

Forward

Recently, one of my dear friends dropped by to say hi while I was deep in the throws of an organizational overhaul of my closet. I remained hard at work pulling things from the shelves above me as I chatted with my friend. I pulled a dusty filing system from above my head and was surprised by a flood of hand scribbled papers raining down on me. I paused for a moment to evaluate the mess I had just made. Quickly gathering the papers that had fallen I realized these were no ordinary papers, they were parts of a journal I had written when I was 19 years old. Trying to put the diary back together the words on the page lured me to stop my busy day and go back to the days of a girl who lost her way and was in desperate need of being rescued.

I know it must have seemed a bit presumptuous when I asked my friend to come sit a while so I could read this 50 page diary outlawed. As only a good friend would do, she agreed to listen. I knew I was risking a lot being so vulnerable. I really didn't know how I would get through reading this story aloud. As I read I felt strong. The days I live in now are so different. It was like I was reading someone else's story. I held my composure quite well till I got to the last page I had written. I looked up as I fought back the tears only to find that my friend had already been crying. I announced that I had no more pages. The story was incomplete. She turned to me and frustratingly squealed "You have to finish the story!"

It was quite an emotional journey to sit and complete the story. This is the story of a girl who was strong willed and stubborn, then broken and battered and finally healed and restored. It is was the inspiration for the song "Princess or Pauper" It is my testimony of the unconditional love, grace, and awesome mercy of The King when his daughter the princess decides to walk away from the wealth of her inheritance only to live in squaller and destitution because she has forgotten her destiny and has instead believed a lie.

Chapter 1 The Man of God

It all seemed innocent enough at first. My aunt's tales of a dreamy guy with a wonderful talent for making a crowd cheer. She told me about the song he had played about his son and how everyone was crying at the end.

I thought, "Wow, for my aunt to say that, it must have been really good." That impressed me.

Then my younger cousin chimed in with, "You can't have him though. He is all mine."

One night around midnight, I was at my aunt and uncle's house and my aunt woke me up. "He is here!" she giddily whispered.

"Oh no," I thought, "I'm sick. I can't sing." I came downstairs, one eye open, one eye shut. My hair was tangled and not a stitch of make-up had graced my face. My runny nose was less than a come-on. There I sat. There was Ryan. I was anything but impressed with his looks, but as I sat and listened it was as though he had entranced me with his calm, soft spoken nature and some really good licks on his guitar.

He was not just a Christian, I was informed, he was a spirit filled man of God! Needless to say, this pushed me over the brink. Wow, a man of God! My mind raced, we could pray together. If I learn something new I could share it with him. If we got together we could be a musical team. This had to be the one I'd been praying for.

I was so worn out with the games that the guys at school played. Even though they might be Christians, they lacked depth in my mind. The idea of ministry seemed foreign to many of them. Most were raised in Southern Baptist homes and had everything handed to them their whole life. I was different. I had ideas and goals. I had a purpose in life other than making lots of money and retiring. I had already experienced more than the majority of them had.

I was still skeptical though. After all Ryan was 32 years old! (I found out later he was actually 38 years old.) I was 18. That was quite an age gap. What would people say? I decided to drop the idea. I was going back to school. I was in no hurry to settle down. I still had plenty of youth to use before I ran off with an old man!

The only thing I had to remember him by was a card. My cousin said, "Here, Ryan wanted you to have this. He wants to help you with your music. He didn't want you to get the wrong idea by asking for your number."

This business card was impressive. It said, "New South Music Group". Cool, so he didn't want to run off and marry me. Great! I was always up to having a friend who was godly and interested in music.

I was involved with a no-name band at the time. I thought, "I wonder if this guy would give me some good songs to use because the material I've been working with is lame."

Back at school I met this guy named Seth. He was young and dumb with not a lot to say. He was not the best catch from the pond, but as I told my sister, "He isn't very smart, but he sure looks good in a suit." O.K., I know that is a terrible reason to date someone, but I didn't have a date for homecoming.

Well, after homecoming Seth was still around. He was company and he bought me dinner. He had been in a car accident . After the settlement, he had plenty enough to treat me.

During all this time I had been talking to Ryan. It was all strictly music talk. We kinda became phone buddies. He would sing different ideas to me and I would give him feedback. He had some good lyrics. The funny thing was, I couldn't stand country music and the majority of his tunes were straight from heehaw. I still really liked a lot of his stuff. Then the day came when he asked if I would like to come over and play around with some songs.

"Sure I would," I said. I showed up with Seth, the "think-tank". I noticed the look on Ryan's face drop as I introduced Seth. I wondered, was Ryan genuinely interested in doing music stuff, or was that just an excuse to invite me over? Probably both, I thought. That was okay, I would do music stuff with him and if he got brave I would let him know he was too old.

A week later, I was bored in my cinder block cell called a dorm room. The phone rang. It was an off campus ring. I picked it up. That

soft spoken mesmerizing voice said, “Rachel, this is Ryan. I was wondering if you aren’t busy tonight if I could take you to dinner?”

It took me all of three-seconds to decide. Hmm, lets see, I could stay here and be bored out of my mind or... I could go out with a great guy. “Sure, I would love to,” I retorted before I could think it through any further.

“I will pick you up at seven. I will be in a green Toyota MR2,” he replied.

Boy, did that sound great to me. I was going to dinner with a real man. He was sweet and thoughtful. We had things in common and he was driving a cute sports car. What more could I have wanted? I didn’t get dressed up. I wore an old gap T-shirt, ratty blue jeans and sneakers. I still didn’t want to give him the wrong idea.

When he pulled up to the front of the dorm he was wearing a GQ outfit, his hair was in a music executive ponytail, and the car had a fabulous sound system. I was happy.

That night I shared my heart over Dr. Pepper and On The Border nachos. I told him everything. He listened. He didn’t judge and he treated me with the utmost respect. It was respect like I hadn’t had before, from a date that is. When we got back to the dorm I told him to wait. I went and got my guitar. We sat on the coed porch, he played and we sang. It was fun, real fun, pure fun. It wasn’t dinner and a movie, It was fellowship, true kinship.

Afterwards I ran back to the dorm. There was Abigail, my true blue buddy. “Where have you been?” she asked. “You are glowing. Oh no, I know it wasn’t Seth that put that smile on your face. Who? Who?”

“Ryan,” I beamed.

“You mean the old fart? Rachel, you will be changing his diapers before long if you keep this up.”

“He isn't that old.”

“He will be that old, goofy.”

“Forget it, you don’t get to hear about my date.”

“No, I’m sorry, I won’t say another word. Tell me.”

So I proceeded to tell her. She listened patiently, reserving her concerns.

I went to bed that night thinking about him. The next day I thought about him. A week later I was still thinking about him.

Ryan and I went to church one Wednesday night and I dressed up for the occasion. I had Abigail do my hair. Fancy, I'm talking prom night fancy. I wore a fabulous outfit. It was a smash hit. I looked like we were going somewhere other than where we actually went, the basement youth dept. of a Baptist church in Irving. We were there to see the talents of the guy who led worship.

That was November. By December we were seeing each other all the time. But, "No holding hands - No kissing". He was a man of God. I was impressed. Ryan was a gentleman, and I felt like a bona fide lady.



Chapter 2 Walking Alone

One day Ryan met Abigail. He didn't like her, even though she was a lot of fun and very nice to him. He said she was a bad influence on me. I tried to tell Ryan that she was fun and sweet and needed a good friend. The truth was so did I. Abigail and I had many a good talk about our spiritual lives, whether we were up or down we encouraged each other. Ryan was jealous. I enjoyed both of them and he didn't want it that way. As a result, I tapered my time with Abigail down to a trickle. I spent most of my time with Ryan. The other girls in the dorm were my friends but I didn't really like the click they had formed. I was invited to be part of it, but I liked the freedom of individuality. As a result, I only saw them a little bit. Yes, it was a twosome all right, just me and Ryan.

I never seemed to be able to get involved in a church because I was always going to a different one. One Sunday I was in Cedar Hill, the next I was in Carrollton, then I would go to First Baptist in downtown Dallas. I did manage to go to Christ Temple in Irving 3 or 4 times.

Mom and Dad were asking for me. My brother, Paul and sister, Anna wanted to see me. I hadn't seen my friend Kristin in quite a while. I was setting myself up for a terrible fall because I had no covering or accountability.

One night I had a spiritual dream. Mom, Dad, Paul, and Anna were all with me. We were walking around in the downtown of some city. The buildings looked like Gotham City, and surrounding the town were tall mountains.

As a family we were going for a walk together. Everybody was having a good time, but I kept walking too fast. I would catch myself a time or two and slow down. But ultimately I ended up so far ahead that I was lost and the family was nowhere to be found. I wandered around

the streets for a while, no one but vagrants saw me. I began to yell for my family but they couldn't hear me. Finally, I thought, I will get in my car and drive around looking for them. But no luck. Eventually, I ended up on a cliff overlooking downtown. As I was looking over the cliff, I thought I saw my family. I couldn't figure out how to drive back down there, so I thought I would go down on foot. The climb was scary, but even scarier was the fact that I was naked and had no shoes on. It wasn't a thought of embarrassment, but rather that I was exposed and any of the vagrants that approached me could rape or hurt me.

My family was again nowhere to be found. I looked at how far I had climbed down and realized I couldn't climb back up. The crazy bums were getting closer and closer, and suddenly I had no strength left. My arms and legs wouldn't climb no matter how hard I tried. I finally cried out, "Jesus, Jesus, I don't have the strength to escape. Help me! Help me!"

I woke up. The dream was startling and puzzling. To this day I don't know exactly what it meant, except that I wasn't walking under the authority of my father. I was not under a spiritual covering. I was walking alone and without any accountability. It is interesting that Jesus didn't show me what He would do after I finally gave up and called out to Him.

Chapter 3 The Vortex

Well, the story goes on. Around Christmas time, mom and dad knew about Ryan and me. I was still trying to maintain the "just friends" story. That went over like a lead balloon. Dad was upset. My parents did not want me to see him anymore. I didn't think that was, fair but I tried to obey.

I called Ryan and said, “Don’t call here. I can’t talk to you anymore.”

He called me back and told me he was going to talk to my dad.

“Oh no you are not!” I said.

Well, that didn’t last long. My parents and I went to Cleburne for Christmas. There was Ryan. I was horrified.

“What are you doing here?! Please leave before my dad sees you,” I pleaded.

Ryan didn’t budge. “I will handle your dad.” Ryan said. Well, he tried.

My dad was kind, but firm. “Please don’t see my daughter anymore.”

Ryan replied, “I would like to maintain a friendship with Rachel if that is possible.”

Dad agreed, but only to a friendship. We both respected that for a while, but it didn’t last long.

I remember Ryan taking me out for Valentine’s Day. He handed me a small box with beautiful gift wrap. With a sheepish smile he said, “Open it.” I untied the bow and opened the box only to find three pair of silk panties. I was shocked. What in the world was he thinking? It was definitely an awkward moment being 18 and inexperienced.

“Oh good, I needed more handkerchiefs!” I said sarcastically. Inside, though, I churned knowing his intentions were more serious than any other “boy” I had encountered.

Over the next couple of months he became more and more physical with me, yet I still felt a youthful invincibility to the danger of truly falling.

As it came time for finals in late April, I found myself staying the night at Ryan’s house. He would leave me alone while I studied. It was quiet there. I got a lot done.

Back at the dorm chaos ruled during finals. The bookworms obviously left campus. At night, after studying for 3 or 4 hours I would climb into bed with Ryan and fall asleep.

One night something not so innocent happened. I found myself crying and sick to my stomach. I had worked hard to save myself. Not

just for anybody, but for my husband. I was going to have a fairy tale wedding and ride off into the sunset with Mr. Wonderful. Now reality hit. I was a whore!

I gathered my thoughts and told myself to pull it together. Get out of there and don't come back. That I did. I left and when Ryan invited me over I said no, once. It didn't last long. I didn't have the control that I had before. I came over and it happened again.

This time Ryan said, "How bout if we pray and God will join our hearts. We can take our wedding vows. We will be married in God's eyes. You know nobody would understand if we just told everyone we were getting married."

It seemed very logical to my shame based thinking. Why not? Hey, then my conscience wouldn't hurt. What a grand idea!

As the story goes, Ryan began to control me. At first it was little things. One day I was going to class. Of course I had been staying at Ryan's. I brought a change of clothes, which included a white button up shirt and blue jeans. I got the iron out of his closet and began to iron. He came in with a horrible look wrapped around his face.

