
Sincerely
WRONG:

AN IMPROBABLE JOURNEY

BY

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Sincerely Wrong

Subtitle: An Improbable Journey

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*For false christs and false prophets will rise
and show great signs and wonders to deceive,
if possible, even the elect.*

(Matthew 24:24)

*For my grandchildren:
Alexandra, Danielle, Christiana, Ricky,
Kaitlyn, Devlin, and Ryan*

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P R E F A C E

For many years, I lamented not having a testimony to share. To me, testimonies were what people like former warlord and gang leader turned Christian evangelist Nicky Cruz had, or what folks who were addicts, criminals, or victims of abuse and had hit bottom had when they came to know the Lord and their lives were miraculously transformed--not ordinary people like me. My life had been mundane by comparison, and my conversion experience far from dramatic.

One day I was struck by the sudden realization that I did have a testimony, a testimony no less remarkable. The miracle of my testimony is that I found the right path at all, considering I believed I had already found it and was no longer searching. What follows is the story of that improbable journey.

PART I

I

INDIA

My story begins in a private nursing home in Calcutta where, after a long and difficult labor, a forceps was used to pull me into this world by the bridge of my nose. My father was delighted to hear he had a girl, but from the very beginning, I was a disappointment to my mother, who had hoped, dreamed, and firmly believed she would give birth to a son. It's not that she didn't love me. She did, fiercely, but it was the kind of love one would have for a prized possession, albeit a second choice one, rather than unconditional love for a separate little being who would eventually grow up and have her own set of hopes and dreams.

My parents were of Hungarian origin, and my father was an industrial engineer who had served as a Hungarian Army officer during World War 1. After the war, he dedicated himself to industrial development, and at the time of my birth, was Chief Engineering Adviser

to the Government of India's Department of Industries and Supplies.

My mother was a socialite with a keen business mind that did not go unnoticed. She was approached by a maharaja interested in promoting European art and, at his request, began organizing local exhibitions of oil paintings and etchings by well-known Hungarian artists, whose works she imported from Budapest. When World War II broke out, she opened our home to American troops stationed in Calcutta, and spent many hours rolling bandages as a Red Cross volunteer.

That is all I knew of my family history until a time much later, when the tangled web of deception I was born into slowly started unraveling, bit by bit.

Earliest Memories

We lived in a garden house complex surrounding a large courtyard, and I have happy memories of flying kites on the rooftops, eating juicy mangos, having vanilla ice cream at Firpo's,¹ a little girl who wore saris and spoke only Hindustani, and a special friend--a little American boy by the name of Phillip--who told me he had a penis, and I didn't, to which I retorted that I did too have

¹ Popular restaurant in Calcutta that catered to foreigners and served dishes familiar in the West.

one, and was genuinely surprised when I checked and saw that I didn't.

I remember my Betsy Wetsy doll that accompanied me to the doctor's office to get whatever I was going for, too, and whose life came to an abrupt end when I started feeding her milk instead of water, and she developed a severe case of worms. I also remember the birthday parties where we played blind man's buff, musical chairs, and a game where everyone sat in a circle and passed around a large box containing several smaller boxes, wrapped in brown paper, with instructions written on top--to the girl with blue eyes, to the boy whose name starts with a B. Each recipient would excitedly rip off the paper, hoping to get the gift, but instead, find another box to be passed along. So it went, suspense building, until it reached the lucky child who got to tear the final paper off and find the prize.

Then there were scary memories. Memories of funeral processions where the body draped in garlands was carried through the streets on a stretcher adorned with flowers, followed by musicians playing drums and other instruments. I don't know why these scared me so, but whenever I heard the distinctive music approaching in the distance, I would press my hands over my ears and run and hide.

The memory of my father's temper was scary, too. He suffered from high blood pressure, and when something or someone enraged him, it rose even higher, and he would start screaming uncontrollably at the offending party. One time he threw a knife at one of the bearers² while we were seated around the dining room table. Fortunately, it hit the wall behind him.

Some memories are just snippets. Going to the air-raid shelter when the sirens went off; keeping the drapes drawn and lights turned out so our house would not be seen by bombing planes flying overhead; our car coming home with a smashed windshield, after driving through a mob of angry rioters; getting a shot while I took a nap, and having my mother insist it had been a mosquito bite when I woke up crying; not being allowed to dance in my ballet recital because all the tutu colors except green and yellow had already been assigned, and my mother didn't like those two colors; being afraid to tell my mother that my nanny was punishing me for being a poor eater by stuffing the food down my throat with the handle of a knife.

I have no memory of the naughty things I did, but I know I did them because I do remember my exasperated mother threatening to send me away to boarding school, when the help complained to her about my behavior. I must have upset the current nanny too, be-

cause after she heard me saying my prayers one night, asking God to make me a good little girl, she was quick to retort that I was a very bad little girl, and He wasn't going to listen.

What Am I?

I was a British subject by birth, so my parents had me christened in the Anglican Church. My godparents were British too, but I don't recall anything else about them. I don't remember who taught me about God, but someone must have, because I do have the one memory of saying my prayers before going to sleep. I also remember a large painting of the Sacred Heart that hung over my bed; a thick, olive green, hardcover book of illustrated children's Bible stories I had; and a nanny once taking me to a church where a loaf of bread was passed around during the service, and everyone broke off, and ate, a piece of it.

2 Servant responsible for dining room service

2

TO DISTANT SHORES

On a July day, in 1946, we left India for what I was told would be a six-month vacation to the United States. Looking back, though, I think it was more of an escape from the violence breaking out in Calcutta. We set sail on a Dutch freight ship, and were on the seas for almost two months.

There were several other children on board my age, and one of our favorite pastimes was fishing over the deck rail with homemade poles and long dangling pieces of string. Little did we know that our chosen spot was above the kitchen, and that our catches were courtesy of the kindly kitchen crew below who enjoyed hearing our squeals of delight when we pulled something up. Once they attached a fish cut out of tin to my line, which aroused our suspicions, but we were never able to solve the mystery of where it had come from.

I remember one of the stewards teaching me a little Dutch lullaby, *Slaap kindje, slaap*,³ and I also remember one of my friends getting her thumb caught in a door and having to go to the ship's doctor to get it stitched. When we saw her finger all bandaged up, we wanted our thumbs bandaged, too.

New York, New York

Our ship sailed into New York Harbor around dusk on September 17. Everyone gathered on deck to watch as the shore drew closer, and the Statue of Liberty, her torch all aglow, came into sight. That one riveting image stayed with me, but I have no recollection of who met us at the port or where we went from there. My only other memory of the entire six-month period is that, for a time, we lived at the Hotel Duane in Manhattan, where there was an old upright piano I was allowed to play.

A New Home

Shortly after we left India, the Calcutta riots escalated into a full-blown civil war, and we never returned. My father spent the rest of our trip establishing contacts and investigating work options. In January of 1947, we flew

³ Sleep child, sleep

to the Santo Domingo side of the island of Hispaniola,⁴ and settled in Ciudad Trujillo, the capital. A few months later, President Trujillo commissioned my father to establish an armory, and the following year, appointed him Director of Technological Services to the Secretary of Armed Forces, with the honorary rank of brigadier general. All of us were granted Dominican citizenship.

My mother lived a charmed existence. She was adored by my father, who was much older than she was, and became known as his beautiful helpmate. Together, they traveled throughout Europe and South America, meeting with presidents, rulers, and other foreign dignitaries, and when those officials visited our country, she was the one who organized and hosted the lavish state affairs at which they were regaled. My mother did this with great flair, and gloried in the limelight.

There wasn't much time for me. Mostly, I was left in the charge of a series of maids and nannies hired to look after me.

Making Friends

Our first home was a large, fenced-in, brick house with a long, winding driveway that led from the gate to

⁴ Hispaniola is a Caribbean island containing the two countries of Haiti and Santo Domingo.

the carport. The front of the fence, bordering the sidewalk, was also brick, but the part separating our yard from the neighbors' was made of wire that someone had bent an opening in, just large enough for a small person to step through. That's where I first met the little girl next door. I had seen her playing and called out to her.

We became fast friends, and the hole in the fence a convenient shortcut for getting from one side to the other. I liked her side better because she had a large extended family, a mom who was always available, many pets, and an enormous limoncillo⁵ tree in her garden that made a perfect hangout. We would climb to its crook and nestle there, enjoying the fruit while we giggled and chattered.

We played games, sang songs, made clothes for our mini dolls, and colored pictures we would try to sell to passersby at a makeshift stand by the gate. We also bought bags and bags of candy, not to eat, but for the trading cards they came packaged with. There would be one rare card in every new batch produced, and we were determined to be the ones to find it. I never found one, but my friend did, and I stole it.

When she noticed it was missing, she asked me whether I had it. Panicked, I struck out at her, pushing

her away, and vehemently denying having taken it. One of her sisters overheard the commotion and came to the rescue, backing me into a corner and prying it out of my hand. The next day my friend was back at the fence calling me out to play, yesterday's transgression forgiven and forgotten.

⁵ A large tropical tree bearing small green fruit with a sweet juicy translucent pulp.

PART 2

3

LOOKING FOR ATTENTION AND APPROVAL

I know that my mother loved me, but she was incapable of loving unconditionally. There was too much fear, too much need to be in control. Her opinions were irrevocable, and I was expected to feel and do as she did. If I didn't, it meant I didn't love her. There was no freedom to be myself, no grace to learn from my own mistakes, and silent treatment was her favored punishment for real or perceived wrongs. No matter how repeatedly I told her I was sorry and begged her to talk to me, or how loudly I cried, it could take several hours to a full day before she relented. All that did was make me supersensitive to being ignored and increase my need for validation.

