird virus? Lack of rest?*

I opened the First Baptist Montgomery cookbook to a lasagna recipe that was always a huge hit back home. For the next twenty minutes, I would be doubling ingredient quantities in my head and preparing sauce and browning ground beef. My nausea and headache were still there, but I had to push through those funky feelings and get the meals made. We had been the recipients of countless meals after James arrived, and I had seen how much it meant to us to not even have to think about preparing dinner. But now all I could think about was getting off my feet and closing my (now stinging) eyes. The room began spinning and suddenly felt way too bright. I needed soothing, low-lit surroundings. I made my way to the couch a few feet away, sure that if I just got off my feet for a moment I'd feel better. But as I sat down, it was as if all the blood in my body rushed into my head. I felt like I was choking and couldn't breathe.

“JAAAYY! COME IN HERE NOW! SOMETHING’S WRONG!”

I tried to stand, only to realize that my legs were numb. Everything in the room was now moving in a circle, but also coming in and out of focus and jumping from one place to another in my line of sight. Jay flew into the room and, frantic, screamed right in my face. *All this noise is going to wake up James, I thought. Jay’s voice is so loud, and I need quiet.*

I tried to dismiss the thought that what was happening to me was anything serious. *What a drama queen I am*, I thought. *Why do I always make a scene? What will the neighbors think? This is so embarrassing.*

Then I heard Jay yelling into the phone.

A handwritten signature of the name "Jay" in black ink. The signature is fluid and cursive, with the letters "J" and "a" connected.

After three long years, the end of my law school education was imminent. Though I was grateful to be done with the intense culture, testing, and expectations, Pepperdine had been our first home, and it would be very hard to leave.

On Mondays that last semester, I had about an hour between classes, right around noon. Leaving the mid-morning class, I realized I'd left some things at home that I needed to prepare for the final exam presentation I would be giving in my next class. I usually stayed on campus at lunchtime, but that day, April 21, 2008, I went back to our on-campus married housing apartment, brushing aside any shame over my procrastination in preparing for the final. We had a six-month-old baby—who could blame me for being spread a little thin? He was not on a schedule and didn't sleep through the night, so neither did we.

Katherine was cooking in the kitchen, and after giving her a quick kiss, I plopped down on an old chair squeezed into the corner of our bedroom. I began rifling through my scattered papers and typing words on the final slides for my presentation. Class would be starting within the hour, so I searched hastily for just the right pictures to add.

Suddenly, I heard Katherine's panicked call for me to "Come in here!!" She has always had a flair for the dramatic, but what could be important enough to possibly wake up James? I ran to the main room, where I found her seated on the couch in an

unnatural slump. The TV was on, and she staggered across the living room floor toward the noise, mumbling that everything was too loud. The moment she touched the Off button, it was as if she turned herself off too. Her body fell hard onto the floor, sprawled, motionless.

The room closed in on me. I could almost hear the blood rushing through my ears and feel the adrenaline pump through my body. I sprang to her side, staring down at her normally animated frame, now seemingly lifeless. I cursed and yelled, not at her, but at my own realization that I was looking into the very face of death.

All I could see were her pupils. They were black, consuming almost every remnant of blue iris. Those blue eyes were one of the first things I saw whenever I saw Katherine. Her eyes could speak more expressively than most could with their words. But now it looked as though her light was being eclipsed by an unknown darkness. Her eyes were motionless, as if resigned to the fate of the expanding black hole of her pupils, the place into which everything would be sucked down forever.

Suddenly, Katherine gasped deeply and sat up, as if having been resuscitated on the beach after nearly drowning in the sea. No sooner did I, too, breathe a sigh of relief than she began to vomit violently. I propped her on some pillows and scrambled to find the phone. I had never dialed 9-1-1 before and was grateful it was easy to remember. Nonetheless, I fumbled and dialed 4-1-1 at least once before getting it right.

The operator had me elevate Katherine's legs on a chair and assured me that help was coming. It seemed that a veritable swarm of EMT workers poured through our front door almost as soon as I put down the phone. The sleepy beach town clearly had no other emergencies occurring then; their entire crew had come to this call. As I moved away from Katherine, stepping to the corner of the room to allow them to assess her, I was momentarily relieved but panicked, too, as though engaging

medical professionals somehow made whatever was happening to Katherine more real, as if we could not go back to our ordinary day because of what I had set into motion by dialing those three numbers.