"What's wrong?" I inquired.

"Why are you ironing a shirt for class?" he demanded.

"It's speech class and the teacher gives us brownie points if we look presentable." I explained. "Besides, it isn't all together unusual for me to try to look decent all the time."

Ryan angrily retorted, "You were just wearing shorts and a t-shirt when you came over here."

"Yes, I was just going to study and I didn't figure that you cared." I defended.

From that point on he was enraged. "I know you are going to that class to flirt with the guys. I'm not enough for you am I? You are such a tramp! I knew you weren't a virgin before!"

The words cut deep. I wasn't as angry as I was hurt. I had given him the most valuable thing I had. Here he was trampling all over it. He continued to yell at me all the way to my car. The whole way to class I cried.

I was going to give him a choice - jealousy or me. During class I wrote him a long blunt letter, telling him just that. As I walked out of the class, there he was standing stone faced staring at me.

“We need to talk!” he demanded.

“No, we don’t.” I said. “Read the letter and call me in the morning.”

He did better than that. He called me that night. He was apologizing for his behavior; for getting angry over such a silly thing. He explained that he felt so intimidated by the young, good looking guys I went to school with. I was understanding and forgiving. I brushed it under the rug. He was sorry; I would forgive him.

So it went, time after time. If it wasn’t jealousy it was something else. But the bad times were mixed with good times. We enjoyed each others company. We talked, we laughed, and we cried, but I noticed that it was mostly him doing the talking now. When I would talk, he was either uninterested and would show an obvious look of disinterest, or I would hit on a subject that poked a nerve. He would become enraged and we would end up leaving dinner or fighting the whole way through it.

Chapter 4 Jealousy and Impropriety

Ryan had a friend named Michael Jones. They were really close (they even called each other brothers because they had the same last names). Michael never really knew Ryan. He only knew Ryan as the guy that everyone loved. Ryan had a whole slew of people completely fooled into thinking he was a great guy. Ryan never shared his heart with anybody and he kept his moods well in check if we were around anyone. He had this strong sense of competition with Michael. Ryan

was always suspicious that I must be secretly in love with Michael. That doesn't really seem very amusing unless you know what Michael looks like. Michael is the kinda guy who needs to buy two airline tickets rather than just one. His arms and back were covered with six inch long hair.

Michael's boisterous voice resonated as he talked. He was a kind, jovial fellow, with one small hang up: Women. He just couldn't keep his eyes off of them. It really didn't matter whether a girl was good looking or not, as long as she had all of her limbs. On second thought, he probably would have been interested even if she didn't have all of her extremities available. He just wasn't picky.

Even though Ryan thought that I was tempted, he always wanted to hang out with Michael. More specifically, he wanted to hang out at my cousin's pool. This presented a real problem for me. First of all, I had to wear a swim suit. It was a one piece suit, not designed to be a head turner. It was not, however, an Arabic frock that came down to my ankles. As a result I was frequently accused of somehow seducing Michael with my body.

One day I was talking to my uncle while I sat serenely in a hammock. I wasn't really paying attention when Michael walked onto the porch. I found out later, to my dismay, that Michael was staring at me. Even though it wasn't my fault that Michael had such a lust problem, Ryan claimed that it was.

He said that about any guy who looked half way cross eyed in my direction. According to Ryan, I had a bad spirit of lust on me and that was why guys looked my way. I'm sure glad it was that and not that I was young and pretty or anything. After an event like that he would yell and rant and rave about what a tramp I was.

On the drive home from my cousin's pool, Ryan gave me a vivid picture of exactly what could happen to me if I behaved with any impropriety in my dealings with other men. He told me a story about his ex-wife. He said that they were at a party and had been drinking. Another man at the party had approached his wife and kissed her directly in front of Ryan. Instead of being enraged with this drunken fool, he directed his anger at his wife. He immediately grabbed his wife

by the arm and took her outside. He confronted her, and as she tried to defend herself, he slapped her to the ground. With righteous indignation, he had served her exactly the kind of justice she required. He was so confident that what he had done was justified that he warned me, “If you ever pull a stunt like her and humiliate me in front of my friends, I will do the same thing to you!”

One night, I was spending the night at my cousins house. It was late and I went upstairs to go to bed. My cousin, 13 yrs. old, came upstairs a little while later. Ryan followed her up. I lay on my side with my eyes closed. I was awakened by the noise of them coming into the room, but I remained still and quiet. I heard strange noises and turned over to find him intimately kissing her. “Are you guys having fun?” I asked. They both giggled.

I was really disgusted at the thought of Ryan being so much older than my cousin. It was also a bit disheartening to know that even though I was in the room, he didn’t mind violating my trust and our vows.

The next day on our way home, I carefully confronted him about the incident. He seemed remorseful and in a moment of honesty he explained to me that young girls were a real attraction for him. Especially a little girl named Chrissy. He explained that though she was only 12, he was captivated by her. She used to always hang out with Ryan before we got together. After Ryan and I became a couple, Chrissy still came around some and occasionally Ryan would take her out with him.

At eighteen and nineteen years old, I was not able to process exactly how sincerely inappropriate his behavior really was. Looking back on the situation, I can only say that I was in the middle of a storm and had completely lost sight of the horizon.

Chapter 5 Emotions vs. The Voice Of God

Early summer I received a scripture from my mom. She hadn't intended for me to read the entire chapter, but I did. When I did I began to cry. The scripture was Galatians 4. The scriptures were for me. Verse 17 says: "*Those people are zealous to win you over, but for no good. What they want is to alienate you from us.*" Oh my, if only my mom knew just how true that was. I kept reading.

The chapter goes on to talk about how Ishmael was the child of the slave woman and he was the result of you trying to make the promise happen. God says: "*Send the slave woman and her child away.*" Isaac is the son born as a result of the promise and you can't make that happen. It does it on its own.

In the beginning of the relationship, my foremost hope was that Ryan was who he said he was; someone to help me with my music. I believed that Ryan was the answer to what God had promised me. As time went by I realized that he had no intention of helping me with music. When I would start singing he would get out his guitar and overpower me with one of his songs. I eventually lost interest in trying.

So I left. The scripture was clear. The scripture was true and it fit. I packed my bags, took off his senior ring and fed exed it along with a letter, saying adios.

I was free! I was going to eventually find Isaac but until then I would live with mom and dad, and I would survive. It didn't take long, maybe a week, before my new found freedom felt more like a trap. I was in no man's land. After all, I was married to Ryan. (It wasn't actually a legal marriage, just simply vows taken before God and each other to keep our consciences from hurting while living in sin.) How could I just leave him like that? I know he wasn't perfect, but when the soul ties are so strong, you can find no wrong. I cried out to God, "Lord, show me what to do."

His word didn't change.

I cried out again. "Lord, I miss him. He is my husband, right? I must not have heard you, Lord, because my emotions are telling me otherwise."

Of course, God never said my emotions were going to speak for Him. So I followed what seemed logical. Call and patch things up, and quickly, before he goes out and kills himself. That I did. I patched things up to the best of my ability and I thanked him for talking to me.

When I got back to Dallas he was there, ready to kill me, to crush me to death with his words. So I listened. I sat cowered for days and weeks as he lambasted me for trying such a stunt. All the cursing and profanities Satan ever thought of, Ryan used. Like tools in the carpenter's tool box, so were the profanities and accusations in Ryan's heart. Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. His intimidation worked wonders to battle my spirit. I was rapidly wilting. My personality changed from confident and funny to cowered and quiet. I was told, "Just don't speak because your mouth is vile."

Nothing I said could survive more than a minute in the air without him twisting and perverting my words into something he could forever use against me. Even as I would fight the accusations, he would find new ones to use.

My heart cried, "If only I could please him. We could have a wonderful life together."

So I tried. I would never say anything on my heart. I never gave an opinion, even if he asked for it.

I encouraged him no matter what I really thought and the words I muttered almost constantly were, "I am so sorry, honey, I didn't know how awful I was. I didn't mean to. Please forgive me. I love you and would never try to hurt you. I am so glad you are my husband. I am gonna try harder to be as good a wife to you as you are husband to me."

Yes, we weren't really married but he had me pretty convinced that we were. (I was sick in the head at this point.) His favorite thing to tell me was, "You can't leave me. See, you tried and you couldn't make it. I knew you would come back, ha! Try to leave again, I dare you."

I knew he was right. I couldn't survive without him. I was so brainwashed and felt such a need for his companionship that leaving him seemed impossible. Every night I cried myself to sleep. It was an eternal trap and I knew it. The amazing thing was that I still felt a strong "love" for him. At least I thought it was love. After all, I hadn't felt this

way about anyone else. I thought, “I must have the right one. And he loves me too. I just have to work a little bit harder so he will show it.”

At his suggestion, I moved into a tiny bedroom in the downstairs part of an old converted garage. He lived in the upstairs section. The house was out on a lake, about an hour outside of Dallas. It was set up with a tiny kitchenette and an even smaller bathroom downstairs. The downstairs portion of the home was stacked floor to ceiling with old furniture and stored items in any available corner. This was Ryan’s little haven and he absolutely loved it. It was a safe place and the best part about it was it was free for him. He lived in Dallas when we first met but he always had this little lake house to call home. I guess he had it from years before. He decided that I should pay \$120 a month to cover my part.

Even though Ryan had me convinced that we were married, he never lived up to any of our culture’s ideas of what marital duties were. For instance, taking care of your wife. Although he made quite a bit of money (when he worked), he rarely ever bought my dinner. He very rarely bought me anything but a cheap bottle of bubble bath for my birthday. One thing he was willing to spend money on was a pager. (This pager allowed him to rest assured that he could find me wherever I was.)

When we went somewhere it was my duty to pay for my own food and the gas to get there. If we drove his jeep, I had to pay for my food and his. Everything fair and square. On one occasion I saved back a big portion of my paycheck and went out and bought him a bunch of nice clothes. When I excitedly handed him the large sack filled with practically an entire wardrobe, he looked at me funny and proceeded to take each item out, while eyeing me suspiciously.

He finally said, “Thank you, but I don’t really like any of these. Do you still have the receipt so we can take them back?”

Trying not to look disappointed, I said, “Sure, we’ll get whatever you want.”

Every night since I was 12 years old I had faithfully read my bible. When I lived in McAllen, Jesus was my comfort. Jesus would hold me in his arms, and love me, even though I wasn’t popular. He was my

encouragement and strength when I didn't have any. During those six long years in McAllen, my faith was built. I trusted God for my family's needs, and my own need for love and acceptance. Since then, nothing had changed. I still read my bible and tried to hear from God.

"Please talk to me Jesus, I need you so bad. Help me to know how to deal wisely with Ryan. Show me how to be the perfect wife. Give me strength to endure." The comfort and strength I knew so well were nowhere to be found. Was I alone? Had God abandoned me? NO! He said He would never leave me or forsake me. Where was He? Could He not hear my cries for help? I never stopped believing and I never stopped seeking.

If I felt brave on occasion I would ask Ryan to read with me. The answer was always the same. "No."

Some nights I would say, "I won't ask you to read. Can we just pray together, just for a minute?"

Ryan would retort with, "Look, I don't feel anointed tonight, okay! Why don't you pray?"

I would always cower to my usual position and apologize profusely.

Chapter 6 The Pee Test

Well, Well, in early August I turned up pregnant. Yes, the little stripe on the EPT was quite clear. And oh was I sick. I couldn't keep water down. I couldn't keep soda crackers down. Nothing would stay down. At this point I had moved into the downstairs apartment adjacent to his upstairs suite. As one could imagine, being sick only exasperated the explosive environment further.

"What is wrong with you?" Ryan raged. "My ex-wife never got sick the entire time she was pregnant. She worked at the hospital until

two weeks before Jon was born. (Jon was his son from a previous marriage gone bad) You just want attention. You are such a pathetic wimp. You should get an abortion. Besides you couldn't love a baby. You can't even love me."

This angered me. A fire welled up inside of me like never before. I struck back in between heavens. "How could you say that?" At a loss for words I shoved and kicked at him. "Get out," I screamed, "Get out of this room. I hope you rot in hell! I hope you die a painful death! I already do love this baby!" The tears welled up in my eyes as I continued, "And it is obvious that you hate us both!"

"You are right," he screamed back, "I want you to leave and don't come back!"

That was fine with me. I was ready for someone that cared. I got a bag, packed it, and got in my Bronco. I was off. Or was I? Where was I supposed to go on a quarter tank of gas and seventy-five cents in the ash tray? I drove back and demanded \$20 bucks. Yeah right, Ryan's wallet was like getting into Fort Knox. He gave me \$10 bucks and added "good rid-dins" for an extra measure to my self confidence.