Sometimes I'd ask my mother if she thought I was pretty, and she'd say I was, but that when she was a child, she had been a real beauty. She would tell me how smart and talented other people's children were, but never add that by working hard, I could achieve the same results. I grew up believing you were what you were born with. The aha moment, that diligence played an important part, did not come until much later in life, when I discovered that the woman with the great shape wasn't born that way. She watched her diet and followed a well-planned exercise regime, and the medals won by the gifted gymnast or figure skater, were the result of long, tedious hours of consistent practice.

No matter how I tried, I never seemed able to please my mother. Any attempts to think outside the box or take the initiative were quickly squelched. When I brought home a picture of tulips I had made and proudly showed it to her, not one word of praise did I receive. Instead, I was admonished for coloring outside the lines, and for using hues that weren't the norm. Another time, I ran to the phone to call the doctor after my grandmother suffered a seizure, and instead of thanking me, my mother totally lost it. She shouted at me to get out of the way, while kicking and shoving me to the other side of the room. The call did need to be made. She just didn't think I was capable of doing it.

What About Me?

I didn't like being an only child, and when my mother's best friend and family moved in with us for a while, I pretended their toddler was my little brother. I loved playing with him, and having him follow me around. That is, until I started imagining that my nanny was paying him more attention than she was me. I saw them laughing and giggling as she tickled him and chased him under the dining room table, and was overcome by jealousy. Instead of joining in the fun, I stood and watched with a scowl on my face.

Far from Angelic

I craved attention, and would brag, boast, exaggerate, or show off in an attempt to get it. I'd even think up things to do that I thought were funny, but really weren't, like sitting in the balcony of the movie theater and throwing my sticky chewing gum down into the hair of someone below.

Not everything was premeditated though. One time we were visiting some friends of my parents, and I wandered outside. Somewhere, I had found a piece of charcoal, which I now clutched in my hand. The freshly painted white exterior of the house beckoned to me, and

without a second thought as to the consequences, I drew pictures all over it. The black-on-white effect was quite pleasing, and I couldn't understand why the adults got so upset when they saw what I had done.

Another time, I decided to put on a play, and impulsively invited several of my parents' friends over to see it. I did not tell my mother what I had done until after the fact. That threw her into a tizzy. She abhorred the thought of people dropping in unannounced, but realized these people would have no idea they were intruding, so she hustled the servants to set up chairs, prepare refreshments, and make sure the house looked company ready before anyone arrived.

I even had a temper, which I was especially prone to lose while playing jacks by myself. If I missed before I reached my goal, I would fly into a rage, fling the jacks across the floor, and scream at God for tripping me up. He became my scapegoat, the one on whom I vented all my frustration, since no one else would have tolerated my outbursts.

*Nagy mama*⁶

Nagy mama was my intriguing Old World grandmother, my mother's mother, who moved into our attic after my parents sent for her from Budapest. She was

6 Hungarian for Grandma.

short and plump, wore long, flowery, short-sleeved dresses that buttoned down the front, high-top lace-up shoes, and I don't remember ever seeing her smile. At first, we couldn't communicate because of the language barrier, but I quickly picked up enough Hungarian to be able to converse with her, and to understand what my parents were saying when they would speak it in my presence.

My grandmother had a strange quirk. She refused to eat food prepared by anyone other than herself, and insisted on doing all the cooking. Nobody complained. We all enjoyed her cuisine, especially my father, who relished the homemade, traditional dishes of his native land. One of his favorites, and mine too, was fattened goose liver, a delicacy reserved for special occasions.

To prepare the goose, my grandmother would sit on it, and force-feed it. She looked so comical straddled across a struggling bird, almost as big as she was, that I couldn't resist poking fun at her. When she started to cry, though, I was so overcome by remorse that I started crying, too. I threw my arms around her to try to comfort her, and told her I didn't mean it. After that, I never laughed at her again.

When she wasn't in the kitchen, my grandmother could often be found in her spacious room, sewing on an old black Singer treadle pedal sewing machine, or reading

fortunes with a deck of colorful Hungarian playing cards. They were larger than standard cards, very ornate, and instead of the usual clubs, hearts, diamonds, and spades, their suits consisted of bells, acorns, hearts, and leaves. Sometimes she let me play with them, and would teach me what the images meant.

4

DECEPTION AND DENIAL

If my mother didn't want to believe something, she denied it, and there was no convincing her otherwise. She would make blanket statements such as, "We don't feel this," or "We don't do that," which was all terribly confusing to me because I did feel and do those things, and so did she. Eventually, I learned to cover up and disown my feelings, to the point I no longer knew what they were. I dreaded being asked what I thought about anything, because I could never think of what to say.

Image was very important to my mother, and she put much effort into projecting what she considered to be a desirable one. She taught me not to answer the phone on the first or second ring, lest people think we had been standing around with nothing better to do. She did not let me accept last-minute invitations from friends either,

because that might give them the impression that I was available at a moment's notice. They needed to learn that I had a full schedule that required planning, she said.

Little White Lies

Back in those days, little white lies were considered perfectly acceptable and justifiable. Doctors refrained from telling terminally ill patients the truth about their condition, so as not to deprive them of hope. Family kept the truth from their sick loved ones for the same reason. My mother lied to me because she thought she was protecting me. I lied to her because I didn't want to upset her.

As often happens with people who don't tell the truth, my mother was suspicious of others, including me, and quick to jump to conclusions. She had a way of making me feel as though I was lying, even when I wasn't, and I would constantly feel guilty about things I had no reason to feel guilty about. If someone did something naughty at school while the teacher was out of the classroom, my stomach got all tied up in knots when she came back in and demanded to know who had done it. I always felt like the guilty party, even when I had had nothing to do with it at all.

Wanting What I Could Not Have

I wanted to feel as though I belonged, but never seemed to fit in. I envied friends who came from large, close-knit families, and wished I had family ties and roots, too. I yearned to be loved for who I was, with no strings attached, but never thought of treating others the same way. I was ashamed of my father because he was old and had bad teeth, and instead of focusing on how proud he was of me, or his kind and generous heart, I judged him by his outward appearance. If I saw him approaching on the street, I would quickly cross over to the other side.

My mother embarrassed me too, because she expected me to do things nobody else did, and the kids at school would tease me for it. When I reminded her that we no longer lived in India, and that children did not do those things here, she still insisted on my calling her mummy, because that's what British children called their mothers, and that I spell Sandra with an X instead of an S, because it was short for Alexandra. Today, I would probably enjoy the distinction of spelling my name that way, but back then it was a source of tremendous frustration.

5

UPS AND DOWNS

We moved to another house, a white stucco one without a fence. There was a cherry tree in the yard, under which I fashioned a makeshift room out of a couple of wooden crates. It was my favorite hideaway, and I spent much time in it, sometimes alone, sometimes with a playmate.

I was not terribly popular at school, but I did have a few friends. One of them seemed to have a strong influence on the other girls, and became my champion. If she saw me ask a classmate for something and not get it, she would tell her to give it to me, and was instantly obeyed. Months later, I discovered why. She was the president's daughter. Looking back now, I think she was drawn to me because, in my ignorance, I never kowtowed to her the way the other children did.

Convent Days

The school I attended was a Catholic convent run by American nuns. They wore the traditional long white habit, collar, and wimple topped by black veil, of their Order, and yet all these layers of clothing didn't seem to hinder their energy in the least, despite the hot, humid climate. They played softball and other outdoor sports, and when they hitched up their skirts to run a race, there weren't many girls who could beat them.

My memories of those days are mostly happy ones. I was just an average student when it came to academia, but the recitals and plays were where I shone. I loved being in the limelight, and had many opportunities to perform for an audience. In the first and second grades, we dressed up in crepe paper, and performed in our classrooms, but the older grades held their performances in an auditorium, and wore costumes so elaborate, they required the careful stitching and handiwork of a tailor.

At Christmas, we had an outdoor Nativity pageant that drew a large crowd. The flat-topped dormitory building served as center stage, with Mary, Joseph, and a real live baby Jesus in a stable under the portico. Angels danced on the rooftop, while shepherds tended their flocks on a hill to one side of the grounds, and wise men approached from the other.

We had processions too, where clad in our white dress uniforms, we marched around the giant statue of our Lady of Fatima on the front lawn.

From the very beginning, I was drawn to the rituals. I loved the Latin Mass, the rosary, the lighting of candles, the prayers offered up to the saints and Blessed Mother, and I set up an altar in my room at home. I even got permission to stay at the boarding school during the week, so I wouldn't miss out on anything.

Seeds of Fear

Santo Domingo lies above two fault lines, and it was while I was at the convent that I experienced my first earthquake. We were on one of the balconies at the time, and when the shaking started, I was more intrigued than alarmed. I didn't understand why the nuns were falling to their knees and crossing themselves, rosaries in hand. Students stood about, not knowing what to do. When the tremor ended, we were herded into the chapel, where more rosaries and prayers were said. The next time the earth shook, I knew to be afraid.

Broken Promises

Catechism was my favorite subject, and one of the few I excelled at. I soaked up the content like a thirsty

sponge. When the teacher quizzed us on what we had learned, my hand was always the first to fly up. I prided myself on being able to answer even the hardest questions that stumped the rest of the class. However, none of that changed the fact that I was not a Catholic and that, according to the catechism, only Catholics went to Heaven. Everyone else was condemned to Hell.

I asked my mother if I could become a Catholic. She said I could, if I improved my grades, and for the next several months I studied extremely hard. My marks did go up, considerably, but when my mother saw the evidence on my report card, she didn't believe it was the result of my efforts. She was convinced that the nuns had given me the higher grades so they could add another convert to their ranks, and would not keep her promise. I was devastated.

PART 3

6

CANADA

When I was 12, my parents sent me to boarding school. My mother said it was because of my severe hay fever. I'm not sure whether that was the truth or a cover up, but at the time, I believed it to be true and looked forward to the experience. The school they picked was an English girls' school in Montreal, where I would receive a British education.