After quickly examining her, the head paramedic announced that they would be taking Katherine to the ER at UCLA Medical Center, Santa Monica, which was nearly half an hour down the Pacific Coast Highway, and that I should follow them in my car. They had already strapped her to a stretcher and were lifting the contraption up as one would do an ironing board, with the same screeching noise. Yet their fluidity and precision diffused some of the dizzying chaos that had exploded into our normally peaceful space.

Just beyond the stretcher on which Katherine lay, out the main window of our living room I saw the blue sliver of the Pacific Ocean. We loved saying our place had an ocean view, though it was mostly parking lot with a hint of ocean only if you looked at just the right angle on a cloudless day. Today was such a day, and I was standing at the right angle. That thin water-color streak of ocean blue often faded right into the sky above so one couldn't tell where the ocean stopped and the sky began.

In a blink, I was transported back to another sliver of ocean blue, this one in Katherine's eyes. The blue irises were once again prominent, though visibly straining to overcome the blackness as her eyes darted around the room. A tear zigzagged down her cheek.

"Call Anna," she pleaded. "Get her to take care of James." Anna and Andy were some of our closest friends, and though pregnant with their first child, these not-yet-parents were the most knowledgeable on the subject of babies since nearly no one else in our friend group had had kids yet.

Katherine's words had an urgent, almost dying-wish quality to them, which terrified me. *What do you know that I don't know?* I thought, dread nearly capsizing me. "I love you," I told

her. “Don’t worry.” I kissed her forehead, feigning confidence as my voice cracked. I gulped down the lump in my throat as the EMTs pushed the stretcher into the hallway in preparation for the trip down three flights of stairs. I could tell she wanted to turn her head or lift her hand to say good-bye, but her arms were strapped down tightly. The door to our apartment slammed shut so hard behind them that the welcome wreath attached to it crashed to the ground in a jarring clatter. Then all of a sudden, it was quiet again—until I heard the sound of my own wailing.



Katherine’s emotional state was often contingent on mine, so I had maintained my composure until she was taken to the hospital. Now I could no longer hold in the wave of sobs. *What do I do now?* I raced to the bedroom to gather an overnight bag for her. Surely this insane detour would be over by tomorrow, and we would return home, grateful, maybe slightly embarrassed at all the fuss.

I threw into a bag Katherine’s favorite pair of post-pregnancy lounge pants, which I hated. It made me smile to see them. I suppose she had earned the right to wear whatever pants she pleased. After grabbing her toothbrush, I couldn’t think of anything else to pack. I proceeded to rouse James, who had impressively slept through the single most tumultuous twenty minutes of his life and ours. I grabbed his diaper bag and rushed downstairs to our car, half expecting to see Katherine being lifted gently into the ambulance, but she was long gone. I could barely make out the sound of a siren in the distance. I strapped James into his car seat and sped down the hill to leave campus.

I saw a law school friend walking to the class I was supposed to be attending. She waved, her smile quickly fading as I screeched to a halt next to her and tried to calmly yell that I would not be at class as Katherine was heading to the ER

and could she please tell our professor. I floored it forward, bouncing on the campus speed bumps like a novice horseback rider. I groped around my pocket and the front seat for my cell phone but couldn't find it anywhere. I hit the steering wheel and screamed in frustration so violently that James began to cry, and I did too. I made a majorly illegal U-turn in the middle of the road, raced back up the hill, and parked on the curb with flashers blinking. Leaving James inside, I sprinted up the three flights of stairs, skidding into our apartment. I quickly found my phone, plugged in by my bedside next to the picture of Katherine running in her wedding dress—my favorite picture of her. I flew back to the car and drove off campus, calling Anna on the cell phone. She lived close to the hospital in Santa Monica, so I asked her to try to meet Katherine's ambulance there, as I would be lagging behind.

The mountains line one side of the Pacific Coast Highway, while the ocean nearly laps the other side. The road curves back and forth hypnotically, hugging the natural undulations of the mountain range. In the three years we had lived in Malibu, Katherine had put nearly 100,000 miles on our car, mostly traversing this same stretch of highway on her way to auditions and church and adventures with James. We always said if you had to have a commute, it might as well be this one. On this familiar route, I began to calm myself, remembering that every other time I had driven this road, Katherine was okay and alive and well, and this time would be no different.