Here I was a long way from anyone I felt comfortable running to, pregnant as I was. I thought about my brother and sister, grandparents, parents, and friends. I just couldn't bare the condemnation I felt certain I would receive if I went to any of them. I know, Sam. He has skeletons in his closet. If I go there, I can tell him what I need to, and from there? I don't know. I will figure something out. I stopped to make the call.

"Sam."

"Yeah girl, what's up? I haven't heard from you in ages."

"Sorry," I said as I choked up.

"You okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. Can I stay at your place tonight?"

"Sure come on."

"Thanks, I will tell you what's going on when I get there."

I knew Sam wouldn't judge, and if he tried, I would remind him of his own failures. He lived in Ft. Worth so I could be there in no time. In thirty minutes I was on Sam's front door step. He was kind to me. He

guessed it, I was pregnant. He understood and didn't condemn. He left me to think while he went to play tennis.

I thought and I thought and I thought. I kept running the options over and over in my mind. I just couldn't think of any place I could go to and stay where I thought I wouldn't be humiliated. I had in my mind that nobody that was following God would understand my predicament without shaming me.

I just couldn't go to my parents, pregnant as I was. I had gone behind their back and been with someone that they didn't want me to be with in the first place. If I went back to them now, I would not only have to admit what I had done, but I would be making them pay for my mistake. No, that just wasn't an option.

It seemed to me that Ryan was my best option. One small detail had to be worked out. He would have to take me back. He had kicked me out just hours before. Surely he didn't mean what he said. He could make plenty of money to provide for me and the baby. The baby would have a father and would grow up loved and nurtured. I won't be a burden to anyone. I was praying it was true as I thought it.

That night while Sam was gone I called Ryan. He was frantic.

"I love you, please come home," Ryan pleaded. "I didn't mean any of that. We will get officially married. We will get marital counseling."

Wow, what a change! I thought I was the one who was supposed to apologize. Maybe he really meant it. He had never actually been willing to commit to this marriage in a legal sense.

In our relationship before, we had taken our vows, but that was to ease our conscience. We never told anyone about our so called marriage. We knew that my side of the family would be opposed to it. I can only speculate why he was holding back on the commitment. So I was excited about the thought of him taking this big step. If we got counseling too, then Ryan would have to answer for how he was treating me. Bingo, everything would be okay.

I spent that night at Sam's house and thought and prayed till I fell asleep. I still hadn't heard from God. So I took matters into my own hands to fix the mess that I was in.

I arrived back at Ryan's, only to be greeted with a hug! Wow, he loves me! I knew it! Within 3 days we were legally married. I wore my best dress and he put a great suit on. We went down to a little historic church and we were married before the justice of the peace. No family or friends witnessed this solemn occasion.

It was a good three days, even though I was sick. I was vomiting constantly and the light headed feeling never left me. Ryan never felt sorry for me, or had any compassion for me at all. That was okay as long as he wasn't yelling at me.

I'll never forget our "honeymoon" night. What an event! All the time we had been together (other than when we were first intimate) he had never allowed me to sleep in the same bed with him. Sex was the only way to "snuggle" with this creature. Yes, our "honeymoon" night was no exception.

"Go get in your bed," he would say.

I knew better than to argue with him at this point. Basically, I was nothing more than a tool for his personal satisfaction. That didn't even phase me, though I saw it clearly.

Chapter 7 He's No Sugar Daddy

The only thing bearing on my mind was making sure that this baby was cared for. If it had a daddy it would grow up normal and healthy. This baby wouldn't lack materially because Ryan would make a good living and supply for all of us.

Well, there was one small problem with that idea. Ryan didn't like to work. Ryan had been a very successful developer in Las Colinas, Texas. In the late 80's he had managed to loose everything on one large development project. He was forced to file bankruptcy and had been depressed ever since. Now he did little side jobs and tried to hide from

the IRS. He owed the government well over \$100,000. He informed me that it was a mistake that his lawyer had made when he filed bankruptcy. With much sincerity he exclaimed, "I don't know why my lawyer didn't put the IRS in my bankruptcy papers." Of course now that I am older and wiser I know that you can never file bankruptcy on the government.

Since he had been reduced to a manual labor kinda guy, he was a little bitter to say the least. His brother, whom he didn't think much of, owned a successful remodeling company. His brother was kind enough to give Ryan as much work as he wanted. His main request was tile setting.

On those days when Ryan was desperate enough for some cash, he would roll out of bed and go to work. I frequently tried to go with him if I wasn't in school. It was a chance to get out of the house and also I was able to help him. This seemed to improve his mood as well.

Although he was proud of his past accomplishments, he didn't plan on making anymore accomplishments. Ryan's bedroom was like a bat cave. The windows were covered from top to bottom in layer after layer of dark sheets and blankets, completely impenetrable by the sun. This was helpful in his plight to sleep as long as possible. I must admit, it wasn't a bad way to live. You know, you get up around 10 a.m., make some breakfast, and sit on the commode for half an hour while you work on your latest masterpiece. No, I don't mean what you think! He always played his guitar on the commode for long stretches of time. When he got up, I bet his legs were numb. I never asked.

After dilly dallying around another 30 minutes or so, he would get in his jeep and drive away. He especially took his time if he knew the job was urgent or if someone tried to pressure him. Kinda like a game, I suppose.

He was doing really good if he got to the job before noon. Most of his jobs were in homes, and people generally don't like for you to work past 5:30 or 6:00 p.m. I think that is a universal law. As you can imagine not a great deal of money was made by this schedule.

One thing I can say positive for Ryan, he always did a first class job on his projects. But they always took a lot longer to do. He always charged more than he originally agreed to, and every job he did he called

a “nightmare”. That meant the job wasn’t as easy as he had originally anticipated, therefore, the customer was going to be billed an arm and a leg.

Everyday when Ryan got home, he would rant and rave about nothing. But he would always manage to slay me with his words. They were deadly arrows that pierced through me like poison in my veins. It seemed most of his anger now was related to the fact that I didn’t do enough that day. Never mind the fact that the nausea, throwing up, and excessive dizziness never left me. (I found out later that I was severely anemic.) With vomit trailing out of my mouth I would apologize for not making his dinner, or not making it the way he liked it.

Most days I would wake up in a cold sweat, trying to figure out how I was going to stand up long enough to manage the affairs of that day. A couple of days a week I had college classes to attend. I also had homework from those classes along with the duties around the house. Ryan expected me to wash dishes, do laundry, make the beds and go to the grocery store to buy something for his dinner.

Going to the store was the hard part. If I was at home I could sit down in between dishes, or somehow wash them sitting down. The grocery store was different. I had to walk, push a cart, and wait in a line. It was embarrassing on a couple of occasions: once I ended up on the floor in the frozen food section, and once when I was waiting in line at the checkout I became too dizzy to stand. On both occasions the grocery store clerks had tried to call 911 for me, and I had to beg them not to by getting up to prove I was okay enough to go home.

The nausea was my biggest fear. I just really didn’t like spewing in front of strangers. I guess I was trying to hold on to the last little bit of pride I had left. I had a milk jug that I resourcefully cut the top off of. It was always in my car. I used it way too often.

The other real stress about going to the store was that Ryan never gave me any money. I had to write a hot check and hope he would put the money in my account the next day. It was a stressful thought. He didn’t give me money because he said I couldn’t be trusted. I might run off if I had the ability to do so. He preferred to just pay me back for things I had already purchased. That way I was guaranteed not to run

away. If I did buy groceries and make his bed and my bed and vacuum and mop and do the laundry and dishes (I rarely could), he still found something I did wrong.

It was disheartening to know that nothing I did could possibly please him. I never gave up hope though. I would fantasize about having a happy home. I dreamed that he would love the baby, and the baby would help him to love me. Just a fantasy, but it kept me trying. The preposterous thing about the dream was knowing that the reality was that he wanted the baby dead. It was hard to fathom so I pretended it away until the next time he would bring up abortion, which was every time he raged at me.

Chapter 8 Trapped In My Own Mind

From time to time when Ryan saw me gathering the nerve to leave, he would take the keys to my car, any money that I had, my checkbook, credit card, and driver's license. That way, when I was angry enough to leave on impulse I would be shut down by the fact that I would have to walk. If I started to leave on foot, he would wait until I got down the road a little ways. Then he would get in his jeep and chase me down. There were a few times I hoped he would just run me over. I do remember eluding him in a neighbor's bushes for a while, but I knew in my heart that after the moment wore off I would go right back to him. It was as if we were sewn together in some twisted way. Times like that were becoming the norm.

More often than not, when Ryan left for the day and I was still out of his good graces, he made sure that the upstairs suite was locked securely. Alone in the downstairs with nothing to do, no way to call anyone and no keys or money I would remain until he arrived back at home. I frequently had no idea where he was at or when he'd be home.

On one such occasion, I became so agitated at the thought of being stuck in that depressing downstairs quarters that I decided to drag a ladder from behind an old out building to crawl in through an upstairs window. I didn't even know whether or not the window would be open, but I figured it was worth a shot. Sick and dizzy on that hot Texas day, I struggled with every ounce of strength I had to lean that heavy ladder up against the house and climb up to that window and open it. I'm still amazed that I was able to pull that off.

Teetering on the edge of disaster, I discovered the window to be open. However, once I got past that milestone I was confronted with a whole new problem. Ryan had stapled several layers of sheets and blankets to the perimeter of the window. As I mentioned earlier, he did not like to be awakened by the sun. The staples were contractor style, inch long staples that were extremely close together.

I was in a precarious spot at this point. Unsure of whether or not I could physically make it back down the ladder because of extreme dizziness, I decided to push my way through the layers of sheets and blankets. My original hope was that my break in would be undetected and that I could do it again and again. Unfortunately, the ripped sheets and blankets told the story for me.

Fortunately my little ladder escapade was discovered on a night when Ryan had it in his heart to make up with me.

While he was just verbally slaying me for the most part, I noticed he was adding more and more muscle to his words. I was increasingly more scared of what he might do. I was wasting away physically. I had very little strength left in my body.

He usually, in a kind of firm but not harmful way, would grab me by the back of the neck and kinda show me who was boss. Sometimes I would just hold really still and he would let go after 30 seconds or so. But on occasion, I would kick at him, squirm, or say something to make him angry. That's when I got to feel his wrath. He would shove me into a wall or twist my arm while he held my neck tight. I do remember getting slammed pretty ferociously into some cabinets. My shoulder and knee got some pretty unattractive scrapes and bruises. Sometimes, if he

really hurt me physically and he knew it, he would apologize after a day or two. I ate up the apologies. They made me feel loved somehow.

One night, when I had access to the upstairs part of the house, it got later and later and Ryan still wasn't home. I paged him once an hour for four hours. He never returned my call. This was a common occurrence, but for some reason I felt afraid for him. I was really worried for his safety.

He finally walked in while I was on the phone with my sister. She was in the middle of telling me something and I didn't get off the phone in time. When I did finally hang up, he began to yell at me. His eyes were so angry it scared me.

I whispered, "I was worried about you."

He ignored the comment, "Who were you on the phone with?"

"My sister," I replied.

"How long were you on the phone?" he demanded.

"About ten minutes."

"Don't you lie to me bitch."

"I'm not."

He grabbed me from the back of my head and slammed my head in between my knees. It was a pretty awkward position, not to mention the fact that I was pregnant. I don't know if that really mattered much, but my neck and back popped really loud. It must have scared him. I know it scared me. I thought he broke my neck. I rolled onto the floor crying. He calmed down just long enough to see if I was okay. He then resumed his yelling at me. He ranted at me for close to an hour, I guess. At some point I finally fell asleep.

Ryan loved psychology more than life itself. He loved the excuses that it gave him. If a problem was ever to be admitted as his, it wasn't really his but rather "the little boy inside". He spoke often of his need for re-parenting. It allowed him a great escape to blame his actions on his lack of proper parenting as a child. He also used this as a handy weapon to try to work resentment in my heart towards my parents, and any other person in my life that opposed our relationship.

Example: “Didn’t your parents drag you off to Africa with them?”
(My parents are missionaries and I lived in Africa for two years as a kid.)

“No, but they took me to Africa.”

“Well, you told me yourself that you were extremely malnourished when you returned.”

“Yes, that is true.”