A Whirl of Firsts

My mother delivered me to the boarding house on a Sunday afternoon, and helped me unpack and get settled. The boarders were downstairs having tea with the principal. After tea, they came rushing up the stairs, and I heard someone exclaim, "I wonder what the new girl is like?" Some of them came into my cubicle to meet me. Everyone was very friendly, and I soon felt quite at home.

The next morning I was introduced to my class, most of whom were day students. They were friendly too, and for a few weeks, I enjoyed my first taste of popularity and academic success. It was short-lived, however. A mistake had been made in my placement, and I was moved to a higher grade where I struggled to keep up, and where I was teased because I was shorter than anyone else. My classmates called me pipsqueak, and wondered among themselves why I had been promoted to their class. I wondered about that too, and wished I hadn't been.

That first year away from home was full of novel experiences. Crunching through piles of multicolored leaves in the fall; experiencing snow for the first time; learning to ice-skate on a flooded tennis court converted into a rink. I even contracted my first childhood disease, a case of measles, and was quarantined in a separate building across from the boarding school. My mother flew up to be with me, and I also had a private nurse. When I was feeling better, but not yet deemed fit enough to be released from my confinement, I stood by the window and waved to my friends. They waved back, and sent me bundles of homemade cards and letters.

One day, in gym class, the teacher told me to open the window a crack. The ceilings in the room were so high, the only way to reach the window was to climb on a radiator almost as tall as I was. Pride kept me from

saying I couldn't do it, and as I tried pulling myself up, I fell, and cracked my foot instead. The next month was spent hopping around on crutches, with my foot in a cast.

Perhaps my most astonishing first, was finding out that one of my fellow students was Jewish. I had never met a Jew before, and had thought Jews were an ancient people who lived in Old Testament days. Mesmerized, I joined the other curious girls who surrounded her at the lunch table and bombarded her with questions. I listened quietly, and drank it all in.

An Unapproachable God

At school, we started and ended the day with a ritual of prayer. First period, all students and staff gathered in the gym for General Assembly. We sang a hymn, listened to a passage of Scripture, and concluded with a recitation of the Lord's Prayer.

After supper, boarders congregated in the parlor with the headmistress. We took turns reading verses out of our Bibles, all the while keeping our fingers crossed that when our turn came, we wouldn't get one with a hard to pronounce name or embarrassing word in it. When we had finished going around the room, we ended by saying the Our Father together.

In class, the Bible was presented as a book of historical literature, rather than the inspired Word of God. We learned all about Jesus, but never got to know Him on a personal level.

Most of the girls in the boarding house were either Anglicans or Presbyterians. Anyone who wasn't could choose which of the two churches they wanted to attend on Sundays, or go to Mass with the Catholics. Those of us who were Anglicans attended St. George's Church, and when we reached the age of 15, were confirmed at an apostolic rite of laying on of hands performed by John, Lord Bishop of Montreal. It was a solemn occasion, and my best friend and I exchanged little white Bibles and Books of Common Prayer.

First Tangle to Unravel

I went home for Christmas and summer vacations. At Easter, I met my parents in New York. We would visit my grandmother, who was now living there, as well as my aunts and uncles, but the highlight of the week was the Easter Parade. My mother loved hats, and my father enjoyed buying her unique and stylish ones to debut as she strolled down Fifth Avenue with the rest of the crowd.

My grandmother passed away right before the Easter of my last year at school. I was not told until after the funeral. My mother and I spent that vacation at the hotel, where I helped her sort through a pile of paperwork. I noticed a receipt for a rabbi, and asked her what it was for. She got angry with me for asking, and acted as though I should have known. What I should have known, but didn't, was that my grandmother was Jewish.

PART 4

7

SWIMMING AGAINST THE TIDE

Academics were not my forte. Other than piano and languages, at which I excelled, I was an average student. I much preferred daydreaming and extracurricular activities, and since my mother's only expectation was that I pass all my subjects, I felt no pressure to do more than that.

Math was my nemesis. When it came to algebra and geometry, I could only retain one set of rules at a time. When a new one was introduced, I'd do great on homework and quizzes, but then promptly forget how to use it when we moved on to the next. I did so poorly on finals, that if it weren't for the homework and quiz credits

I'd accumulated during the term, I would never have scraped by.

When it came time to take the college entrance exams, my math teacher told me I should wait another year because if I took them now, I would not pass. I considered that a personal affront, and set out to prove her wrong. I studied so hard for those exams that even though I soon forgot most of what I'd crammed into my brain, I was able to hold onto it long enough to not only pass, but to do so with high grades. In the end, I was one of a very few girls from my school who were accepted by McGill University, the most prestigious college on the list, as well as the most difficult one to get into.

Deep Convictions

McGill was my first coed experience. I had no trouble adjusting to dorm life or to college lectures, but relating to my peers on a social level was more difficult. I was self-conscious, and had trouble starting or keeping a conversation going, especially with the boys. I was more comfortable in structured situations where I didn't need to think of what to say or engage in small talk, and quickly earned a reputation for being hardworking and reliable.

When sorority recruitment week rolled around, I did not participate, even though I had been eagerly anticipating it. There were two tables in the room that we could register at. One was for the Jewish sororities, and one for the Christian ones. We could not sign up for both. When I heard that I had to make a choice, I was so taken aback, I walked out without choosing either. This had been my first brush with discrimination, and I found it shocking.

Everybody assumed I was a Christian, and though I hadn't signed up to participate in the rush process, I got several invitations from houses that were eager for me to join. I politely declined. It wasn't the fact that I didn't know what to consider myself that stopped me. It was the thought of becoming part of a segregated group of any kind. Instead of a sorority, I joined the Spanish Club, and spent most of my time with the Spanish-speaking students.

Tug of War

One night, I had a particularly vivid dream of my father thrashing around in his bed. I woke up with an ominous feeling I could not shake. The next day, I was called into the warden's office, where I was greeted by one of my mother's New York friends. The moment I

saw her black hat and somber expression, I knew what she had come to tell me. My father had passed away. As happened after my grandmother's death, the news was kept from me until after the funeral.

Even though we were not Catholics, my mother mimicked many of the things the religious women did back home. She crossed herself whenever she passed a church, and now insisted on mourning the way the Catholic widows did. She expected me to do the same. I was to wear black, and avoid dances or parties for an entire year. It made no difference that I was only 16, just starting to spread my wings, and living in a very different culture where such customs were not observed.

Again, I found myself having to choose between doing what I wanted to do, and displeasing my mother, who had deeply ingrained in me that other people's feelings were more important than my own. So strong was her hold over me, I complied, even though it was unlikely she would ever have known if I really had or hadn't.

Compensating

Over the next four years, I became involved in the Debating Union, served as Treasurer of the Women's Union, Secretary of the RVC⁷ House Council, and vol-

⁷ Royal Victoria College, where the women's dorms were housed.

unteered to be on several other committees, as well. The highlight of those years was my induction into the Red Wing Society in my junior year. The Red Wings, along with their male counterparts, the Scarlet Keys, served as the official hosts and hostesses of the university at all campus activities, and I loved feeling important, and showing people around.

Finding a Job

I had never had a job before, and persuaded one of my friends to apply for a counselor position at a summer camp for handicapped children with me. Neither one of us had had any experience working with children, and we were told we needed to get some before being hired. I got mine by volunteering at a home for troubled children.

My assignment was to do arts and crafts with a group of girls, and every Saturday I faithfully showed up, armed with coat hangers, feathers, bits of fabric, and whatever other trappings were needed to create the project I had thought up for them during the week. They had a great time, and so did I, until the day the matron asked me to accompany my group on a shopping trip.

We walked to Woolworth in a semi-orderly two-by-two line. The girls laughed and chatted, somewhat

loudly, but nothing untoward happened on the way over. When we got to the store, however, they scattered before I had a chance to say a word. I frantically looked up and down the aisles trying to track their whereabouts, and felt totally at a loss as to what to do when I caught sight of two of them shoplifting. I'm ashamed to say I looked the other way.

When it was time to return home, I tried getting the girls out the door, but they paid me no heed. Realizing I was out of control, I asked one of their ringleaders to help me. She was able to get their attention and take charge. After that, I never agreed to take them shopping again.

The next summer, following graduation, I got a job as a Dictaphone typist at the Radiology Department of the local hospital. I found the work interesting, and far less stressful.

8

UP FOR THE CHALLENGE

We did not have career counseling or aptitude testing when I went to school, and I wasn't sure what direction to take following graduation. I started looking for unusual fields, and my interest was piqued by an article on speech pathology. I had never heard of it before, but the idea of working in a hospital clinical setting appealed to me.

The only school in my area that offered the required training was the University of Montreal, a French university. Though my knowledge of the language was limited, I enrolled in their speech pathology and audiology master's degree program.

We were an unusually small faculty of only four students. The other three were French Canadians, and spoke little English. As it turned out, though the

lectures were conducted in French, most of the textbooks were in English, so I was as helpful to my classmates as they were to me. We studied together for exams, and with the aid of amphetamines and gallons of ice cream, managed to stay up all night, cramming and quizzing each other.

My classmates and I soon bonded and became a close-knit group. They told me about a summer camp for handicapped children in the Catskills that employed speech therapists, and how nobody from our school had ever been able to get a job there. They had always been turned down because their English was not considered good enough. I asked them if they would like to apply, and offered to fill out the application forms. They did want to, and we all got hired—I, as the camp secretary, and the other three as counselors. We would also be given the opportunity to conduct supervised therapy sessions with the children.

9

A NEW CHAPTER

In 1961, following the assassination of Dominican dictator/president, Trujillo, my mother and I became *personae non gratae* because of my father's past business association with him. Our citizenships were revoked, and my mother was given a one-time opportunity to move to New York. I, however, planned to settle in Montreal, and had already applied for Canadian citizenship, so instead, she came to live with me.