No sooner had I soothed myself with such pat reassurances than I glimpsed James in the rearview mirror, visibly upset after being ripped away from his nap by a yelling, crazy person, and I remembered this drive was not a normal one. Suddenly, a deluge of horrific thoughts flooded me like a tsunami pent up behind a dam of sticks. *What if she dies? Today might be your day to see the worst life has to offer, to no longer be a casual observer of the pain but the recipient. What if she dies? Will you take*

James and move to Africa to serve the poor? Or will you go off the deep end and leave everything and everyone else, like Katherine left you? What if she dies? Today, it seemed that the target was on my back, and the arrow of brokenness quivered through the air to find its mark.

Like a plane coming out of a cloud bank, we suddenly arrived at the ER, and I tried to shake off the shroud of dark thoughts as I looked for parking. I pulled into the loading zone, not knowing where to go or what to do. And then I looked in the rearview mirror and saw one of the most horrifying sights of my life—our visibly pregnant friend Anna, her face ashen, brow furrowed, running toward our car. In that moment, I knew my deepest fear just might be coming true.



I began to sprint to the hospital entrance, my eyes searching for signage, my brain grappling with the affirmation of my great fears. This wasn't food poisoning or some post-pregnancy, freak blood sugar drop; no, this was something much bigger.

I ran up to the ER desk and manically asked the person seated behind it where I could find my wife. "What's her name," she asked calmly, in a way that reminded me this was *my* crisis, not the rest of the world's. "Her name's Katherine. Katherine Wolf. She just arrived by ambulance." The soft click of computer keys punctuated the silence, which lingered longer than my short-fused patience would allow. I left the desk and staggered around the hallway, just looking for Katherine instead. An older ER doctor apprehended me knowingly. "I'm looking for my wife," I nearly shouted. "The ambulance just brought her here. Something's very wrong." As I spoke the last words, I couldn't contain my whimpering sobs. The man, maybe of Eastern European descent, cupped my face in his hands and looked me right in the eyes in a way that denoted both authority

and intimate commiseration. “Shhh, son, it’s okay. She’s here. She’s here. We think she’s had a stroke, and we will help her.”

He quickly led me to the room where Katherine was surrounded by a new swarm of medical professionals. I called out to her, but her eyes were closed and she was motionless. A nurse was quickly cutting off her T-shirt, the one from our senior year in college when she had successfully chaired her sorority’s recruitment campaign. She had chosen the color, a vibrant shade of Tiffany blue—her favorite. It was ripped off her and thrown to the floor in a shredded heap. Her bra was now exposed as they placed heart-monitoring pads on her chest. I lurched to pull the curtain or shut the door to give her privacy, but my new doctor friend held me back, shut the door to her room, and quietly and expertly guided me away to a private waiting room.

Within the hour, it became clear that UCLA, Santa Monica, a satellite hospital campus, wasn’t as well equipped to help her as the main UCLA Medical Center in Westwood was, just a few miles down the road. There was a neurosurgeon on call there. I signed whatever release papers were handed to me without even looking at them and ran to my car with James and Anna in tow. I was not going to be so far behind the ambulance this time.

As I drove, I began to make phone calls to my parents and Katherine’s. Hardly knowing what to say, I explained that she had been taken to the hospital and that she had had a stroke and that I would keep them posted. I raced to the next ER, where, plastered over the entrance, was a huge sign:

#3 HOSPITAL IN THE COUNTRY, BEST IN THE WEST.

We were both twenty-six and healthy. We didn’t even have a primary care doctor. I couldn’t have told you where the nearest hospital was to our home in Malibu, much less which one was the best. And yet it was clear we had been brought to the right place.

I ran inside, scanning the room for another helpful, older-doctor figure. Instead, my gaze fell on some familiar, if out-of-place, faces. I blinked, confused. It was Monday midday; why were friends from our church in this waiting room? It quickly dawned on me that they were gathering there for us. This revelation both deeply comforted me and sickeningly proved the dark whisper in my head to be true: *This was a very serious matter.*

Dr. Nestor Gonzales, apparently one of the most highly respected neurosurgeons at UCLA Medical Center, approached me. His face was concerned, eyes sorrowful yet compassionate. “I will be treating your wife, Katherine,” he said in a Spanish accent. “She has suffered a major neurovascular incident, and we will need to perform surgery immediately.” In a gentle voice, he added, “I need you to know that there is a good chance she will not survive.”