“See, that is abuse with a capital A! They neglected you. Now look at you. You have tons of problems. They spanked you, too. You say they broke your will when you were young. But you are really even more rebellious now. You certainly were never taught to respect your elders. Just look at how you treat me.”

I never could figure out what he was talking about. He generalized accusations so much that I had no way to rebut anything.

Ryan made me read Tim La hay’s book, “Spirit Controlled Temperament”. First, he sat me down while he read the questions on the temperament test. He gave me paper and a pencil, and then proceeded to tell me which ones I was. When I would say I was one way, he would say, “No way, you are obviously this way.”

When he was done pegging me, I was 100% choleric. (Webster’s defines choleric as easily aroused to anger; bad tempered)

“See that explains why you are always railroading me,” he theorized.

“I do?” I wondered. I had to leave it at that. Why not? That was obviously what I was.

He told me he had already taken the test. “I’m all melancholy,” he declared. (Webster’s defines melancholy as gloomy; sad; pensive or sober reflection)

By October of 1995, I was going on four months pregnant and everyday was more difficult than the day before. I was so thin and sickly, it was hard to fight back to any confrontation. Worse than my body’s state was the condition of my spirit. I was a truly broken person. I found myself praying daily for God to take my life. I wasn’t the type to do it myself, but I figured I would keep asking God to do it for me. My preferred way of leaving this earth was in a car accident. I drove

insanely reckless, hoping for some kind of good accident to come my way. That obviously was not God's plan for my life, or the life of the baby living inside of me.

Chapter 9 Who Needs Doctors?

Trouble came for Ryan when we told Suzanne and Charlie that I was pregnant. Suzanne was so sweet to me. I didn't feel condemned or embarrassed in the least. She was kind to Ryan as well, but she gave him a stern command that I needed to see a doctor.

I had asked Ryan on several occasions, when I felt brave, if I could see a doctor. His reply was always the same: "Are you gonna pay for it? Get a job and then you can go to the doctor." I knew I was caught between a rock and a hard place. I couldn't get a job. I couldn't even stand up for more than 5 minutes. But I had to see a doctor. Suzanne to the rescue.

I knew God had placed her in my life. She was the only person on the planet that Ryan wanted to please--as long as it wasn't too much trouble. Charlie and Suzanne were Ryan's investors. He needed them. On top of that, he wanted to build their house which they planned to start in a few months.

Ryan heard Suzanne, agreed with her plea and proceeded to ignore it as soon as he wasn't in her company. For the next few weeks she called and pressed for me to see a doctor, more specifically, her doctor.

He had agreed to accept me on his exclusive patient list and Ryan didn't budge. He never argued with her. He didn't do anything about it either.

One day Suzanne called and said, "I made an appointment for you on Friday." I knew I needed to go. I had never been a huge fan of doctors or hospitals, but I had never been this sick before either. I really wanted to go. I knew it would mean pressing my luck with Big Chief. I had to try though. I felt like my life hung in the balance. Something might be really wrong with me. I needed answers. All I knew was that I had to go to the doctor.

When Ryan came home he was already frazzled. I knew I had to ask him. "Uh, Ryan, Suzanne made an appointment for me to see the doctor tomorrow." Silence...

"She did what? Oh, she is stepping all over my boundaries. I can't believe her! Well, you told her you couldn't go, right?" Silence.....

"I told her I would ask you."

"No, the answer is No!"

"Ryan, please. (tears welling up in my eyes) I need to, please."

"Why are you crying? Getting a little sentimental and mushy about this aren't you?" he mocked.

I left the room. It was useless. I hobbled downstairs, lightheaded and seeing spots as usual. Laying helpless and alone in the bedroom downstairs, I heard my sweetheart coming down after me. 3-2-1. The door swung open and the light flashed on.

"You are way overreacting on this whole thing."

"No I'm not," I whimpered, "I just want to know that everything is okay. All I know right now is what the home pregnancy test said. What if I'm really not pregnant and I'm just sick from something else?"

He softened. What a shock! "How much is it?" he asked.

My eyes brightened, "It is \$120."

Ryan retorted, "That is absolutely a rip off. I can go to the clinic in Irving for \$30."

Feeling brave I came back with, "I don't know why, but they are like all the other OBGYN's in the phone book."

I was glad I had done my homework. “They said we could pay it out over a few weeks.” This caught his attention. “Also, Charlie said if you needed money, he had some work for you to do.”

The money or potential to earn it didn’t really excite him, but he loved the idea of paying it out over time because his plan was to pay as little as possible on the visit and then let the rest go to a collection agency.

He finally said, “Okay, but you will have to sleep down here tonight. I don’t want you to wake me up in the morning.” That was okay with me!

I woke up early the next morning and got dressed to go to the doctor. After my usual vomiting routine, I got in the car and drove to Suzanne's house. After the appointment (I threw up again at the Dr.’s office) Suzanne and I went back to her house where Ryan met us. I was excited to tell him that the baby was okay and I was fine too, except for severely underweight and extremely anemic.

“I heard the baby’s heartbeat,” I exclaimed.

He smiled politely because Suzanne was right there. I knew he was anything but thrilled. Standing up and stretching, Ryan said, “Well Suzanne, we are gonna have to run.”

Those were the last pleasant words I heard out of his mouth. We went to eat at Jason’s Deli. I couldn’t eat; all I could do was sit there while streams of tears flooded my face. He continued to accuse me and threaten me the whole way through dinner. He was upset because the doctor had done a whole bunch of tests on me and the bill was more than what I said it would be. He wasn’t upset about the balance, but that I had paid more because the bill was higher. That gave him less opportunity to cheat the doctor and that infuriated him. I tried to comfort him by telling him that the Lord would provide for our needs. That didn’t soften him one bit, but it comforted me even as I said it.

Later on that day, we went looking for a part that had fallen off of his jeep the day before at the intersection of HEB and 183. We drove up and down a half a mile section of the highway searching for it. We never found it. We did find \$100 in crisp \$20 bills strewn up and down the identical spot where his part was lost. Coincidence? No way, God

was proving that He would provide for my doctor bill even if Ryan didn't. Ryan said excitedly as he would spot another bill, "God is really blessing us."

I was sickened by the fact that Ryan couldn't acknowledge that God gave us the exact amount of cash that he had been raging at me for several hours about. He was instead claiming that the Lord was rewarding the lifestyle that he was living. I guess Ryan couldn't have acknowledged that he was wrong even if God himself had come down and handed the cash to him in person. The rest of the doctor bill of course was ignored and left to go to a collection agency.

When I was able, I still went to work with him when he set tile. Ryan cared little about the fact that I was pregnant, nauseated, and very dizzy. In my over the top desperation for trying to gain his love, I did tasks that were well beyond my realistic capabilities at that point in time. While he spread the grout into the cracks, he would have me come behind him to wipe up the excess grout and then clean the hazy film left behind. This is a very labor intensive task that required me to fill and carry several five gallon water buckets for cleaning the tile. I remember struggling with every ounce of strength I had to drag and scoot those very heavy buckets.

One day after working really hard to please Ryan by cleaning grout, we were both hungry. Hunger was a real novelty for me because I was nauseated so often. He took me to a greasy Long John Silver's drive thru. I felt confident that this time was different, I promised him that I could eat a whole meal. Begrudgingly, he went ahead and ordered me a full meal. I ate to my heart's content. It felt so good to have a full stomach. Unfortunately, that didn't last long. I found myself throwing up into a large cup in the car on the way home. This enraged Ryan. He began to yell at me and swear, telling me that he should never have listened to me and ordered a full meal for me. What a waste.

Chapter 10 Finally Broken

Suzanne had offered to not only throw a very expensive shower for me, but also to cater an entire reception for me. Her only request was that I pay for the reception food for 150 people. She said she could do it for about \$300. We were delighted with her generous offer. Ryan said, “Well, your parents are the ones that want us to have a reception. They should pay for it.”

I knew mom and dad were hurting for money, but I also knew that Ryan was a brick wall when it came to finances. I asked and mom and dad agreed to send \$200 and another \$200 in a couple of weeks. The extra was for flowers and stuff. When the check came, Ryan had me sign it. He cashed it and spent the money. He refused to pay Suzanne anything. I felt awful. My hands were tied and I didn’t know what to do. His excuse was, “Charlie and Suzanne aren’t hurting for money!”

The wedding reception and shower were planned. It was going to be a big event. Suzanne was doing the catering. My mom was flying in for the “celebration”. So it was that on the night of October 14, 1995, Ryan and I went to pick my mom up at the airport. The atmosphere was sweet. Mom was excited to see me and she was really trying to accept Ryan. The conversation in the car was pleasant. I guess I must have forgotten myself and began to really enjoy the company. It was like a cool breeze on a sweltering hot day, having my mom in the car with me. We began to talk about kids and child rearing with the thought of a baby on the way. With great passion and excitement mom began to explain how to gain a child's heart, and how to discipline with love. All of it was good information, but mom had no idea the mess she was making or what her comments would mean for me later on that night.

As we talked, Ryan began to give me the “I’m gonna kill you later” look. All of a sudden I remembered myself. The car got eerily quiet. When we arrived at my sisters house late that night and finally

shut the door to our room, the silence turned to cruel whispers. Ryan proceeded to lambast me through the night. I was so sick that night between his mean jabs and threatening remarks that I vomited and cried through the night. That night sticks out in my memory as one of the worst, most hateful nights in my experience with Ryan. I don't know how the night ended, I just remember falling asleep while he was whispering in my ear.

Chapter 11 The Rescue

When I awoke the next morning, my mom was in the bathroom fixing her hair. I walked in and sat on the edge of the tub. I just looked at her and smiled. It was a weak smile and I knew it. I was worn down to the lowest energy level possible.

In the past I had painstakingly tried to cover up who Ryan really was. After all I picked him. I wanted the world to know just how great he really was so that I would look less like an idiot for picking him.

At that moment though, I did not have the strength to put up the fight. I was totally and completely broken. My mom looked at me. I was gaunt and scrawny with terribly dark circles under my eyes. The spunk in my personality had completely disappeared. I was afraid to tell a joke or say anything inappropriate. I was just plain scared to be me.

She asked me one simple question that was to change the course of my destructive lifestyle forever, "Do you feel trapped?"

I just stared at her. It took all of a second to undo all of the covering up I had worked so hard for all this time. "Yes," I blubbered, "I am trapped." The tears streamed down my face.

She grabbed me and looked intently into my eyes and said something so liberating, "You are not trapped. You are not trapped."

She said it with so much passion I would have been a fool not to have believed her. “You can make the decision right now” she continued.

I was sobbing uncontrollably. It was a safe place. My family was there. He couldn't do anything. I started pouring out the truth. It was a rushing river that had been dammed for too long. The truth was such a fantastic feeling. My mom didn't even know a fraction of what he had put me through. All she knew was that I wasn't my usual self anymore and she was there to rescue me.

My brother Paul drove over from a few blocks away to be there. Ryan was not combative at all. He acted like a broken husband that was deeply in love with his new bride. And I must be the scared little girl that wants to run back to mama when we don't get along just right. I had finally caught on to his schemes and they weren't working on me. I'm not sure if I had more strength because my family was there, or if it was the sheer terror of what I would go through if I turned back at this point. I had gone out on a limb of honesty and it was being cut off behind me.

We sat on the couch as a team, and Ryan sat opposite from us in an arm chair. He was a truly a pathetic site to behold. His chin was quivering and he seemed scared. Mom, Paul, and my sister Anna sat and listened as I did the confronting. It felt so good, just being able to say what I had wanted to for so long. But it was short lived. I said a few things and then I stopped. It was a beautiful realization that came over me. It was over. I didn't have to suffer anymore. I was wasting my precious time and limited energy. I could just get my stuff packed up and be done. I stood up from my confrontational position at the couch, looked at my family and said, “Let's go get my stuff.”

The ride back to get my things from Ryan's house was a marvelous one. An hour and a half went by so fast. A flood of experiences came flowing out of my spirit. It was so liberating to tell the truth.

Ryan and Paul drove back together in a separate car. That had to be awfully intimidating for a coward like Ryan. I was told later that he spent the entire time going back and forth between humble and broken to angry and enraged. He was acting just the way he did around me,

except for the humble and broken part. Paul was really taken back by just how crazy he was.

When Ryan was fighting or angry, he would argue in a circular pattern. When he didn't win on one point, he would go back to the last point, and around and around he would go.