More Tangles Come Undone

One of our neighbors was a young psychiatrist who my mother knew from before we had moved into our apartment building. He and his wife were Hungarian Jews. When I asked her how they had met, she said

he had been married to one of my cousins. That was the first I'd ever heard of this cousin, and a barrage of questions came tumbling out of my mouth. Most of the answers were sketchy.

My father's family was Jewish. He had been the second eldest of ten children. Two of his sisters, with their entire families, had been sent to concentration camps and exterminated during the Holocaust. My cousin was the daughter of one of his sisters. She was a doctor, and lived somewhere in Europe. My father had been married twice before marrying my mother, and had converted to the Hungarian Reformed Church after he met his first wife. When she died, he remarried, but the second marriage ended in divorce. There had been no other children. Kovacs was not my father's original surname, nor was it the surname the other brothers, except for one, had picked when they changed their names.

As for my mother, I already knew she had been an only child, that her mother was Jewish, and that her father had been a member of the Hungarian Evangelical Church. I hadn't known, though, about how my grandmother miraculously escaped being sent to a concentration camp, when a guard took pity on her and let her escape from the end of the lineup she had been herded into. Nor did I know that my mother had been a ballerina, who started her own touring dance company. She

and her group had traveled to Italy, Egypt, Greece, and Turkey. My grandmother made all their costumes, and acted as their chaperone. My mother had met my father one Christmas Eve, while performing at a cabaret in Beirut. She gave up her dancing career after they got married.

PART 5

I O

LOVE AND MARRIAGE

Life took an unexpected turn the summer I went to camp with my classmates. I had to be there a week earlier than they did, to help get things ready. So did the dark, handsome, head counselor. My stomach did a flip-flop when I first saw him. Later, I found out, through other staff, that he was single, Jewish, and a junior high school teacher from Brooklyn, New York.

At the end of the season, when campers and counselors were gone, we stayed behind to help the owners close the books, and wrap things up. We went out to dinner a couple of times to get better acquainted, and when all the camp work had been done, he drove me home, to Montreal.

I had not dated much before. The people I was drawn to weren't usually interested in me, and the people who

did express an interest, were not my type. I never gave them a chance. This time, however, the attraction was mutual, and I felt relaxed in his company because he talked enough for both of us and I never had to worry about what to say. I was being swept off my feet by an older man, established in his career, who thought nothing of driving over 300 miles, each way, to see me whenever he got the chance.

My mother never actively tried to prevent the relationship, but I could tell she was displeased. My boyfriend's casual attire and demeanor set him apart from the other men in our circle, who were more formal and mannerly, and she considered him "unpolished."

My friends tried to be polite, but could not hide their disbelief when they found out I was dating him. Their faces said it all. The fact that he was Jewish was bad enough, but that he was a teacher, was even worse. The stigma attached to teaching, back then, was summarized by the popular phrase, "Those who can, do; those who can't, teach."⁸ Teachers were looked upon as people who were incapable of doing anything else.

No one was excited for me, or impressed by my choice, and I could almost hear the whispering going on behind my back. I started distancing myself from my friends, and pretending that I didn't care.

⁸ George Bernard Shaw, *Maxims for Revolutionists: Education. Man and Superman*, 1903.

Choosing to Ignore the Signs

After my mother moved to Canada, we started spending Christmases in New York with my uncle and aunt. That Christmas, I introduced my boyfriend to them, and was pleased that they took an instant liking to him. He introduced me to his sister and friends, and they seemed to like me too. I can't remember what I gave him, but his gift to me was a dainty platinum watch studded with tiny diamond chips.

Before I returned to Montreal, my boyfriend told me he wanted to marry me, but knew he had no right to ask. He said he was a gambler, and had messed up his life by getting into debt. Now he had nothing to offer me. He didn't deserve me, but would straighten himself out and make things right if I gave him a chance. There would be no more gambling, he promised, and the debts would be paid off. I was naive, in love, ignorant of the fact that gambling was an addiction, and accepted his proposal. We made plans to get married at the end of May.

His parents wanted nothing to do with me because I was not Jewish. They told my fiancé that if he married me, they would not come to the wedding, and they would no longer consider him their son. When I asked him what he wanted to do, he insisted that he wanted to get married, regardless. I suggested we have a small civil

wedding instead of a traditional one. My side of the family was very upset by that decision, but they did attend.

The ceremony was performed by a justice of the peace in Monticello, New York, home of the Monticello race-track. No invitations were sent out, and I did not wear a wedding gown. Only a handful of people were present to witness our union: my mother; a New York friend of hers, who acted as photographer, and her husband; my uncle and aunt; my fiancé's sister; and his friend who was the Monticello track's racing secretary, and his wife.

After our vows had been exchanged, and all the papers signed, we had a small reception at a nearby hall. Then my husband and I were off on our honeymoon, a leisurely drive back to Montreal by way of the Catskill Mountains and Niagara Falls. I still had an internship requirement to fulfill for my Masters program, and he had committed to one last summer as head counselor at the camp where we had met.

What Could Have Been

Even though we were separated, the summer flew by. I did my two-month internship at the Royal Victoria Hospital. The first month, I was assigned to the Speech Department, and the second month, to the Department of Audiology, which to my surprise, I preferred.

The Department of Audiology was a subdivision of the hospital's OTL⁹ Department, and we worked closely with the doctors. I felt very much at home there, and when the Director called me into his office to ask if I'd like to stay on as a full-time audiologist, I was momentarily thrilled. It would have been a dream job, but I turned it down.

Betrayal

Most of our wedding gifts were checks and cash, which my husband and I deposited into a joint checking account. We planned to use the money to furnish our apartment. However, after camp ended, I got a phone call from my very distraught spouse, telling me that he had done a terrible thing. He had bet all our money at the track in the hopes of winning enough back to pay off his debts. He hadn't, and now it was all gone. He begged me to forgive him, promising it would never happen again, but I remembered him making that promise once before, and was beside myself.

My mother advised me to stay in Montreal, and give my husband the option of moving to Canada and getting a job here, or having the marriage annulled. I didn't know what to do. I still loved him and wanted to trust

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him, but deep down, I knew she was probably right. Pride would not let me admit it, though, and in the end I made the move, thus fulfilling the second of two things I'd always said I'd never do—marry an American, or live in New York.

Trying to Save Face

Our first apartment was in a high-rise complex in Queens. It had a large L-shaped studio we partitioned off to create a small bedroom, and a balcony overlooking a fountain in the center of the courtyard, that spewed multicolored water at night when the lights were turned on. We decorated the living room with bookshelves and other odds and ends I'd brought with me from home, and used credit cards to buy a bed, sofa, and foldout console table and chairs.

At first I was quite content. My husband was a very social person, and we got invited to many parties and dinners. We did our share of entertaining too, and a group of us regularly went to the theater together. I enjoyed being part of a couple, and thought this was what marriage was all about. I took togetherness for granted, and was upset to find out that my husband did not share my view. Once a week the men got together to play cards. They had season tickets to the Yankees' games,

too. None of this changed after we got married, and I resented being left alone on these occasions. Instead of finding something fun to do, I'd sit home and mope.

That wasn't all that displeased me. My in-laws, who still refused to allow me in their home, did not cut my husband off as they had threatened to do. I thought he would take a stand for me, but he didn't. He would visit them by himself, and even remove his wedding ring so that if anyone else was at the house, they wouldn't know he was married.

Looking back, I think a woman with any self-esteem or fragment of backbone would probably, unlike me, have confronted her spouse at that point, and demanded that he choose between her or his family. I was too needy to take the risk, and too worried about what other people might think if the marriage didn't work out. Instead, I appeased his parents by formally converting to Judaism, and by having a Jewish wedding ceremony. I never told my mother or any of my friends what I had done, and now it was I who was leading the double life.

Job Frustrations

Finding a job in my field was not as easy as I had thought it would be. Most of the speech therapy jobs

available were in public schools or city hospital clinics, and they only hired American citizens. Being married to one didn't count, and it would be three years before I could apply for citizenship.

Eventually, I did get hired as a speech therapist, at the Industrial Home for the Blind. There were three of us in our department, and we got along well, but the job itself was not suitable for someone fresh out of school. We had no supervisor, and I had no experience with the types of cases we worked with. Most of the children who had a good prognosis were sent to college clinics for therapy. The clients assigned to us were the more severely handicapped ones, the children with multiple disabilities, and the deaf-blind adults. Nevertheless, I stayed there for four years, until the birth of our first child.

I I

B E C O M I N G A

P A R E N T

The fourth year of our marriage was full of milestones. I became an American citizen, my father-in-law passed away, my mother moved to Manhattan, and I gave birth to our first child, a beautiful nine pound baby girl who looked just like her dad. Despite her size, I had a relatively easy labor and a natural delivery, thanks to the Lamaze techniques I had learned, and my husband's excellent coaching skills in the delivery room. By the time my mother got to the hospital, our daughter was already being wheeled into the nursery.

Regrets and Smiles

It has always been easier for me to focus on the things I did wrong than on what I may have done right. Looking

back, I wish I had been quicker to pick our baby up and cuddle her when she cried. Instead, I tried to adhere to the then popular method of training infants to fall sleep by letting them cry it out, so as not to spoil them. Years later, as a grandmother, I watched my daughter pick up and cuddle all four of her babies when they cried, without it causing any undesirable effects. I felt a twinge of envy and regret at the precious moments I'd missed out on by listening to the so-called experts, instead of to my own instincts.

Our little girl was doted on, from the get-go, not just by us, but by two adoring grandmothers, and an equally smitten aunt. We took her with us everywhere we went, and she was her daddy's little princess. When she was just a few months old, we visited the Hershey chocolate factory in Pennsylvania, with some friends. Those were the days when you could still enter the plant and see the chocolate being processed from cocoa bean to packaged product. As we walked past one of the assembly lines, my husband balanced the infant seat on the railing for a moment. One of the workers looked up, smiling, and exclaimed, "Oh look at the adorable baby." A couple of other workers looked up too, and in that moment of distractedness, a plethora of Hershey's kisses went flying off the conveyor belt and onto the floor.