To experience such a reversal within the course of a few hours was more bewildering and disorienting than being flung upside down on a carnival ride. The world was still there, but this view of life was nearly unrecognizable. We had awakened to a normal day of law school presentations and baby diapers and preparing food and wondering where we would move after I graduated and if James would sleep through the night. Now the innocent myth of youthful immortality had burst like an iridescent bubble blown from a child’s lips as Katherine lay dying.

I signed all the documents giving my consent for the surgery. I would later find out that shortly before our conversation, Dr. Gonzales had been wrestling with Katherine’s case, weighing whether or not he should even attempt to do surgery, given the severity of her injury and the small likelihood of a positive outcome. He was even informed that I was an attorney. The circumstances, the liability, and the potentially huge expenditure of the hospital’s resources weighed heavily against surgery. And yet he knew she had a six-month-old son. Though Katherine was already unconscious upon their meeting, he inexplicably

felt she was entrusting her life into his hands, and despite the longer list of reasons not to operate, he felt undeniably compelled to give this young mother a chance to live.

As the doctor hurriedly left to prepare for surgery, I told him with surprising forthrightness, “I will—we all will—be praying for you.” He nodded in grateful acceptance, as if he knew he would need all the prayers he could get.

Katherine’s sister Amie had arrived, and we waited in the hallway for someone to direct us to Katherine’s room. A resident matter-of-factly explained that we couldn’t see her because they were drilling a hole in her skull right then in order to relieve some of the mounting pressure in her brain. I suddenly felt lightheaded, my body rocking back into the wall. I didn’t normally do well with blood or hospitals, and the very thought of Katherine undergoing such a medieval-sounding procedure nearly undid me.

Then, out of the corner of my eye, I saw a patient being wheeled down the hallway on a bed. It was Katherine. I silently reached out my hand and touched her arm, unable to even stammer out, *Stop! This is my dying wife. I need to say good-bye.* Perhaps I didn’t want to slow their journey to the OR, or maybe I thought this good-bye might well be the last of all our goodbyes, the abstention from which might prevent its finality.

And then in my mind’s eye flashed a different picture of Katherine—not the Katherine unconscious on the gurney, dressed in hospital whites, but the Katherine from the picture at my bedside, the Katherine smiling and running in her wedding dress, barefoot in the grass. That photo captures her perfectly, illuminated in a shaft of light, mid-stride, surrounded by the dappled shadows of an overhanging tree. I felt something shift inside me, like fresh life breathed into bursting lungs. I would refuse to let this tsunami tear me from Katherine. I would release myself into this unnatural life inversion, no longer fighting to be up-righted, no longer straining toward the life we knew that

morning or the sinking thoughts that lured me deeper down and farther away. I would live upside down if it meant living upside down with her.



Across the crowded college cafeteria eight years before, I had seen Katherine for the first time. She was the most beautiful woman I had ever seen in real life, yet at the same time one of the most unexpectedly approachable. Perhaps it was her warm smile, or maybe it was her lunch tray overflowing with food. Either way, I was nearly speechless when she approached the round table I was seated at with a fraternity pledge brother of mine and asked to join us.

The cafeteria at Samford carried with it some of the archetypal high school seating code, and as it were, Katherine was pledging a sorority that was considered the sister to the fraternity I was pledging. I guess she was less approaching me as she was joining a “friendly” brotherly table, but nonetheless, she sat down. My friend had to go to class, so, like something out of a movie, I was left alone with this dream girl, who proceeded to chow down. She was easy to talk to and emboldened as only college freshmen can be, I engaged in some lively conversation with her until almost the entire room was empty. Seeing how much time had passed, she jumped up, needing to head back to her dorm. With uncharacteristic boldness, I asked her to go on a jog later to make up for the insane amount of calories we had both consumed. To my astonishment, she agreed!