When we arrived at the house, Ryan's parents and the pastor of a church we sometimes attended were waiting for us. Ryan had called ahead and had told them that I was leaving him and that I was planning on having an abortion. Ironically, he had been the only one to ever bring up the A-word. Now he was trying to make me out to be the evil one.

I was strangely calm and completely uninterested in anything they had to say. I didn't even try to defend myself when it came to the preposterous accusation about the abortion idea. I just laughed. While they were in mid-sentence I said to sister, "Come upstairs and help me pack."

I just left them there. I packed everything I could possibly fit in two vehicles. My brother sat downstairs in the living room and listened. The pastor, Ryan's parents, and sweet, heartbroken Ryan begged Paul to try and talk some sense into me. After all, it wasn't about me anymore. There was a child on the way. I should consider what I was doing.

(All of the pages up to this point I wrote when I was 19, shortly after leaving Ryan, with the exception of a few interjections added later.)

Before leaving town, we stopped off at Suzanne's house. I hugged her and thanked her for being such a great source of comfort to me during the past few months. I also begged her understanding of me canceling the very beautiful shower and reception that she had planned for me. She was so sweet and understanding. She wished me well and gave me her blessing. She admitted that she had noticed how very different I was when Ryan and I were together compared to the few times that Ryan had allowed me to be with her on my own.

Her other big complaint was why on earth a man that proclaimed to love me wouldn't allow me to seek medical care during a very difficult pregnancy. I smiled and agreed but I was very careful not to

defame Ryan. As it turned out, over time Ryan ended up defaming himself without any of my help.

On the 12 hour trip to Nashville, mom did a lot of listening. It felt so good to be able to speak freely with her. I didn't have to hide anything anymore. I had worked so hard at keeping the facade going that tearing it down was such a fantastic feeling.

The morning after we arrived at my parents apartment in Nashville, I woke up to the sweet sound of my parents getting ready for work. They always played the word tapes when they were getting ready. Waking to the sound of God's word being played was such a comfort. I made it my routine to listen to those tapes all through the day. When I went out, I played sweet worship in the car. I never tired of hearing it. It was the most healing and restoring thing I could have done. I believe that renewed my mind faster than anything else. The promises in God's word were like honey on my lips.

Chapter 12

Poor Choices Seem to Follow Me

One Sunday, a couple of weeks after my escape to Nashville, we went to my parents church. It was a great sermon, wonderful worship, and I was thrilled to be there. I went to the restroom, as pregnant ladies must do often. When I came back out I found my nightmare staring at me all over again. There he was, stone faced. Those cold blue eyes just shot right through me. I let out a scream and jumped back into the restroom. My heart raced as I looked at myself in the mirror. Why was he here? Did I not give him a clear enough picture of how I felt? Was he here to hurt me or win me back? Too scared to leave the restroom, I just stood there and sobbed. My whole body shook and wouldn't stop.

Finally my mom came into the restroom and held me. “He’s gone. Don’t worry, he’s gone.”

After a long time I left the bathroom. I had begun to feel better in those two weeks prior to that incident. But after seeing him again I began to vomit. The nausea didn’t leave me this time until after the baby was born.

Ryan, we soon learned, had moved himself to Nashville. We never knew when or where he was going to show up. I knew I was followed because he always left notes on my car when I would leave it parked. Some of the letters were nice. They had an apologetic tone to them. Most were not so nice. I guess it was frustrating to him that he never got a response from me. So if one letter was nice, the next few would be hateful and accusing. He wasn’t stupid, though. He never said anything in those letters that was threatening physically. He knew better than that. The problem was, I never had any peace. He was always on the prowl. I felt his shadow. I usually sensed his presence before he would make himself known. We tried things like going to different churches. He always figured out where we went. I tried staying with other people. He found me. He knew where my parents worked.

At one point he wrote a whole bunch of bologna all over his car windows. He chased me down the street, honking his horn. I was in a totally different part of town, which meant he must have been following me all day.

On Christmas Day he left a particularly mean note on the front doorstep of my parent’s apartment. I called the police. I knew he was probably nearby. We were afraid to leave the apartment.

The police came and read the letter. I explained the situation. They said, “Go and get an order of protection. You don’t have to keep putting up with a stalker.” So I did.

The police assigned me a case number and I had my day in court. I showed up that morning, January 9th, 1996.

(This is the journal entry that I wrote that day)

Well, God did a huge miracle today. I went to court today to ask the judge for a protective order against Ryan. He has been harassing me since I left him. Stalking is more what I would call it. The miracle is

this. I showed up at court at 1:30pm. I sat in the back of the crowded court room. About 100 people were there from all walks of life. All of the women were there for the same reason: protection from their boyfriends, spouses, or ex-husbands. I sat- my stomach was in more knots than a bag of pretzels. I was so nervous and scared. This was the first time I had actually been in the same room with Ryan in a long time. He was so intimidating to look at. Considering I had never won an argument with him before- this was a scary place to start. But a lot of people were praying for me and God had promised me throughout this ordeal Isaiah 54. Today He fulfilled 54:17: No weapon forged against you will prevail and you will refute every tongue that accuses you. This is the heritage of the servants of the Lord and this is their vindication from me declares the Lord.

With each case that was called I became more terrified- I forgot the promises. Each woman that got up had a worse story than mine and each one was humiliated by the judge and the man's lawyer. Each man had a lawyer, but none of the women did. Well, I thought, at least Ryan doesn't have a lawyer. Before I could finish my thought a man walked over to Ryan and began whispering to him. This terrified me even more, knowing Ryan did have a lawyer. My stomach hurt so bad I didn't know if I could stand.

Before I knew it my name was called. -Here goes nothing- I got up and walked forward. The judge made us both raise our right hands and swear. After which I was asked by the judge "What's the deal?" He asked if we were still married? -yes- Living in the same residence? -NO!- Have any children? -one on the way- Okay, what's the story? All of the sudden God put a boldness in my eyes and words on my tongue. "Well, your honor, we got married on August 22, 1995; we separated on October 15, 1995. I moved from Texas to Nashville specifically to get away from him. Within a matter of weeks he had moved here. He has come to my church two times and has shown up at my front door on at least five occasions, that I know of. I had to change my phone number to keep him from calling and I started sending all of his mail back since he has written me numerous letters."

Then his lawyer started, "Well, has Ryan ever threatened you?"

Boldness like I've never felt before kicked in- "Well, sir, to be honest, I haven't personally talked to Ryan since I left him and frankly sir it makes me sick to my stomach to be in the same room with him. I didn't want to come here today for that very reason. (the courtroom chuckles) And when I saw him through the peephole on the door I ran downstairs and got my dad, so to answer your question, no he has not threatened me but I know this man, and I know that he is abusive cause I lived with him." Lawyer questions me, "Has he ever threatened you in a letter?" "No sir, but we are not dealing with an idiot here. He knows better than to write a threat in a letter. (I point directly into the lawyer's face) You know why? Because he knows he would get in trouble if he did that. Because I would bring it in here and show you!" (the judge agrees) I look back at the judge. I just want him to leave me alone. The lawyer- "All of those were just attempts to reconcile. -Boldness- "Look mister, how would you like it if every time you walked out your front door you thought that maybe someone was waiting around the corner for you? (The lawyer is befuddled) Lawyer speaks in a kinda huffy tone, "Well, I know Ryan isn't because I worked directly upstairs from him." (I chuckle) "Well, he has obviously had plenty of time to leave stuff on my doorstep." (I handed the bailiff a bag full of letters and junk that Ryan had left on my doorstep and windshield of my car) The lawyer is visibly frustrated at this point. He can't seem to get anything to come out right. Everything came out perfect for me. Then he says, "Your honor, my client would like to speak." Ryan started, "Your honor I haven't abused her, I love my wife." The judge cuts him off- "Well, I think I've heard enough. Mr. Jones, you may love your wife, but she obviously doesn't love you! She is noticeably upset just being here with you. So I don't want you to write her any more letters. I don't want you to call her. I don't want you to go anywhere near her. Here is your order of protection," (he hands us both a copy).

It was a most wonderfully victorious moment. Not because I got what I came for but rather because God took up my case for me. I didn't need a fancy lawyer! It was incredible. Anna was with me to witness the whole thing. She informed me that the entire courtroom was cheering me on. The girl I had been sitting next to said, "Way to go, you

told em!" As I left the courtroom I passed Ryan and his attorney in the hall. I overheard his attorney say, "Well, we will just have to chalk this up as a bad experience." Too much defeat! When God is for you, Who can be against you? Awesome experience.

That was a beautiful day, even though it was nothing but icy, cold, gray skies outside. In my heart I had the sense that God was watching over me.

I will have compassion^r on you," says the LORD your Redeemer.^s

⁹"To me this is like the days of Noah, when I swore that the waters of Noah would never again cover the earth.^h

So now I have sworn^t not to be angry^r with you, never to rebuke^k you again.

¹⁰Though the mountains be shaken^{t m} and the hills be removed, yet my unfailing loveⁿ for you will not be shaken^o nor my covenant^p of peace^q be removed," says the LORD, who has compassion^r on you.

¹¹"O afflicted^s city, lashed by storms^t and not comforted,^u I will build you with stones of turquoise,^{h v} your foundations^w with sapphires.^{i x}

¹²I will make your battlements of rubies, your gates^y of sparkling jewels, and all your walls of precious stones.

¹³All your sons will be taught by the LORD,^z and great will be your children's peace.^a

¹⁴In righteousness^b you will be established;^c Tyranny^d will be far from you;

I will have nothing to fear.^e or I will be far removed; will not come near you.

¹⁵If anyone does attack you, it will not be my doing;

54:8 /S Ps 102:13; S Isa 14:1; Hos 2:19; gS Isa 48:17
54:9 ^hS Ge 8:21; ⁱS Isa 14:24; S 49:18 /Ps 13:1; 103:9; Isa 12:1; 57:16; Jer 3:5,12; Eze 39:29; Mic 7:18; ^kS Dt 28:20
54:10 /Rev 6:14; ^mS Ps 46:2; ⁿS Ps 6:4; ^oS Isa 51:6; Heb 12:27; ^pS Ge 9:10; Ex 34:10; Ps 89:34; S Isa 42:6; ^qS Nu 25:12 ^rver 8; S Isa 14:1; 55:7
54:11 ^sS Isa 14:32; ^tIsa 28:2; 29:6; ^uS Isa 51:19; ^v1Ch 29:2; Rev 21:18; ^wS Isa 28:16; Rev 21:19-20; ^xS Ex 24:10; S Job 28:6
54:12 ^yRev 21:21
54:13 ^zS Isa 28:9; Mic 4:2; Jn 6:45^x; Heb 8:11; ^aS Lev 26:6; S Isa 48:18
54:14 ^bS Isa 26:2; ^cJer 30:20; ^dS 2Sa 7:10; S Isa 9:4; ^eZep 3:15; Zec 9:8; S Isa 17:14

54:15 ^fIsa 41:11-16
54:16 ^gS Isa 44:12; ^hS Isa 10:5; ⁱS Isa 13:5
54:17 ^jS Isa 29:8; ^kS Isa 41:11; ^lIsa 56:6-8; 63:17; 65:8,9

whoever attacks you will surrender^s to you.

¹⁶"See, it is I who created the blacksmith^h who fans the coals into flame and forges a weaponⁱ fit for its work. And it is I who have created the destroyer^j to work havoc;

¹⁷no weapon forged against you will prevail,^k and you will refute^l every tongue that accuses you.