The summer our daughter turned one, we drove to California, taking one route there and a different one back so we could visit all the friends and relatives on our list. The scenery, as we traveled through the Painted Desert, Petrified Forest, and then down the coast from San Francisco to San Diego was breathtaking; the Grand Canyon, as seen from all its various lookout points, was magnificent; but the highlight of the trip was introducing our daughter to Disneyland. Even though I'm sure she doesn't remember any of it, we had a wonderful time watching her expressions, especially on the boat ride around the shores of a miniature globe lined with brightly costumed dolls, representing the various nations, dancing and singing, "It's a Small World."

A Son

Our son was born nine months after we returned from our cross-country trip. He arrived with the cord wrapped around his neck, and once the delivery room staff got him disentangled, he screamed with rage. For the most part, though, he was a happy baby, who would play contentedly in his crib or playpen if he woke up before we did, or if I was busy in the kitchen. When I'd put him down for a nap, he'd fall right asleep, and even

the sound of his sister loudly hammering her wooden Pound-A-Peg toy in the same room wouldn't bother him a bit. He was his dad's pride and joy, and one of my favorite photos, taken when our son was about three years old, is of him and my husband sitting in a rowboat with their fishing rods. My husband loved fishing, and looked forward to the day when our son would be old enough to go out on a real fishing boat with him.

As a toddler, our little boy was full of beans, bouncing off the walls, diving off the sofa onto the blue-green rug below and then getting up and doing it again. Once, he ran into the corner of the dishwasher while I was loading it, and we had to take him to the Emergency Room for stitches. He had a mind of his own, and would tune out anything he didn't want to hear. When he was naughty, he misbehaved in such an engaging way, it was hard to get angry with him. I remember looking out the window one day to see what he and his dad were up to on the playground below. My son was being scolded, and reacted by curling up at the bottom of the slide and falling asleep.

Happy on the Surface

Much as I wanted children, I was ill-equipped for motherhood. My husband, however, was an awesome dad. He always seemed to know just the right thing to

do. I relied heavily on him, and never considered the possibility that he might not always be there. I took it for granted that he would.

My dream of getting married and having a close-knit family that did things together seemed to be coming true. We ate dinner together every night; got a dog about whom an entire book could be written; hosted family gatherings at Christmas, Easter, and Thanksgiving; were a captive audience to the plays our children put on for us with the help of their friends next door; went apple picking and ice skating; and I have a vivid memory of my husband lugging many heavy bags of sand up to our apartment, so we could make our daughter a sandbox on the balcony. Life was good.

Storm Brewing Below

After we got married, my husband took over all our financial affairs. He did the banking and paid the bills, and all I had to do was hand him my paycheck to deposit into our account for me. I had never learned how to budget or manage money, so I was happy with the arrangement, but about the time our son started going to school, I had a hunch that something was wrong.

My husband began complaining about not having enough money to pay the bills. I never questioned him

about it, but could not understand why not. He had after school jobs and summer school jobs, besides his regular one, and I was working too. Before long, he was telling me we would have to cut something out, and the only thing he could think of was his life insurance. He didn't want to drop it, but what else could he do? I told him he was young and healthy, and should go ahead and do it.

I 2

SHATTERED DREAMS

I'd envisioned my husband and me growing old together. I saw us walking down the street, hand in hand, well into our twilight years. Beautiful fantasy, but shattered dream. Our marriage lasted only thirteen years.

One August day, I awoke at dawn to take the kids ice skating. My neighbor and I went to the early morning sessions so we could beat the crowd, and if we went without our spouses, she drove. I did not wake my husband up that morning because his summer job had just ended, and I knew he was tired. When we got home, the blinds were drawn, the dog was in his cage, the car was parked in front of the building, and my husband was gone. There was no note, so I assumed he would be back soon.

By the end of the day, he still had not come home, and I started looking out the window every few minutes to see if I could catch a glimpse of him walking from the subway station. It was almost suppertime, and I was annoyed that he had not called. I started playing tapes in my head of what I was going to say to him when he finally got back. A couple of times I thought I did see him, and ran to the door to open it, all ready to start firing away, but it hadn't been him.

Living a Nightmare

I put the kids to bed, and started calling our friends to see if any of them knew where my husband might be. Then I called the police. They agreed to make a hospital check, but refused to do a search. They said he was an adult in his right mind, and had probably decided to leave home, or might have run off with another woman. I told them he had not taken the car, there was nothing missing from his closet, and I knew that I knew that I knew he had not run off with another woman. They still did not believe it was cause for concern.

One day drifted into another, with no sign of him. I wondered if he might have started gambling again, and called his friend at the track to see if he had been there. He hadn't. I put an ad in the New York Times, saying we

loved him and wanted him to come home. When there was no response, I began to fear foul play, and thought of changing the locks on the doors. Then I decided not to. If he did come home, I wouldn't want him to find himself locked out. I called the police again.

My mother asked why one of the watercolors from our bedroom wall was on the floor. I told her it had fallen off, and I hadn't had a chance to hang it back up. Like my grandmother, she too believed in signs and omens. A picture falling off the wall meant news of someone's death. My mother told me she'd had a dream of my husband walking around the halls in his school, and I should call the office to have someone check and see if he was there. I rolled my eyes at her, and told her school was closed. He wouldn't be there. In the end, though, she had been right.

Ten days after my husband disappeared, the police came to the door to tell me he had been found, and to take me to the mortuary to identify him. The janitor, who had gone into the school to get the building ready for the new semester, had found my husband's decaying body barricaded in his office.

Shock and Denial

As we were leaving the apartment, one of his friends came walking down the hall towards us. He had heard

the news from another friend, who worked at the precinct assigned to the school, and had come to accompany me to the morgue. Forewarned about what to expect, he told me to wait in the lobby and let him do the identifying. I was too dazed to argue.

When our friend came out of the cooler, he told me the body was badly decomposed, but he had been able to identify it by the crooked pinkies, an inherited Stein trait. I had no idea what I'd been spared from until almost a year later, when I finally received a copy of the autopsy report. Only after I read it, did I fully understand the true meaning of the word decomposed.

The suspected cause of death was suicide, but I didn't want to believe it. I became so adamant about not wanting that recorded on the death certificate, that one of my husband's cousins, a doctor with connections at the morgue, was able to get them to change the cause of death to heart arrest.

Saying Goodbye

We had a traditional Jewish funeral service, in a chapel so packed with friends, colleagues, and family, there was standing room only, and an overflow of people spilling into the lobby. My memories of the day are mostly a blur, except for two things. I remember seething with

anger, and I remember the rabbi comparing life to the back of a piece of tapestry. When painful things happen, or life doesn't make sense, he said, it's like looking at the reverse side of the fabric and seeing only a jumble of tangled thread and knots. When the tapestry is turned over, however, there's a beautiful picture on the other side.

The Curse of OTB

After we had finished sitting shiva,¹⁰ it was time to start taking care of all the things my husband used to do for us. I had a driver's license, but had been afraid to drive. Now I needed to put that fear behind me.

My first trip was to the bank in Brooklyn where we had our joint checking account. My husband had picked it for convenience, because it was near his school. I wanted to close the account and open a new one at a neighborhood bank I could walk to. It should have been a simple procedure, but it wasn't. The signature on the record for me did not even remotely resemble mine. It had been forged. Even though I'd brought proof of who I was, and of my husband's death, there would be time-consuming red tape to go through before I could take the money out.

There was more bad news to follow. Thanks to the ease of betting through OTB, my husband had been able

¹⁰ The seven-day period of formal mourning observed by Jews after the funeral.

to start gambling again without raising suspicions. He was always home when he was expected to be, and when he wasn't home, I knew where he was. Meanwhile he had been borrowing from every source available, and my signature had been forged on several overextended credit card accounts, as well. I needed a lawyer to help straighten things out so I would not be held responsible for paying them.

The attorney I consulted was stupefied at the extent of what my husband owed. He kept shaking his head in disbelief and wondering out loud how anyone on a teacher's salary could possibly have had the kind of credit needed to amass such an unimaginable amount of debt. He speculated that my spouse must have gotten involved with the mob, and that they had gone after him when he couldn't repay his loans.

I was angry at everyone for everything, from being hypocrites, to being in some way responsible for my husband's gambling and death. The only person I could not bring myself to be angry at was him, not even when I finally went to the post office to pick up the mail in our box and found the letters he had mailed to us there, instead of using our home address. One was addressed to me, and the other two to each of our children. Not even the one to me, though, stated what his intentions had been when he wrote them. All they said was that he

loved us, and that he was sorry he couldn't be the husband and father he should have been.

Instead of feeling anger at him for what he had done, I felt sorry for him. I felt sorrier for him than for myself or for our children. He had been a true bon vivant, with a tremendous zest for life, and the first time I cried was when I fantasized that his life had been cut short by the mob's threats to come after the family, and that he had taken his life to save ours.

PART 6

I 3

STARTING OVER

I had been a sheltered, only child, unprepared to face the world on my own. Now I was a single mom, responsible for bringing up two children. Despite my inadequacy, anger and rebelliousness prevented me from accepting help from my mother or in-laws. Rightfully, or not, I felt sure there would be strings attached, and I didn't want anyone telling me what to do.

I'd never wanted to be like my mother, and yet in many ways I was. I also found myself doing things I had judged other parents for, indignantly pointing them out to my husband and exclaiming that I would never do such things. Looking back, I'm filled with regrets, not only for my lack of parenting skills, but for impulsively ripping up the letters my husband had written to us, as well as my Jewish marriage and conversion certificates.

Those were the days before I came to know the Lord, and there was no Word to guide, or encourage me. I

loved my children with all my heart, but I don't think it ever came through. I was too selfish about my time, too easily frustrated and overwhelmed, too quick to jump to conclusions and say things I immediately wished I could take back. Instead of buoying and nurturing them during this difficult time, I caused them much unintended emotional pain.