Near dusk, we met in the well-traversed space between the freshman girl and guy dorms. In the warm evening air of early autumn, we briskly jogged the loop around campus. We chatted about our families and where we had come from. She also not so subtly mentioned her hometown boyfriend, who played football for the University of Georgia, and she kindly suggested I might

like to go to a game sometime with her. It was a slight punch to the gut, but I was undeterred. Within the span of an afternoon, I was already falling for this lovely creature, her long, blonde ponytail whipping through the air as she excitedly bounced down the sidewalk, talking a mile a minute.

And then, in midsentence, her voice faltered, and I looked to my left in horror. I saw her long legs splayed out on the road as a result of falling off the sidewalk. No sooner did I yell and run to her aid than she sprang up from the road in a single, deer-like movement back onto the sidewalk. I stood slack-jawed for a moment, praying that our first “date” would not forever be marred by a broken bone or a bloodied knee. In what I would later find to be a classic “Katherine response,” she yelled, “I’m fine! I’ve always been a klutz. Come on, catch up!” I knew at that moment that Katherine was a woman unlike any I had ever known.

Two months earlier, my parents and three younger sisters had driven me an hour and a half north of our home in Montgomery, Alabama, to Birmingham to move me into my college dorm. I had waited until the night before to pack virtually everything I owned into a dozen baskets, suitcases, and trash bags. We pulled onto the Rockwellian campus of Samford, which was abuzz with the frenetic energy of children metamorphosing into adults at that very moment. Perhaps for the first time, I felt like I just might find here something I’d been looking for as long I could remember.

I have always wanted to do the right thing, if for no other reason than to give the appearance of one who always does the right thing. I am a firstborn, after all. I chaired the Honor Society and was awarded “Best All Around” (voted on by the teachers only) and didn’t smoke or drink or date girls who did. Everything looked right on the outside, but internally I was deeply unsure of who I was and why I was.

I am the only boy, firstborn of four kids. My dad, a beloved

pastor of a large church, and my mom, a hardworking stay-at-home, had both instilled in me the love of God and family. I think my heart formed in Washington, D.C., where I spent the bulk of my childhood, but my head formed in the Deep South, where I spent my youth. Those places shaped me profoundly by their contrasts, but in terms of finding myself, those juxtaposing experiences left me feeling a bit like a stranger in my own home.

Growing up in the church added to this conflict of self. I saw a real and beautiful, if messy, behind-the-curtain picture of Christian community, particularly at home, and it changed me in the best way. I knew God and loved God from an early age. But the Christian culture of the Bible Belt, one that was at times indistinguishable from the broader culture, was confusing.

Pulling up to the freshman dorm at Samford, something about the place caused me to think I might find the answers I was looking for. Maybe it was the newness, a different crowd of people, the separation from home, the chance to start over. As the student greeters helped me and my family to unload an ungodly amount of my junk from our van, I wondered if I'd feel like that same kid with a Virginia accent shut out of the Southern middle school sleepover. Yet, over the next few days, even hours, it became apparent that this place would be a new home. I quickly began to shed parts of my old persona—the insecurities and fears—and met new people from all over, people who thought I was interesting and dateable and funny. I was almost giddy with a sense of finally belonging.

I didn't have a clue what I wanted to major in or what I wanted to do with my life. I didn't have a clue what all was in store for me. But after that first run with Katherine, I somehow knew she would be a part of it. I had no idea of the issues in her brain that explained some of her charming klutziness, but I did have an uncanny sense of certainty that I wanted to love and care for this exquisite, spastic, vibrant girl. On that October day, I could never have imagined where that would lead us.

Katherine

To this day, I can't put my finger on exactly what drew me to Jay. He was completely unlike any guy I had ever dated. Perhaps that was what interested me all along.

I had had two serious boyfriends in high school. Both of them were major athletes, superpopular, life-of-the-party types. Both would go on to play college-level sports.

In contrast, Jay was unassuming, creative, scholarly yet wildly funny too, and deeply humble.

I loved that Jay was thoughtful about his faith, even while wrestling with it. I saw that he yearned to make his relationship with God personal rather than sliding into a more comfortable, cultural faith or one that simply rode the coattails of his pastor-father's legacy. He intrigued me, but I had no romantic interest in him whatsoever. I think, initially, he was the brother I'd never had.