This is the heritage of the servants^m of the LORD, and this is their vindicationⁿ from me,"

declares the LORD

Invitation to the Thirsty

55 "Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters;^p and you who have no money, come, buy^q and eat! Come, buy wine and milk^r without money and without cost.^s

²Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labor on what does not satisfy?^t Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good,^u

13-15: 66:14 ^vS Ps 17:2; Zec 1:20-21 55:1 ^wS Pr 9:5; S Isa 35:7; Mt 5:6; Lk 6:21; Jn 4:14; 7:37 ^xJer 2:13; Eze 47:1,12; Zec 14:8 ^y1a 5:4; Mt 13:44; Rev 3:18 ^zS SS 5:1; 1Pe 2:2 ^aHos 14:4; Mt 10:8; Rev 21:6; 22:17 55:2 ^bPs 22:26; Ecc 6:2; Isa 49:4; Jer 12:13; Hos 4:10; 8:7; Mic 6:14; Hag 1:6 ^cS Isa 1:19

^h11 The meaning of the Hebrew for this word is uncertain. ⁱ11 Or lapis lazuli

Bryon & I - His own will gave away parental rights to Me

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54:9 never again cover the earth. See Ge 9:11 and note. not to be angry. See 12:1 and note.
54:10 mountains ... be removed. Cf. 51:6; Ps 46:2; 102:26-27. unfailing love ... covenant of peace. A reference to either the covenant with Israel or the Davidic covenant, described in similar terms in 55:3 (see note there). Cf. 33:2C21; for the language see Nu 25:11-13.
54:11-1. A figurative description of restored Jerusalem, quoted in the description of the new Jerusalem in Rev 21:18-1.
54:11 acted city. Jerusalem. See 51:21. lashed by storms. See 2 and note. turquoise. Perhaps a bluish-green stone. It was used in Solomon's temple (1Ch 29:2). sapphires. Cf. "pavement made of sapphire" (a blue stone) 24:10e also Eze 1:26; 10:1).
54:12 battlements. Parapets on the top of walls. walls. Cf. 13-14
54:13-14 re ... righteousness. See 48:18 and note.
54:13 taught the LORD. Like the servant of the Lord in Jer 4.
54:14 Tyra ... Terror ... far removed. Cf. 14:4; 9.
54:15 surrender to you. See v. 3.
54:17 create destroyer. God raised up nations such as

Assyria and Babylonia to punish Israel (see 10:5 and note 33:1 and note).
54:17 refute every tongue. Just as no legitimate charge could be brought against the servant of 50:8-9. servants of the LORD. After ch. 53 the singular "servant" no longer occurs in Isaiah. The "servants" (see 63:17; 65:8-9,13-15; 66:14) are true believers—both Jew and Gentile (see 56:6-8)—who are faithful to the Lord. They are in a sense the "offspring" of the servant (53:10). See 49:19-20 and note.
55:1 The exiles are summoned to return and be restored. thirsty. Spiritual thirst is primary (see 41:17; 44:3; Ps 42:1-2; 63:1). waters. Figurative for spiritual refreshment. Cf. Wisdom's invitation in Pr 9:5. Christ similarly invited people to drink the water of life (Jn 4:14; 7:37). no money. In hard times even water had to be purchased (see La 5:4). wine and milk. Symbols of abundance, enjoyment and nourishment. without money. The death of the servant (53:5-9) paid for the free gift of life (see Ro 6:23).
55:2 what is not bread. Perhaps the husks of pagan religious practices. Cf. Dt 8:3. richest of fare. Great spiritual blessings are compared to a banquet (see 25:6 and note; Ps 22:26; 34:8; Jer 31:14).

These are the original pages from Isaiah 54 in my bible . They eventually just fell out of my bible from over use.

Chapter 13

Great Will be Your Children's Peace

I had to fly back to Texas for a few days. While I was there my parents and I went to see a divorce attorney. He was a sweet christian man, and very successful. My parents and I presented the challenges, and I told the attorney that I didn't want this man to ever be a part of the baby's life. I explained that sharing custody with a crazy person would not be a safe idea. He agreed, but proceeded to explain that unfortunately, I would have to live with this mistake the rest of my life. I left that office a little bit discouraged, but I just kept going back to the promises in *Isaiah 54*: "*Great will be your children's peace. In*

righteousness you will be established and tyranny will be far from you. You will have nothing to fear. Terror will be far removed. Anyone who does attack you will surrender to you.”

These promises were very clear. They couldn't involve shared custody with a mad man that hated the baby that he was now trying to steal from me. I knew that as long as I had to live with this mistake, peace would never come. I could imagine for a moment the idea of handing my child over, knowing that as long as Ryan held that child, he held me. We would always be in captivity if God didn't give me a full deliverance. If God promised, it must be true, so I trusted.

When I got back to Nashville, I had work to do. I made an appointment with a place in Nashville called the Mercy House. It was a christian facility for housing unwed pregnant women. They gave free legal counsel and were very experienced with situations like mine. I sat down with the legal counsel and discussed my options. According to her, I really didn't have any. She asked if I had ever called the cops when Ryan had tried to harm me. No, I never had. She said that it couldn't be proven in court that he was unfit. It was that simple. Again, the answer was “You will have to live with this mistake the rest of your life.”

My other big problem was the fact that I had no money. I couldn't very effectively fight a large legal battle without any resources. The only thing I was relying on was that God had promised this to me.

One day, I stumbled onto the legal pack that the court had given me when I had received the order of protection. I sat down and thumbed through it. There was “a wheel of abuse” in the packet. I looked at it and smiled. It had described my situation so very well. The only thing unfulfilled on the wheel was me going back again. I held my breath at the thought. I told myself, “No I will never go back to that life!” I continued rummaging through the papers in that manilla envelope. A little blue paper caught my eye. “FREE Legal Counsel 45 minutes of free counsel with no obligation,” it stated. It was with the YMCA. I called and made the appointment.

When I arrived in the cold dingy basement of an old gym, I was greeted by a line of unhappy, and for the most part unfriendly women.

Some looked like they had just been released from the hospital. It was a sad little waiting area. I sat quietly in a corner rehearsing in my mind the promises God had given me. No matter what this lawyer told me, I was going to cling to God's promise.

After a very long time, my name was finally called. I had expected to see an old, prune faced man in a suit. I had expected him to say that I would have to live with this mistake the rest of my life. Instead, I opened that big metal door to see a beautiful young woman with a sweet, sincerely pleasant look on her face.

She looked like an angel to me. She introduced herself. "My name is Kelley Sauls," she smiled as she said it.

My eyes must have brightened. "I'm Rachel," I said as I smiled back.

Somehow I felt comfortable with her. She was not intimidating, but she was truly hungry for a good fight. I sat in an old, army green, padded chair in that poorly lit little room and told Kelley all of my woes. I even told her that I wanted Ryan to sign away his parental rights.

Instead of laughing at me she said, "We can do that."

I was in awe. "But how?" I retorted.

She reassured me that it could happen without really giving me any proof that she knew what she was talking about.

"First things first," she said. "Let's get your divorce going."

I didn't know how I was going to pay for it but I agreed, "Let's do it."

For an uncontested divorce, she was willing to file for a very nominal fee. However, if the divorce was contested, her rate was \$135 per hour. In my heart I knew it would be contested, for no other reason but that Ryan thrived on control.

Ryan had, of course, paid little attention to the order instructing him to leave me alone. He continued to follow me and leave notes on my car or show up at our church. I would always run off and hide.

I was assigned a detective with the Nashville P.D. I brought him everything Ryan left on my windows and doors. He examined the items and filled out reports. Those reports were then submitted for warrants for Ryan's arrest. He was racking them up. However, getting those

warrants to really work for me was pretty hopeless. Ryan knew that too. He was unafraid to go against the order of protection, so he made my life his mission.

Chapter 14 God Is Never Late

Inside of me was a living thing so indescribable. I didn't know whether it was a boy or a girl. But at this point the excitement was in the air. Rekindled friendships back in Texas were sending baby stuff to me. I found an old crib in the penny saver for a few dollars. It was all set up. I planned to have the baby at home. I had hired a midwife to deliver the baby and do all of the prenatal care. She was a godly woman who had delivered 100's of babies. Mine would be no exception, I thought. Well, there was one small problem with that. My baby was breach. I asked God continually to turn the baby.

One day as the due date drew near, I pleaded with God, "Please turn this baby!"

Out of nowhere the clearest voice rang in my ears, "I am never late." I rested in that. I had heard from God.

On the morning of April 1, 1996, I woke up early thinking I had wet the bed. I realized my water had broken. I knew that babies don't turn after the water breaks. So I thought, it must have turned while I slept. I knew God told me that He was never late. The baby, however, was a month early. My midwife had warned me that if the baby didn't turn, then she couldn't do anything for me. I would have to go to the hospital. She proceeded to explain that no hospital would deliver a double footling breach (the worst kind) to a first time mom, naturally. There was a doctor out in Carthage, Tennessee (about one hour outside of Nashville) that was my midwife's umbrella doctor who would at least

admit me to her hospital without insurance. Otherwise, I might have to go to the worst, scariest hospital in town if the doctor saw fit.

We got in the car and drove like crazy to get to Carthage. The first thing they did was give me an ultrasound and confirm that my baby was still breach.

I was confused. God had said, "I am never late."

He was certainly too late to turn this baby. I've never been very fond of doctors or hospitals. I was really frightened now. The idea of a C-section was terrifying to me. As I lay in the room waiting for the doctor, the anesthesiologist arrived. Just the idea of an epidural in my spine was almost more than I could handle, but God brought me through that. The anesthesiologist left the room and my midwife arrived. She saw the look of terror on my face. "Let's pray," she said.

"Yeah, let's pray that this baby pops out before they have a chance to cut me open," I added.

We did. Scarcely had I opened my eyes after saying "amen" than the door opened. A nurse was ready to wheel me into the operating room.

"They didn't give God time to work," I thought as the wheels glided down the perfectly polished hallway.

Looking into the blinding light as I lay on that cold table, my eyes welled up with tears. I felt angry at God. Where was He? I could hear the clanking of instruments as a woman to my right held a steel tray.

I finally said to God, "You are too late, you promised me that you are never late and right now I am telling you, you are too late!"

At that very moment, the doctor said to a nurse, "Check her one more time before we start."

Ordinarily it wouldn't have mattered anyway. Even if the baby was halfway out they were still required to cut me open and pull the baby out through an incision in the stomach. The danger was that the baby would get stuck and jerk its head back, suffocating itself in the birth canal. Hospital protocol, because of the rampant lawsuit problem, stated, "No natural births for breach babies." End of story.

The nurse pulled back the sheet and at that very moment two little feet popped out. The nurse squealed with delight, "Oh! Look at this!"

The doctor took a long look at those tiny feet and then looked at me. She stood in a pause and then she grabbed my hand. Seeing the tears that were streaming down my scared face, she finally spoke, "I'm going to take this as a sign from God that this baby is supposed to be born naturally." (I found out later that this doctor wasn't even a christian!)

She was taking a huge risk in saying that. She told the nurses to wheel me into a birthing room. Nurses and doctors from all over the hospital gathered at the foot of my bed to see those cute little feet. I would have normally been mortified by the company gazing at me, but under the circumstances I didn't care one bit. I was just in awe of what my God had worked out on my behalf. (With Him changing hospital policy for me and all.) Three hours went by. I had been unable to push because I couldn't feel from that "super epidural" they had given me. Finally, feeling came back and I pushed the baby out. All of the risks of the baby pulling his head back, among other things, were all a reality. The cord was wrapped around his neck and he jerked his head back and was stuck for a while. His heart rate went down and he had to be resuscitated when he finally came out. All of that happened, but we were both fine. And GOD WAS NOT TOO LATE!

While all of that was happening, my dad had been advised to go and apply for TennCare (Tennessee's medicare program). He did all of the paperwork and, as it turned out, the state paid 100% of my medical expenses that day. What a relief that was. God is so amazing.

Holding tiny Joel Franklin in my arms was the best feeling in the world. This beautiful little life, that was dependent on me, was looking up at me like I was something special. He has been an amazing gift to be sure. Just to think, Ryan had wanted him dead. He had yelled and screamed, pushed and shoved to get me to have an abortion. Standing strong on the decision to have this baby was the best thing I ever did.





Chapter 15 As a Dog Returns to Its' Vomit, so a Fool to Her Folly

The hospital administrator came into my room holding a piece of paper. She wanted me to fill out the “mother’s copy”. On the paper I was required to give the father’s information: date of birth, social security number, etc...

I was not in the most stable emotional state after just giving birth. It really would have been an ideal thing to have asked my dad to call Ryan and get this information. I ended up being the one to do it. It was a scary phone call for me. I braced myself for it. I assumed he would be combative and I might have to get his information some other way.

When I dialed, my fingers shook. As the phone rang, I prayed. He answered and I spoke. Instead of being combative, he was nice. He was a different person. I was the combative one. I was rude and to the point on the phone, making sure he didn’t get the wrong idea. I certainly didn’t want him to think this was a social call. He gave me the information without any problems. And he begged to see Joel. I didn’t answer his request. He was unthreatening and supportive.

He even said, “You are going to make a great mom. You know Rachel, I have changed. I have been going to counseling. I am not the same guy I used to be. I would make a great dad if you would just give me another shot.”

I felt sick. Why was I listening to this creep. I got off the phone and cried deep sobs. A battle was still living in me. How did he continue to have any control over me? I knew who he was. I knew that he hadn't really changed, yet something in me wanted to believe it. Something in me was pulled by this strange force.