I 4

AMAZING GRACE

My apartment building had three separate wings, and one summer day, I went grocery shopping for an elderly neighbor who lived in a different wing from mine. When I got home, there was a very tall young man, clad in emerald green shorts and a matching shirt, standing in the lobby, looking around. As I approached the elevator, he called out to me to hold the door. Normally, I would not have done so for a stranger, but my mind was on other things, and he had a clean-cut look, so I complied.

He got on the elevator, and I pushed the button to the top floor, noticing that his feet were about the biggest I had ever seen. I wondered what size sneakers he wore. He didn't push any buttons, and as the elevator began its upward journey, he stepped behind me. I panicked and moved closer to the door. Just before it opened, he

grabbed me and said he was going to take me to the roof and rape me. I started to scream, but he put his arm around my neck and strangled me into silence. My final thought before blacking out was that dying was so easy and painless, there was nothing to fear at all.

When I came to, my flip flops had fallen off, and he had dragged me to the top of the stairwell leading to the roof. He had let go of me to open the door, but it was locked. He turned around to face me, and I tried punching him where it counts, but was so weak, I barely touched him. He thought I had something else in mind. When I told him nobody was in my apartment, and if he would let me get my stuff, I'd take him there and he could do anything he wanted, he believed me. He allowed me to slowly walk ahead of him, down the short flight of stairs leading back to the elevator, whose door he had jammed to keep it open.

When we reached the landing, I made a mad dash down the hall to my friend's apartment and started banging on her door. My sudden sprint must have confused my assailant, because he didn't try to restrain me or chase after me. Instead, he took off in the opposite direction, taking my shoes, keys, and the bag of groceries I had dropped, with him. The police arrived within minutes of being called, and searched the building, neighborhood, and nearby subway stations, but were unable to find him.

Looking back, it was a comedy of errors, but at the time, it raised some serious concerns about my mortality. I became afraid of elevators, and started worrying obsessively about what would happen to my children if something were to happen to me before they grew up. I wrote a will entrusting them to the care of my best friend, in the case of my demise.

PART 7

I 5

THE QUEST

As far back as I can remember, I felt drawn to the supernatural. In college, I became interested in ESP, hypnosis, psychokinesis, and telepathy, and even planned an experiment with a college friend, one summer vacation. We were going to try to contact one another telepathically at a predetermined time, but never knew if it would have worked or not, because she went home to South America, I was in the Dominican Republic, and we couldn't get our time zones properly coordinated.

My exploration of New Age and the occult did not begin until after my husband's death. It started very furtively, after I read an article on transcendental meditation. At the time, I had been feeling stressed and rundown, and was looking for something natural that might help me feel better. The testimonials of how this method of relaxation not only reduced tension, but improved physical and mental well-being as well, persuaded me to try it.

The person who wrote the article stated that TM had no cultural or religious overtones. However, when I reached the address I'd been given, I saw a large poster near the door, of a man who looked like an Indian mystic. I felt a little uneasy about what people might think if they knew I was doing this, and cautiously looked up and down the street before entering the building, to make sure nobody saw me go in. When I reached the reception area, I asked who the man in the picture was, and was told it was Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, the founder of TM.

I registered for the training, and joined a small group of hopeful students, eager to get started. We were told that the technique consisted of sitting upright in quiet surroundings, eyes closed, while mentally repeating a mantra for 20 minutes, twice a day. Then we watched a video documenting the results of scientific studies that demonstrated the positive effects TM had in reducing stress and high blood pressure. Before leaving, we were given a personal form to fill out for the instructor to use in selecting the mantra we would be given during our induction ceremony. We were also instructed to bring a fruit, some flowers, and a white handkerchief with us, to be used as an offering of gratitude on our behalf.

On initiation day, I was ushered into a dimly lit room smelling of incense and flowers. There was a small altar

against the wall, with a candle burning on one side of it, and slightly elevated, at its center, a photo of Guru Dev, the Maharishi's spiritual master. There was a brass tray beneath the image, and I was told to accompany my teacher to the altar, bow before it, and place my gift on the platter. I obeyed, completely oblivious to what I was opening up the door to by this singular act of idolatry.

TM did not provide the results I had hoped for. Instead of eliminating my stresses and tensions, it added a new one. I started having panic attacks. I was told not to stop meditating. These symptoms were a sign that something good was happening. The deep stress I had been subject to was being released. I should just yield to the trancelike state of dissociation, and not try to fight it. My fear of losing control kept me from doing that, however, and I gave up meditating the TM way.

Exploring the Unknown

A friend talked me into going with her to get our palms read. At first I had resisted, because I was afraid of what I might hear, but the experience turned out not to be as scary as I had anticipated. When she suggested we have our tea leaves read, and later, that we visit a tarot

card reader, I willingly accompanied her. Before I knew it, frequenting psychics had become a regular activity.

There was one psychic, in particular, I consulted frequently. She was a tarot card reader, whose accuracy was uncanny. The first time she read my cards, she not only picked up on the recent death of my husband, but on the clandestine circumstances surrounding it. She introduced me to two young women in my neighborhood who were also involved in the occult. The three of us instantly connected over our shared interests, and became close friends.

I was fascinated with New Age practices and beliefs. A whole new world was opening up to me that seemed to contain all the answers that had previously eluded me, and I embraced it with a passion. I took classes and workshops, and immersed myself in the study and practice of astrology, reincarnation, metaphysics, Silva mind control, and eventually, numerology.

The doctrine of karma provided a perfectly plausible explanation of why certain things had happened to me, and what lessons I needed to learn this time around, whereas astrology offered answers to who I was and why I was here. The discovery that my personality, talents, interactions with others, and even the events in my life, were all predetermined by the position of the stars at the moment of my birth, gave me a peace and acceptance I

had never experienced before. For the first time in my life, I felt as though I was exactly where I belonged. I no longer felt a need to search for roots, nor did I feel any dissatisfaction with my circumstances, since I now knew it was my karma that had brought them about.

I 6

FINDING MY NICHE

I was thinking of becoming an astrologer, but got diverted from my goal by a friend who told me she had just had her numbers read. I'd never heard of numerology before. It sounded like a much simpler way to do forecasts than astrology, where accuracy depended on knowing the time zone the person was born in, and their exact date and time of birth. The only information required for a numerology reading was the person's given name at birth, and their birth date. I made an appointment to have my chart drawn up and read.

At first I was impressed with what the numerologist told me about my personality, talents, and past life, but when he started predicting my future and told me I would be a writer, I had to interrupt. Writing has always been difficult for me, and I had never gotten good

grades in English composition at school. Disbelievably, I asked him what he thought I was going to write about. He said it didn't matter. I could write anything I wanted to, and it would be published in 1980.

To test the validity of the prediction, I randomly picked fifteen publishers, and wrote them each a letter, asking if they would be interested in a numerology handbook I had written. I did not expect to hear back from any of them, but three of the fifteen replied that they were interested, and one wanted to see my manuscript right away. Since there was no book, and my knowledge of numerology was limited to the one reading I'd had, I fudged. I told the editor who'd requested it, that the document was at my typist's, and she was on vacation. I'd mail it as soon she got back.

Three weeks later, I had written and typed a first draft of the book, and sent it in. Less than a year after that, on January 1, 1979, my first book, *Instant Numerology*, was published by Harper & Row as a trade paperback. The date forecasted, was off by a year.

Last Stop on Path to Enlightenment

Given the esoteric circles I now traveled in, it was only a natural and inevitable progression to the Eastern path I became initiated into. The occult had offered me

plausible explanations, but Sant Mat, also known as "The Path of the Masters," added the promise of a savior who would take me out of the cycle of reincarnation and lead me back to God.

Sant Mat practice involves listening to the "inner sound," and contemplating the "inner light," during long periods of meditation. Numerous Scriptures, especially from the Gospel of John, are quoted to back up the teachings. A favorite verse is John 14:6, part of which is cited as "the way, the truth, and the light," rather than "the way, the truth, and the life." Since I did not have an intimate knowledge of my Bible at the time, I was unable to pick up on anything that had been partially misquoted. If it sounded familiar, I accepted it as fact.

Truth was twisted in other ways as well. We were taught that nobody can return to God without a savior, and that John 10:3-4, "He calls his own sheep by name... and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice," attests that Jesus is not the only one. God sends a redeemer to every generation to gather the sheep living then, and the flock that Jesus came to save, was the flock that lived 2,000 years ago. The last phrase of 1 John 4:20, "How can he love God whom he has not seen," is understood to mean that humans can only be saved by a visible, living master. Not by Jesus, nor by any of the past masters who are no longer inhabiting a physical body.

I was quite happy with my life and grateful for my salvation. I felt reconciled with God and confident that I would be spending eternity with Him. No one could have convinced me otherwise, not even the Christian acquaintance who did her best to witness to me. The more she told me I needed Jesus, the more pity and frustration I felt at her inability to understand that I didn't. Every time I'd explain to her that I already had a savior and didn't need another one, she would insist that it wasn't the same thing. I gave up trying to reason with her, and avoided her instead.

Operation Rescue

After my husband's death, I made several unwise financial decisions. One of them was to take his pension as a lump sum, rather than opt to receive monthly checks. To me, the lump sum seemed like a small fortune that would last forever. It didn't. Thinking back, I am appalled at the amount of money that slipped through my fingers. Not only the pension, but my own income, and the Social Security survivor benefit checks that we received. Had I known then what I know now about budgeting and handling funds prudently, finances would never have become the issue that they did, and I would

have no regrets today about not having anything to leave my children or grandchildren.