Growing up, I attended an elite college prep school in Athens, Georgia, for fourteen years. The prevailing expectation was that graduating seniors would either enroll in the beloved state school located in our hometown or be accepted to a prestigious institution for higher learning that boasted strong name recognition and fabulous academics. True to form, I was on my way to the South's closest interpretation of an Ivy League school in the spring of my senior year. My parents' minds were set. My teachers' minds were set. And I thought my mind was set too.

As college plans were solidifying, I happened to go to a summer camp reunion in Birmingham, Alabama. In need of a place to stay during the reunion, I called up a sweet friend from Athens who was attending Samford University, a small, private Christian liberal arts school in Alabama. I'd never even heard of the place. I figured that while I was in town I would visit her,

check out her dorm, eat in a real college cafeteria (honestly, I was most excited about that part!), and meet her new friends. Although we had not attended the same high school, I considered my friend a role model. I loved this beautiful, fabulous woman of God, who would later become my big sister in our sorority and a bridesmaid at my wedding.

I fell in love with the gorgeous campus, the incredible people, and Samford's dedication to supporting my faith. Former plans forgotten, I decided I simply *had* to go there! The previous fall, I had won the award for "Best Actress in the State of Georgia" at a one-act play competition, which prompted my desire to pursue theatre in college. So, naturally, by the time my mom picked me up in Birmingham at the end of my summer camp weekend, I had already arranged for us to meet with the head of Samford's theatre department. I auditioned for him that very day and was subsequently offered a theatre scholarship for the fall. Now I *really* had to go to this college.

My parents had never heard of Samford, either. However, in their great wisdom, they trusted God's clear call on this place for their high-achieving, firstborn child. My parents never could have known why God navigated me away from my perfect plan and directly to Samford's gates. But, you see, He knew why. He knew Katherine Arnold had to get to Samford University to meet Jay Wolf and to find the place where their love story would begin.

We became best friends during our first semester in college. It was hard to find one of us without the other. I had a wonderful feeling of total safety with Jay. He was deeply kind and compassionate and had this "ability to listen" thing that was electrifying. I could talk to him for ten hours straight (seriously) and still have so much to say. While my walk with Jesus never felt very outstanding, I had always wanted Him and all of His amazing attributes in my life. Jay embodied many of these characteristics. There was a quality about him that I had never

seen in a man before. He was so strong and wise, and yet unpretentious at the same time. Having three younger sisters, he had learned how to treat a female and deeply respect her. He was totally honoring of me in every way possible. Though he was on a journey of figuring out who he was—and making some mistakes along the way—I had never known a male to be so kind in my entire life.

During that time, I was dating a high school boyfriend who would become the all-time leading scorer on the Georgia football team. My entire life and identity were wrapped up in this hometown hero, and I would drive home almost every weekend for games. In November of our freshman year, our big sorority formal fell on the same day as one of the biggest college football games of the year, so my boyfriend was unable to attend. I needed a safe date. After much deliberation, Jay seemed the obvious choice. Even though I would never want any relationship with him beyond the sweet brother-sister thing for which we had become infamous on campus, I knew he was an absolute blast at any party that involved dancing. He has tremendous rhythm and loves to cut a rug, and I thought I could hide my superawkward tall-girl dance moves while laughing out loud the entire night.

And laugh we did! We danced right in front of the live band for more than three hours straight, with laugh-until-you-almost-wet-your-pants hoots and hollers. It was such a blast, surprisingly so—but at the same time, maybe not so surprising. As the evening ended, I couldn't shake this weird feeling. *Why was I so comfortable around Jay? We could never date or anything like that. Could we? This guy is like the brother I never had, so why am I starting to be so drawn to him as more than that?*

He had not told me that night, but I later learned that Jay had jeopardized his presidential scholarship by skipping a mandatory retreat to attend the formal with me. I felt horrified on one hand (thankfully, he got to keep the scholarship), but on the

other hand, I felt valued and special. He was willing to take a risk and give up something really important, not out of obligation, but because he wanted to be with me. I had never met a man like this, and I knew then that I wanted to be with him too.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jay". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the letters "J" and "a" connected.