I couldn't sleep that night, mainly because I had a newborn, but also my head was spinning. It felt so good for him to tell me that I would make a great mom. All of the complements and apologies were like a symphony of kisses. I just kept wanting to hear it again. I replayed that conversation way too many times.

A week went by and I was back to my old jeans and feeling great. No more nausea! It felt amazing to keep my food down consistently and have energy. My lawyer called to check on me and give me some updates. I told her about the conversation with Ryan. She informed me that if he requested to see the baby I must allow, otherwise I would be in trouble when court rolled around.

I agonized over this thought. I worried that if he saw Joel he would immediately fall in love with him. I also worried about my own instability. I had one nice phone call from him, and it almost pushed me over the edge. I fought my fears for a few hours weighing out all my options. In the end I opted to call and set up a place for us to meet. In retrospect, I should have made arrangements for someone else to meet with Ryan and Joel, but I didn't.

We met at Green Hills mall in Nashville. I sat with Joel in my arms on the side of a concrete planter box. I clutched onto Joel with every ounce of emotion I had. Ryan smiled at me, like he did when we first met. My heart just wasn't ready for that. He asked if he could hold Joel. I agreed. After a minute Joel began to cry. Ryan handed him back to me. I was thankful. I was less afraid when Joel was in my arms. It was a short visit at the mall.

Back at home I cried and cried. I knew that this was a lie. I knew it could never work. I wished that it could and I mourned what was not. I also knew that I was making it worse by allowing Ryan to see us. He hadn't been willing to let go at all, and now I was dangling myself like a carrot for a crazy rabbit.

Three more times I allowed Ryan to see us. The last visit we followed him back to the house he had been staying at. I was becoming more and more swayed with each visit. Joel was 3 weeks old.

Ryan was good friends with the vice president of Capital Records. It was their house that he had been crashing at rent free for the past several months. He showed me through the beautiful home and down the stairs to the basement room where he had been living. Gold records lined the walls of the long stair case leading down to the basement. With each step down, I knew I was sinking further and further into a hole of regret. Or was I? He had been so kind lately. He really did seem like he would be a good father. He seemed genuinely interested in me. I even let him read the first 40 pages of this very story (hand written copy). He cried and apologized as he read it. He had validated my hurt and recognized his failures.

There I was in that basement. I knew I shouldn't be there. It just felt so wrong as I stood there. He asked me to sit and offered me a glass of water.

"No, that's all right I've really gotta get going," I fidgeted as I said it.

"Why, where do you need to go?" he questioned.

"I'm gonna have to get home," I said again. He grabbed my arm. A glint of hate past through his eyes. Then he smiled. "We both know you are home," he said. I sat. My heart was racing. I was in a basement with a mad man and my baby. How was I going to leave? I felt the oppression in the air. Joel started to cry. I stood and bounced him. I decided to be calm and ask Ryan questions. Just small talk until the owners of the house got home. Ryan became increasingly agitated. He started to pace and try to explain himself. With each explanation came a little outburst of anger. The real Ryan was about to be revealed. 3-2-1, there he was. He let it all hang out, every hidden

thought that he had tried so carefully to conceal in order to win me back. I decided to make a beeline for the stairs. He grabbed my shoulder and squeezed. “You need to stop running from me. I am your husband,” he commanded.

I started to cry. What was wrong with me? I had listened to him long enough. At that moment, I heard a car door slam, then another and another. The owner of the house was there with her two kids. I knew that was my ticket out. I marched boldly up the stairs. Ryan followed. He cordially introduced Joel and I. I walked calmly to the car, Ryan followed. I put Joel in his seat, buckled him up, and we drove away.

Chapter 16 Breaking Free

That was the last time I ever met with Ryan. He tried to call and we changed our number for the second time. He harassed my lawyer for the next 11 months. I moved around to different friends houses in an attempt to disappear. One time he found out where I was staying, wrote crazy things all over his car and followed me down the road when I left the house, honking and waving.

The last straw was when he found the house that my parents were having built. He must have followed one of us there. He taped fluorescent colored large paper on the back windows of the house, each with a different message on the same topic. They said I was “the Adulteress,” among other crazy things. I was so embarrassed. People were in the house doing work to complete it. They all saw those papers.

I took the papers down and drove to the police station. My detective looked them over and said, “I am going to get him this time. This guy seems just crazy enough to hurt somebody.”

Fortunately, I knew where he was staying and was able to tell the police all of the details. The cops immediately took action. They staked

that house out for three days. Ryan must have been on to them. He ran back to Texas I found out later. They never were able to catch him.

At least that forced him out of town. His only communication after that was through my lawyer. (Poor Kelley!) He faxed some of the most embarrassing things to her office. He also tried to send things to me in the mail, but I put return to sender on everything.

“Great will be your children’s peace....,” I would recite into Joel’s ear the promises in Isaiah 54. God comforted me over and over again. God really proved to me that He was my husband and He would care for me. Even though I had been so rebellious, He said, *“To me this is like the days of Noah when I swore that the waters of Noah would never again cover the earth, so now I’ve sworn not to be angry with you, never to rebuke you again.”*

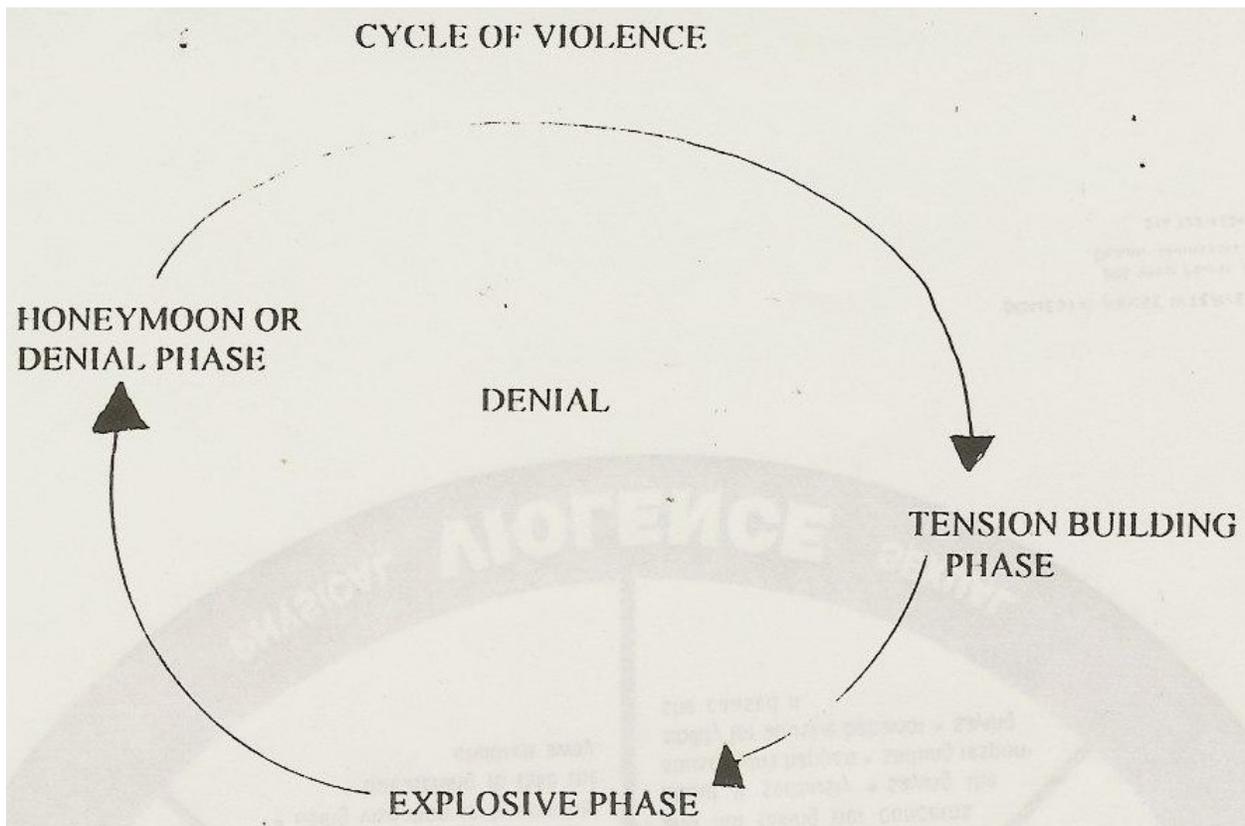
I had received my punishment and consequences and now God would keep me and never allow that to happen again. I held tight to the promises God had given me, *“ ‘...The Lord will call you back as if you were a wife deserted and distressed in spirit, a wife who married young only to be rejected,’ says your God. ‘For a brief moment I abandoned you, but with deep compassion I will bring you back. In a surge of anger I hid my face from you for a moment, but with everlasting kindness I will have compassion on you,’ says the Lord your Redeemer.”*

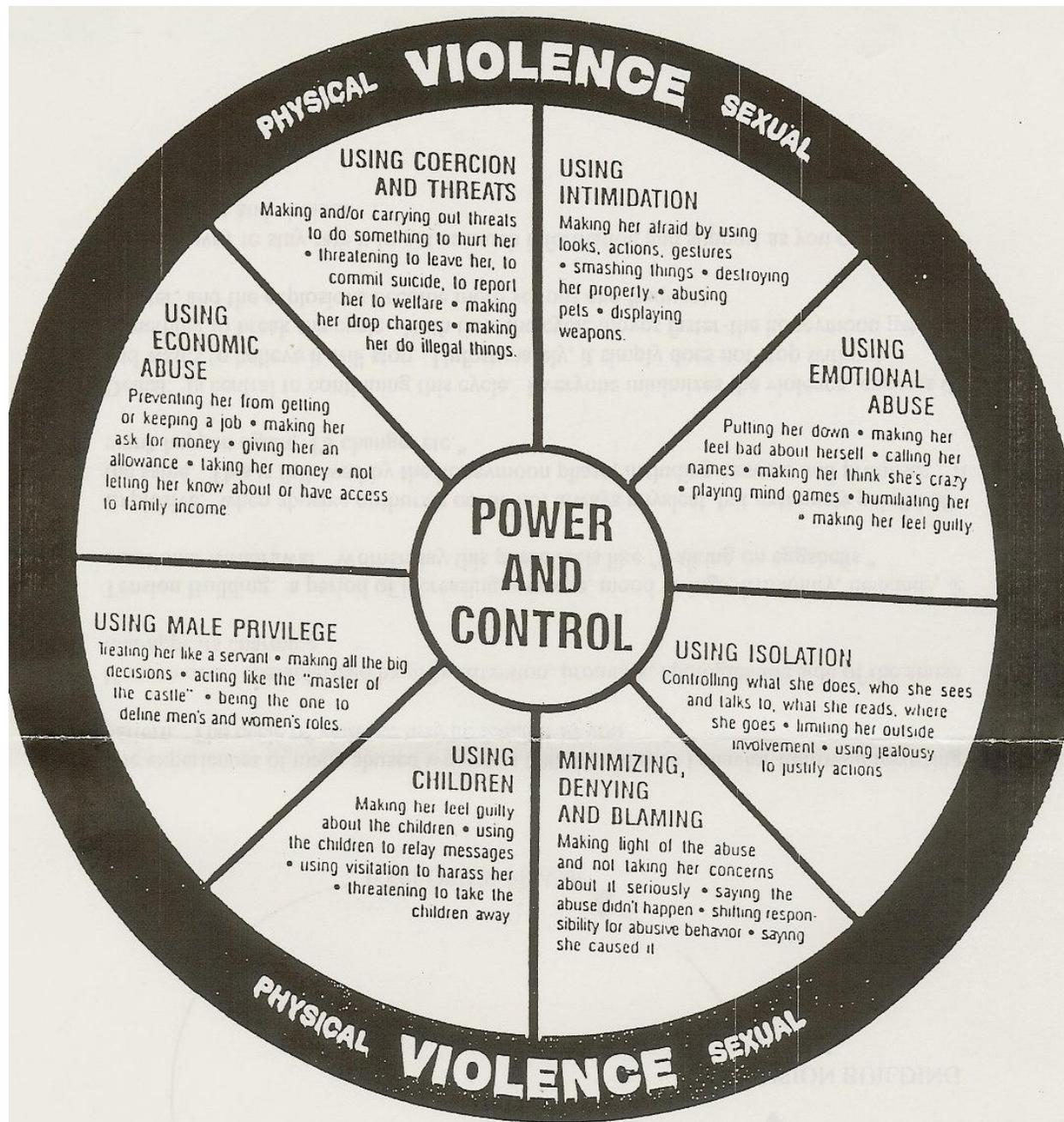
In those days I got so close to Jesus. Those words comforted me, just knowing that even though I had deviated from God’s best for me, He was holding my hand through the mine field of my own mistakes. There were a few things that God showed me that really kept me in His hands. First, I daily absorbed myself in bible c.d.’s. These cd’s were “no frills” recordings of scripture. Since I left Ryan, I had made a practice of keeping them going through the day.