I started using credit cards and accumulating debt. As long as I could still get more credit, I felt flush. When I was overextended, I would pawn or sell some jewelry. It never occurred to me that I should cut back on my expenses. Finally, I was hit by a couple of unexpected setbacks that put me over the edge. I swallowed my pride and borrowed money from my mother and in-laws.

Bills were piling up, and I started "robbing Peter to pay Paul," as I juggled the payments. The more effort I put into trying to redeem my situation, the worse things got. Instead of making more money, I was just losing it. When it got to the point where I didn't know how I would come up with the next month's rent, my daughter, who was now married and living out of state, called to ask if they could come up for Thanksgiving. I did not want to say no, and that's how the true God, Jehovah Jireh, my provider, got my full attention, and came to my rescue.

PART 8

I 7

SINCERELY WRONG?

As I was pondering what to do, a friend of mine called about a program she had watched on TV. She told me a televangelist was teaching on planting seeds for your needs, and she had done what he said to do. It had worked. She was so excited, she wanted me to watch the program too, and tell her what I thought about it. The next morning, I turned it on.

Under normal circumstances, I would have immediately switched channels or turned the TV off at the sight of this loud and hyper man. However, I forced myself to continue watching, and to try to keep an open mind. I listened carefully to everything he said about planting seeds of faith, and about tithing, and wrote down the references to the Scripture verses he quoted so I could

later look them up. It sounded hokey to me, but I had nothing to lose by trying it out.

I called up his prayer line and planted a seed of faith, believing God to provide the money I needed for the rent and other outstanding bills, plus enough extra to buy food for Thanksgiving. I also started tithing, though not into this preacher's ministry. I took a tenth of whatever money came in, no matter how small the amount, and donated it to a local soup kitchen.

Soon I was the excited one, calling my friend to tell her about my abundant harvest. By the time Thanksgiving and my daughter, son-in-law, and the two grandbabies arrived, my bills had been paid, and there had been enough money left over to enable me to invite the whole family to join us, and even cater the meal from a kosher deli.

Getting the Go Ahead

It would all have ended there, if the path I was on had any bans on its members investigating other belief systems or religions. With that question in mind, I joined the members of my spiritual group on a trip to Baltimore to see the Master. He had traveled from India, to visit his American devotees. There would be a special message, a time to have our questions answered, and *darshan*,

which was the coveted opportunity to sit silently in his presence, and gaze into his eyes. It was believed that by doing this, the devotee's soul connected to the soul of the holy one, "the Word [made] flesh,"¹¹ and became the recipient of special blessings and grace.

At the appointed time, we were told to line up. People scrambled to get as close to the head of the line as possible, but I wasn't fast enough. My place was at the very end. When we had all been positioned, however, the back of the line was told to enter the auditorium first, and I found myself seated dead center, at the front of the room.

I did not have to ask any questions. They were all answered for me during the message. We were told that all religions are branches of the same divine tree, rooted in one divinity, and that Sant Mat's focus is on the firsthand inner experience of spiritual realization. There was no need to give up our religion. Faithfully following the principles of the path would, rather, make us better Christians, or Muslims, or Jews. I took that as *carte blanche* to continue my Bible studies, and when I felt nothing at all during the long hour of *darshan*, I was eager to go home.

In my haste to leave, I forgot my travel directions, but a taxi driver, on his way out at the same time, led

11 John 1:14

me from the hotel to the highway. From there, I just followed the signs and, despite rush hour traffic, made excellent time all the way home. I turned on the car radio, and the most wonderful, uplifting music started playing. As I listened to it, I felt engulfed in wave after wave of the purest love I have ever known.

I 8

EXPLORING THE WORD

I had always thought of the Bible as a historical book, but now I was beginning to see it as a detailed road map of the path to follow, and the pitfalls to avoid, if I wanted to experience the very best God had for me. I couldn't get enough of reading it, and I also found some other Christian programs with more substance to them, which I started watching on a regular basis.

The day came when I felt ready to turn my life over to Jesus Christ, and as the invitation was given on the program I was watching, I put my hand on the TV screen, repeated the sinner's prayer, and asked Him to come into my heart and be my Lord and Savior. I accepted the gift of salvation with the unwavering faith of a little child, and as I continued to spend time in the Word, I accepted

every other promise just as unwaveringly. If God said it, I believed it.

Slowly, slowly, the Bible was becoming my authority, and when I read about the importance of fellowshiping with other believers, I started looking for a church to attend. It was not as simple as I'd expected it to be. I thought all believers believed the same thing, but that's not what I found. Never in my wildest imagination could I have conceived how much division I was about to come across.

There were believers who praised the Lord loudly and joyfully, singing and dancing before Him like David did in Old Testament days.¹² Then there were others who frowned upon the practice of raising hands or clapping during worship. Some believers believed in miracles, healing, and the gifts of the spirit. Others claimed those things were no longer for today. Who was right, and who was wrong?

My heart's desire was to do what was right, but I wasn't sure what that was, so I began wavering, and putting more faith in some of the sermons I heard than in what the Word said. If I heard something that confirmed what I believed, it strengthened my faith, but if I heard someone I considered an authority figure condemn such a belief, I would falter again. I had read the warn-

ing in James 1:6(b)-8, about not being double-minded or wavering in our faith, yet that's just what I was doing. I was letting the words of others color my thinking.

Looking back, I see how I was like the apostle Peter, who got out of the boat and started walking on the water when Jesus bid him "come," but who then got distracted by the wind and the raging sea, took his eyes off of Him, and began to sink (Matthew 14:24-31).

I went back to reading my Bible and started marking it up. I put hearts and asterisks next to the promises, and little TPs (tested and proven) next to the ones that I saw manifested in my life. Now when I hear someone say those promises are not for today, I can tell them they've brought their message too late. My personal experience of these Scriptures is evidence that cannot be denied.

12 2 Samuel 6:14

19

A NEW CHAPTER

Life was comfortable and fulfilling. I had good friends, enjoyed my work, belonged to a church family where I felt welcome and appreciated, was part of a music ministry, and felt quite content with the way things were. Then, suddenly, when I least expected, everything changed.

A friend of mine and I applied for a part-time, seasonal job selling ads for a Christian Yellow Page business and ministry directory. The person in charge of our area lived in Baltimore, but he traveled to New York to interview us. When it was my turn to see him, I had a premonition that we were going to end up together. My friend later told me that she had had the same feeling about us.

We were instructed to check in regularly with the Baltimore office. When I did, my boss would keep me on

the phone much longer than necessary. He also stayed in the office until I got home at the end of the day, because he said he worried about my going into the drug-infested neighborhoods some of the ministries on my contact list were located in. If he hadn't heard from me by late afternoon, he'd keep calling until I answered the phone.

Our calls started getting personal, and we laughed so much, I looked forward to speaking with him. Then he started visiting on weekends, invited me to come to Baltimore to see the office, and offered me a job there should I ever decide to move. I met his family, and he met mine. When he proposed, I had mixed feelings. I liked my freedom, and had become used to coming and going as I pleased. On the other hand, I enjoyed having someone in my life who thought I was special, and who seemed genuinely concerned about my well-being.

I prayed for the Lord to close all doors if this wasn't of Him, but at the same time, I tuned out all the little warnings that the still small voice within me was trying to bring to my attention. I saw only what I wanted to see, and heard only what I wanted to hear. I convinced myself that this man was mature, responsible, and trustworthy, and I believed him when he told me his word was something I could bank on. When both his pastor and mine gave us their blessing, I reasoned that it was a sign of the Lord's blessing, too. I started fantasizing

about what an awesome testimony this union would turn out to be, and even tried helping the Lord speed things along, instead of waiting on His perfect timing.

Unwise Choices

The apartment building I lived in turned co-op, and the owner offered to pay me if I'd move out. At first I turned his offer down, but then reconsidered. I accepted the full-time job I had been offered at my fiancé's Baltimore office, and gave up my word processing service. We would be living in his house after we married, so I gave most of my furniture away too, except for a few things I left in my son's storage area.

The first sign of trouble came only days before I was due to leave. The job I'd been counting on fell through, and it was too late to change plans. My daughter said I could stay with her until the wedding, and I drove off to West Virginia with only what could be stuffed into my little two-door Ford Escort. Anything that didn't fit was also given away.

20

THE POTTER AND THE CLAY¹³

I was about to learn that only God's word can be banked on. Only His word can be trusted one hundred percent of the time. Man's word is subject to change. People make commitments they don't always keep. Sometimes it's because they make them impulsively, without first considering the ramifications. Other times it's because circumstances get in the way. Even the most honorable and best-intentioned folks are subject to sickness, accidents, unavoidable delays, and death.

Before long, I found out that not only had the job fallen through, but there would be no wedding either. Unwilling to settle for less, I ended the relationship. I

¹³ Jeremiah 18:1-4

was now a bag lady, living out of boxes, and inhabiting the top bunk of my granddaughters' bunk bed.

Preparing the Clay

I needed to find a job, and didn't even have a resume. My daughter had no computer, but told me I'd be able to find one I could use at the library. She also suggested that I look for a job in Leesburg, because it was close by, and salaries in Virginia were higher than in West Virginia. So with a full tank of gas, and no money in my pocket, I followed the signs to Leesburg, all the while weeping and telling the Lord this was his fault. Why, I asked, had He let it happen, when I had not only prayed about what I should do, but even begged Him to close all the doors if this move were not of Him?

When I got into town, I found myself right by the Loudoun Times-Mirror building, and out front was a street newspaper box. There was nowhere to park, though, and so I drove around to the back. There I found a spot waiting for me, directly across from a house with a sign out front that said Women's Resource Center. The sign piqued my curiosity, and after I had gotten my free paper, I went in to find out what kind of resources they had.

The woman who answered the door told me they were a crisis intervention center. I told her I wasn't sure what

that was, but I did have a crisis. When I explained my predicament, she ushered me into an office with a computer, and told me I could use it to type a resume. She then printed ten copies of it for me, helped me look for employment agencies in the Yellow Pages that wouldn't be too far away, and said I could use her phone to call them.