I managed to slowly but surely work my way into Katherine's affections, and over the course of becoming close friends, dating, breaking up, dating, breaking up, Katherine and I had history, but did we have a future? By the time we were seniors, I felt more confident in myself than I ever had in my life, more ready for the next season, and Katherine did too. The typical firstborn, Bible Belt responses of either rebellion or judgment (personified in myself and Katherine, respectively) had now given way to self-assuredness, a deep desire for authenticity, and a healthy dose of humility. We had lived in a place where the consequences were not totally real, and yet it naturally set the stage for us to take what we had learned and make the leap together into the real world.

As we approached the last semester of our college career, the question of the final status of our relationship loomed as well. After much thought and deliberation, Katherine felt drawn to pursue a career in the entertainment industry after college. She had become somewhat of a big fish in a small pond in the Southeast world of commercial print modeling, so she and a friend had been scheming a cross-country move to Los Angeles, where she could give it a shot in the big pond.

It was clear we were at a crossroads. It wasn't that I felt I needed to protect Katherine or jealously manage her journey in a city like LA; it was more that I didn't want to miss out on any life with her. I had dreams for my own future, but more than a

concretized career path, I had dreams of spending my life with someone who got me, who challenged me to grow, and who loved me in spite of it all. Someone like Katherine.

But before this future could begin, I needed to ask her an important question.

I'm a creative at heart, so I knew I wanted our engagement to be a meaningful representation of our separate stories joining into one. Katherine, while sentimental to a degree, hates surprises and would have probably been fine with me popping the question in our beloved cafeteria between dessert courses. Instead, I schemed for months, gathering and framing dozens of pictures that charted both our histories, culminating with a picture of the inside of her hometown church, where I hoped we would be married. I even memorized a song that was sung at the end of every summer at the camp she had attended as a camper and counselor (the same camp reunion that spurred her to go to Samford). This song was a kind of calling to a close on a chapter of childhood and an invitation to a new chapter of life with me. Plus, I knew that Katherine so loved when I sang to her that she would likely do whatever I asked afterward.

On February 2, 2004, we drove down to my hometown—Montgomery, Alabama—on the pretext of visiting family. A proposal in my home church seemed just right, as it had not only been an integral part of my life for the many years my dad had served there, but Katherine had also been lovingly embraced by the church as one of its own. As I drove, Katherine fell asleep in the car, unknowingly peaceful in comparison to my hidden anxiety. I remember looking at her sleeping, my mind tumbling with nerves and awe that this complicated and amazing woman's life had collided with mine. God had brought us so far since the first day we met three and a half years before. I slyly texted my family that we were close to the church, where they had already scattered candles and flowers around the sanctuary and placed the framed pictures.

As we walked up the outer stairs to the sanctuary under some flimsy guise I had quickly constructed, it became very clear to her that something else was going on, particularly as she glimpsed candlelight flickering inside. Her eyes began to grow larger and glisten with tears of surprised understanding as a smile bloomed on her face. We entered, and I walked her down the middle aisle of the church that had been home for most of my life. With its red-tiled roof and marbled facade modeled after the Duomo in Florence, Italy, its monumental Tiffany stained glass angels keeping silent vigil, it may have been the last thing one would expect to see in that once-forsaken downtown, but somehow it had a place, and it wasn't going anywhere. Now, neither were we.

I don't remember much from the few minutes that followed, save for the memories reignited after the fact by the shaky video footage covertly taken by my dad from the back of the church. I sang the camp song to Katherine as I led her to the altar. I gave her a Bible with her would-be married name—"Katherine Wolf"—engraved in gold into its black leather. I narrated the disparate stories of our lives through the dozens of framed pictures, the moments that led us to the intersections that had led us to that very moment on the altar and would (hopefully) lead us, in the not-too-distant future, to her hometown church sanctuary for our wedding. I don't even remember asking her the question, but I remember shouting, "She said YES!" into the seemingly empty sanctuary, as my parents and sisters ran out from behind columns and pews in celebration. Our tight-knit family of six would expand to bring in this very different but already loved new member. They were overjoyed, and so were we.