Most of the agencies required appointments, but there was one temp agency that said I could come right over for an interview. I did, and that's when I discovered that God has a sense of humor.

After I had passed the typing and computer skills tests they gave me, I was interviewed by a woman who asked what kind of job I was looking for. I told her I'd like to try something different from what I had done before. She asked if I was good at reading maps. When I told her that I wasn't, and that I relied on AAA for directions, she responded, "Oh good. I have the perfect job for you. It's at the County Mapping Office. You'll do fine. All you have to remember is that north is up, south is down, west is to the left, and east is to the right. You can start tomorrow."

I was extremely nervous, but the interviewer turned out to be right. I did do fine, and the job turned out to be one of the most enjoyable jobs I've ever had. I loved it. Even so, I still shed many tears, especially while

driving back and forth from work. It didn't take much to trigger them—a song on the radio, a memory. The miracle of it all was that I never had an accident when they so filled my eyes that I could hardly see where I was going. I even considered ending my life by driving the car over a cliff at the edge of the road, but the fear of being crippled instead of dying stopped me. That was not a risk I was willing to take.

Eventually, there came a time when there were no tears left to cry, and I have a vivid memory of being on the way home from work one day, and feeling suddenly enveloped by a great peace. It was as though the Lord had put His arms around me and was holding me close and quieting me. A picture flashed through my mind of a wild horse bucking one last time before finally calming down, and in that moment, I was able to release what was in my tightly clenched fists, and open them up to receive something better.

Out on My Own

Someone told me about an apartment complex that was being built in Leesburg for people with low incomes. It was part of the Affordable Dwelling Unit program, and close to where I worked. I applied and was accepted. The unit I wanted had a western exposure and faced the

woods, and I looked forward to enjoying tranquil scenes of deer and sunsets. However, I didn't have the money for the security deposit, and by the time I did have it, the apartment had been rented to someone else.

Reluctantly, I moved into the only unit available, which was on the other side of the courtyard. Instead of the woods, I faced a dirt road and a horse farm, separated from each other by a row of tall trees. Little did I know that the Lord, who sees the whole picture and knows the beginning from the end, had my best interest at heart when He steered me over to that side of the complex.

Less than a year later, the woods had disappeared, and construction was started on an outlet mall. The tenants in the apartment I coveted lived through many months of dust and blasts, and when the mall was finally completed, their original view had been replaced by cement walls and a parking lot. I, on the other hand, was still enjoying my view of the horse farm, and though I never saw any sunsets from my window, I did see horses grazing in the field, deer congregating at dusk, and even an occasional fox making a quick dash through the grass.

The Reshaping Process

There were many blessings ahead, but much work to be done before I could receive them, and the first thing

to be chipped away at was my pride. For the first time, I found myself on the receiving end instead of the giving one, learning what it felt like to walk in the other person's shoes. I experienced the shame of needing a hand-out, and the humiliation of having people think you're too lazy to get a job, or in my case, a second or a third one.

My salary was so low it barely covered the rent and utilities. I no longer used credit cards, but still had several with outstanding balances. I hadn't been able to make the payments for the first few months after my move, and hefty fines kept being added. Now the monthly charges were more than I could handle, and I could only send in partial payments. My creditors were not satisfied. I started getting dunning letters and threatening phone calls, and my excellent credit rating was destroyed.

As though my financial woes were not enough, I discovered that it was not going to be as easy to make friends, or to get involved in a ministry, as I had at first thought. In the big city I had come from, making friends had never been an issue. People were happy to be invited over for a meal, and often came to visit. There were also many volunteer opportunities at church and in the community that I could be a part of. Here, in this small town, nobody seemed to need or want anything I had to offer. I would have thought it would be the other way

around. It was a perplexing and painful experience that rapidly diminished my already fragile ego.

More than once I asked the Lord why this was happening to me, and His answer was always the same. If He had wanted me to keep living my life the same way I had been living it before, and keep doing the same things, He would have left me in New York. He had allowed me to be uprooted and transplanted into unfamiliar territory, so He could start doing something new.

I began to understand that just because things hadn't turned out the way I expected they would have if it had truly been the Lord's will for me to move, that didn't mean it hadn't been. It only meant that His agenda was different from mine.

2 I

THE BEST IS YET TO COME

My twelve years in Leesburg were bittersweet. Sweet, were the awesome ways the Lord revealed Himself to me, and the wondrous ways he provided, not only for my needs, but for some of my wants, as well. I learned to trust Him more than ever as I experienced first hand the manifestations of His faithfulness and love.

Bitter, was the sense of isolation I felt. Neighbors were transient, and kept to themselves. On top of that, I was in a cold, cold church where I never felt I belonged. I stayed for eight years, only because the teaching was sound, and it was close to home. I felt as though the Lord had put me on a shelf, and wondered if He would ever take me down again. After a while, though, those thoughts grew less and less, and I resigned myself to accepting the way things were.

Mostly, I was content and focused on my blessings, but every now and then, I'd think of friends I'd gone to school with, who had lived successful, fulfilling lives, and were now enjoying retirement or semiretirement. I didn't mind having to keep on working, but I did regret wasting my talents and opportunities, and having nothing to show for my life. However, God wasn't done with me yet.

Taste and See that the Lord Is Good

Unbeknownst to me, the Lord still had a "suddenly" up His sleeve. As I was preparing to sign my twelfth lease, a series of unexpected events took place that led to my moving to another apartment complex in an even smaller town. It all happened so swiftly, there was no time for planning. Snap decisions had to be made, and there were many frustrating, suspense-producing snags that made me wonder if I had made the right choice after all, but by the last minute, all details had been worked out in the most amazing ways, and I had confirmation that it had indeed been the Lord who had set the whole process in motion.

Not only did He give me superhuman strength to do things I would have thought impossible, but He sent friends to help me, interceded with testy people who put

obstacles in my path, and provided the most spectacular fall colors to be enjoyed on the numerous trips between one apartment and the other. He even provided a car with a sunroof to transport a tall, gangly plant that would not fit in a van, and that the movers refused to put in their truck.

God's Agenda Proves Better than Mine

It's been three years since I moved to this little town, and not a day goes by that I don't count my many blessings. I live in a quiet complex, surrounded by beautiful trees, where the neighbors are friendly, and my new church has truly become a church home. From the very first day, I was welcomed with open arms, and made to feel like an integral part of a large, caring family. People wanted to include me in their groups, and hear what I had to say, and the Lord gave me a new ministry. He took me off the shelf to be an intercessor.

My professional friends may be retired now, but I am just getting started. As for the tragedy of a wasted life, has it truly been so? If I had pursued my talents and education to their fullest, would I ever have felt a need for the Lord or for His saving grace? Would I have spent my life chasing after the things the world has to offer,

instead of the things that have eternal value? Would I have missed God's gift of salvation, a greater tragedy by far?

Life has become fulfilling and exciting. I can't wait to see what the Lord does next!

AFTERWORD

This book has not been easy to write because I am a private person, and to give you the whole story, I've had to share things that I've never spoken about before.

Vulnerability led to my believing a lie which, in turn, led to my misleading other people and getting them to buy into that lie as well. I was not consciously deceiving anyone; I was just sincerely wrong. If my story can help even one reader come out of the darkness and into the light, then baring my soul will have been worthwhile.

Were I to see you headed towards some imminent danger, such as a cavernous hole in the sidewalk, it would be unconscionable of me not to warn you about it, and I would not hesitate to do so, even yanking you aside if necessary. So why the hesitation when the threat is spiritual and, therefore, invisible? For me, it's the fear of rejection, of being judged, of all the things I struggled with at the beginning of my life, but I know that I can't let those fears stop me any longer. There's too much at stake.

Don't be deceived, as I was, into thinking that there are many paths to God, or that we get to Heaven by being good. Although we were created to have fellowship with the Lord, Adam and Eve's sin caused us to be born into a fallen world. The Bible tells us in Romans 3:23 that "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God," and in Romans 6:23, that "the wages of sin is death." Because of sin, a vast gulf separates us from our Heavenly Father, and there is no way we can cross it through our own efforts. Only one path can lead us to eternal life, and that is Jesus, "The way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through {Him}" (John 14:6).

The good news is that "God so loved the world {you and me included} that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life" (John 3:16). God loves you so much that even if you were the only person on this Earth, He would still have sent Jesus to die for your sins so you could be set free.

This gift of salvation that is being handed to you can only be received by grace, through faith. It cannot be earned by good works (Ephesians 2:8-9), and as much as it is not God's will for anyone to perish, He will not impose His will on you or force you to accept it. The choice is yours.

Jesus stands at the door of your heart, knocking and waiting for you to answer (Revelation 3:20). I pray that you would open the door before it is too late, and accept His invitation to enter your life, forgive your sins, and make you a new creation.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

SANDRA KOVACS STEIN is the mother of two children, grandmother of seven, and a great-granny to two little ones. She lives in Purcellville, Virginia, where she has made many friends in her community and church.

Sandy works at home at two virtual jobs, spending several hours a day doing data entry and transcription. She also has a passion for picture taking and cooking. Much of her photography is of her home town's changing backdrop during the four seasons of the year—trees and flowers, the sky at night, cloud formations, falling snow—all of which she'd like, someday, to assemble into a tabletop book.

When she's not taking pictures, Sandy enjoys cooking, especially for others. If she finds an interesting new recipe, she invites the neighbors over for dinner to be her tasters. Her cuisine must be good; they keep going back.

Sandy is an active member of Purcellville Baptist Church, where she helps out at the Welcome Desk on

Sundays, and serves on the prayer team. Once a week she joins a small group of residents who gather at the old train station, to pray for the community, and she is also in the process of becoming an online missionary.

You can visit Sandy at her blog, <http://atfootofcross.blogspot.com>, or communicate with her at skstein2010@gmail.com.