As Katherine excitedly recounted the event to her parents on her cell phone, I quickly ascertained that the song I sang to her was not the iconic final song from her camp days; in fact, she didn't know the song and probably wondered why in the world I

had sung it to her. I had been misinformed; yet rather than feeling deflated at my falling short of long-planned-for perfection, I was inflated as Katherine breathlessly described the moment as if it was the most perfect song that could have ever been chosen. The words are inspired by the blessing from Numbers 6: “The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face shine on you and be gracious to you; the LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace.” The words are sung to the tune of “Edelweiss” from *The Sound of Music*, Katherine’s absolute favorite childhood movie, watched on repeat during idyllic weekend stays with her much-adored grandparents.

I couldn’t have planned it better if I had tried. It was an early foretaste of who Katherine would be to me—an encourager of my gifts, a fosterer of my best, albeit imperfect, efforts. She saw my heart, even when I had a hard time seeing it myself.

A handwritten signature of the name "Katherine" in black ink. The signature is fluid and cursive, with the "K" being particularly prominent and stylized.

Nine months of engagement *seemed* long enough to prepare for our nuptials. Once we set the wedding date, however, life seemed to speed up, and we couldn’t slow it down. My initial ideas about an intimate wedding for our “closest friends and family” quickly succumbed to pressure to hold a blow-out gala in all its Southern-fried goodness. My family had lived in my small hometown for more than fifty years, and Jay and I were some of the first of our friends to marry, so our wedding was sure to be an event for the whole community. At more than six hundred guests, we probably should have just put ads in the paper: “Come one, come all!” Until our funerals, it’s unlikely that so many people we love will be in the same room at the same time. But we both knew this wedding was not just about us. Printed in our wedding program was Psalm 115:1: “Not to

us, LORD, not to us but to your name be the glory, because of your love and faithfulness.” This was a glorious day to honor our Lord for our lives and point our friends and family to the true Giver of all good gifts.

November in Northeast Georgia is stunning. Though there was a chill in the air, it was still warm enough to be outside and enjoy the gorgeous colors of all the falling leaves. Surrounded by our beloved families and friends (and quite possibly a few strangers!), we entered that same sanctuary where my parents were married almost three decades before. Jay’s dad officiated at the ceremony and spoke of the need to “build our house on the rock” and lay a foundation that would endure—because the storms of life come to everyone. We think the Lord knew we needed to have that truth planted deep in our souls. At twenty-two, we were both bright-eyed in love and perhaps a little naive as to what we were promising before God and those witnesses. Yet we gave each other heartfelt assurances of our devotion, words of hope and commitment that would be tested much sooner than we could have ever imagined.

After the noonday ceremony, we celebrated with a bright and festive reception, overflowing with my favorite Southern brunch foods like sweet potato biscuits and shrimp and grits, a towering white wedding cake and scrumptious chocolate and peanut butter groom’s cake. The only minor tragedy of the day is that we didn’t get to eat a bite of wedding food during our entire reception! We had spent many months adjusting and tweaking our menu, but the buffet style combined with the crowd would prevent us from getting to the good eats! (It worked out fine—our wedding planner made us a picnic feast we enjoyed afterward.)

Our first dance was to “Son of a Preacher Man,” with lyrics personalized just for us. I didn’t begin to grasp at the time how important those words would become in our story. Being

a preacher's son's wife meant I had a husband who had grown up learning how to love people well. As an added bonus, it also meant we had a massive, built-in support system from the beginning. We were woven into a vital Christian community, and this would prove to be an immense gift. I loved watching our separate worlds collide on the dance floor as kids from Jay's church danced with kids from my neighborhood and Jay's grandmother followed my uncle in a spontaneous conga line. It was a precious slice of heaven.

Perhaps the most meaningful touch to our day was the framed black-and-white photographs of our mothers and grandmothers on their wedding days. We placed them in the entrance to the reception hall. While each marriage has known struggle and hardship through the years, our parents and all four sets of grandparents began their love story at a wedding while they were also quite young (early twenties) and continued it until death (or are still writing it—both sets of our parents have been married for more than thirty years). Because of that legacy of commitment, for better or worse, we knew that marriage was for life. And that is what we wanted.

Following all the festivities, we crossed the country and the Pacific to Hawaii for our first big "adult" vacation, though we technically weren't even old enough to rent a car.

After years of dating and questions about our future relationship and after months of stressful planning for the big wedding day, there was such a sense of release in being officially married and just being together at last. Our adventure as husband and wife had begun, and it was going to be an adventure beyond anything we could imagine.

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