Second, when the word cd’s weren’t going, there was worship music playing. This practice was like a washing to my soul. And last but not least, I journaled. Writing down the events that had happened, along with the promises God had given me was so very therapeutic. Not to mention the fact that writing them down allowed me the freedom to

put this experience behind me and forgive without the danger of forgetting truth.

Knowing the story, allowed me the luxury to look back when my emotions were lying to me. It renewed my mind when my emotions longed for the things that would bring me death. I can't count how many times I read over parts of this very story and was saved from falling back into that trap.





These were papers that the court gave me when I received the order of protection. They were eye opening reminders of how easy it is to be lured back into the cycle of abuse.

Chapter 17 New Beginning

Even though Ryan was temporarily out of the picture, my concerns were far from over. Now, more than ever, he was putting his focus and energy into getting Joel from me. I knew it was only a ploy to keep control over me. I kept holding on to the promises God had given me.

Kelley Sauls called me one day about 8 months into this ridiculously long divorce proceeding. She was very serious and concerned. I had only been able to give her a few hundred dollars at this point. My dad's company had laid him off and my mom's \$10/hr job at a car dealership was all we had.

Kelley said, "Rachel, I know you don't have a lot of money and my hourly rate has far exceeded what either of us could have anticipated. What do you think about just agreeing to a flat rate?"

I gulped, I was afraid of just how many thousands of dollars I owed at this point. It was scary to ask, but I said, "Okay, what were you thinking of?"

"How about \$500? You have already paid me \$300. If you can pay the rest over the next few months that would be great."

I was momentarily speechless. I finally blurted out, "I think I can handle that!"

Wow, what an incredible gift from God she had been and she wasn't bowing out now either. God had hooked me up! Her stint of work on the divorce finally ended, 14 months after she had agreed to take the case.

By and by time flew and I fell madly in love with this amazing little boy that God had placed squarely in my arms. I never went anywhere without him. Joel was extremely attached. He was fine hanging out with my parents as long as I was close by. If I tried to go somewhere without him, my mom would call me and let Joel do the screaming. He was a persistent little guy, and oh so cute and smart. I have to say, he loved his mother.

Even though it was mentally and physically exhausting at times, Joel was such a ministry to me. He gave me someone to hold and love.

His need for me was comforting. I needed him as much as he needed me.

I had been invited to the college and career group at New Song Christian Fellowship. It was a great little church in Cool Springs, just outside of Nashville. I was really apprehensive about showing up there. We had gone there once before and Ryan had shown up. That was not my only apprehension, though. I was really afraid of what people would think if they found out I had a baby. But God had promised me, *“Do not be afraid; you will not suffer shame. Do not fear disgrace; you will not be humiliated. You will forget the shame of your youth and remember no more the reproach of your widowhood.” Isaiah 54:4.*

Okay I thought, I need friends so bad and all I have done is hide. I’ve got to get out and allow my God the opportunity to protect me from criticism. So I went. I left Joel with my parents and hoped and prayed he wasn’t screaming himself into a tizzy. I sat down next to some other girls. We immediately started talking, and before the evening was over, I had made some great friends. They invited me to hang out with them; I was ecstatic. It was a wonderful night.

Over the course of the next year, I received more love and acceptance from that group of people than I think I ever had before. These were godly, fun and non condemning soft, spoken friends. They loved Joel like he was the mascot of the group. When I walked into a party with those people I could feel the love. They would run up to me and try to take Joel. Their hugs and welcomes were so amazing.

I had feared shame more than death. That is why I had prayed to die when I first found out I was pregnant. I really thought that when people discovered my mistake I would be publicly humiliated. Now as I walked with the Lord he gave me friends beyond my wildest imagination.

One day I was at a friend’s house. She was giving me a mattress. I was hanging out talking to her. I had Joel with me as always. There was a knock at the door. She answered and this good looking guy came walking in. I had briefly met him before, but to me he looked like he might break my heart. Anyway, this guy named Nick came over to talk.

He set his helmet and motorcycle jacket on the counter and proceeded to tell me and my friend Meg his heart.

His parent's marriage of 28 years had just ended and there was an overwhelming amount of drama in his life. "That is a sad situation," I thought to myself. "I better stay away from him. I don't need any more drama in my life, that's for sure." He left after an hour or two, but first he helped me put that mattress into my Bronco. He really was cute and sweet, but totally dangerous - stay away.

A few days later, Meg and I met for lunch. She worked downtown. We would picnic at the Parthenon and feed the ducks with Joel. We talked that day, as girls do. We were sizing up all of the available guys in the group. At this point in my life I wasn't thinking like a normal twenty year old. My only real concern was who God's best was for me and Joel. After leaving Ryan 10 months before, I was terrified of making another mistake. When Nick's name came up we both said "No way!"

I said, "Yeah, his family has too much drama." I wanted nothing to do with more problems than I already had.

Chapter 18 Too Soon For Love?

Time marched on and occasionally I would see him at church or at a group party. We never really talked much. I was kinda interested in this other guy named Mark. Mark and I had no real chemistry, but I looked at him as being a really stable person. He would have treated me like a princess. He would have come home from work at 4:30 every afternoon and mowed the yard, washed the car, and taken out the trash. We could have had a couple of kids and lived happily ever after.

The good news was, I listened to God this time and never moved on my own. I was actually terrified to move on my own. Before, if I wanted something to happen I would manipulate the situation until I got my way, but not anymore. I held still until God told me to move. It was the safest place on earth, right in the center of God's will.

One Sunday after church I was invited to go eat Chinese food with Mark. He wanted me to meet his parents. They were just in town for the weekend. A couple of other friends came, and Nick showed up also.

As fate would have it, Nick and I ended up being at one end of the table together. We made small talk and I was making wisecracks. Joel was with me as usual. My friend Sarah and I were talking about the last PFR concert ever. (The band was breaking up.) I said we should go. I knew it couldn't really happen because I had no money. It was fun to dream, though.

Nick piped up, "I'll take you to the concert."

It was funny because Sarah and I both wanted to go, but Nick only asked me. "Okay," I said, "That sounds great."

After lunch was over I left the restaurant and realized we never exchanged information. The concert was that week. I wanted to go that concert so bad. I thought quick. Nick had ridden with someone else. They would be dropping him off back at his truck. I raced to the church. There he was, getting into his truck.

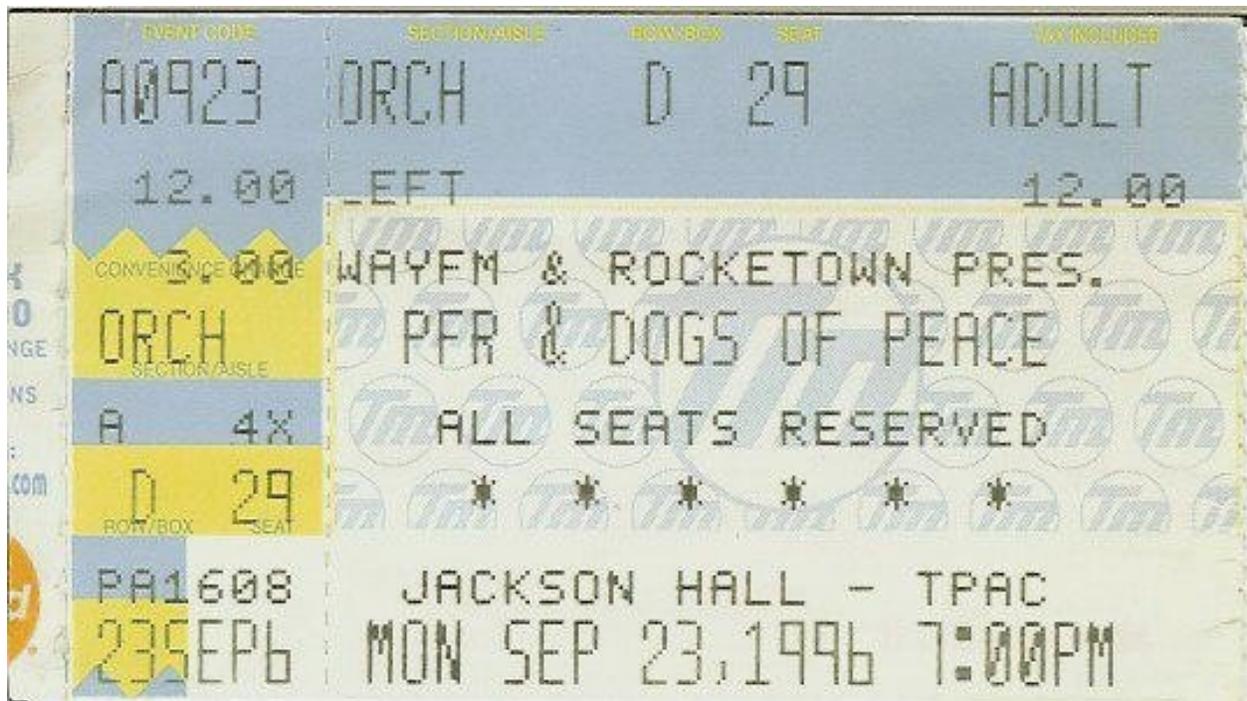
I parked the car and nonchalantly walked over to his truck and smiled. "Did you really mean what you said about the PFR concert? Will you take me?" I asked.

"For sure," he said. "Let me get your number."

We exchanged information and I went home happy. Okay I liked him, but mainly I really wanted to go to that concert. He was really cute and funny. But oooh that concert!

He picked me up the night of the concert. My parents took care of Joel. It was a lot of fun. We laughed and joked the whole night. At one point in the evening I mentioned something about Ryan. I used the words "my husband." Nick clammed up and didn't say much for a while. I still had a great night. I figured that I had probably killed my opportunity with Nick, but it was a fun night.

I found out later that Nick was horrified at the idea of my marriage still being unresolved. It had been about a year since I left him and it was still dragging out because Ryan refused to sign the papers. I really thought that everyone in that group had at least a vague understanding of what I had just come out of. I really hadn't told anyone but Meg any of the details, but everyone knew I was still trying to get a divorce, except Nick. I didn't do any explaining that night so he must have thought that I was a terrible person for going out while I was still technically married. Maybe going to a concert with a guy by myself while I was still legally bound to Ryan was wrong. I don't regret it though. It was a great night.



The ticket stub from that night.

I didn't hear from Nick for a while after that. I didn't really worry about it. I was very afraid of being out of God's plan for my life, so I rested in the Lord's hands. After a few weeks had gone by, I got a phone call from Nick. Apparently, he hadn't completely dismissed me from his memory.

The group that we both hung out with from church was meeting at this amazing house in Brentwood. The house had a full-blown movie

theater and concession stand in the basement, along with a basketball court. Nick asked if I would like to go to dinner with him and then we could go meet the group at that crazy house in Brentwood. I agreed. We took Joel with us and we drove my old Bronco, it had the car seat in it. Nick had wanted to take me somewhere nice but I wouldn't let him, so we went to Sonic. It was easier with a baby. Joel was 7 months old.

We sat at that drive-in diner and talked and talked and talked. He would tell a horror story about his parents broken marriage and then I would tell a story about what I was going through. We both found it extremely therapeutic. We did a lot of laughing. Pain is a great source for comedy.

After being out that night, I began to feel ill at the home theater. I told Nick I had to go home now. He drove and I sat in the back seat with Joel. As we neared my house I began to panic. I was going to throw up. I wasn't going to make it home in time. As gracefully as possible, I turned around and puked over the back of the seat. Nick's view of me bending over and puking must have been a terrible sight.

As I threw up, I made the joking comment, "Aren't you glad you didn't spend more on my dinner?"

He laughed. I was really sick and running a fever. Nick was determined to clean up my mess. I was horrified.

"Just go home", I pleaded "I'll take care of it later." But he insisted. He opened the back of the Bronco to find that I had neatly caught everything in an empty box that happened to be back there. He must have been relieved. That was the end of our second date.

After I got well, he would come over to visit. At first it was just once a week, pretty soon it was once every three days. Just like clockwork, every third day he would show up. Only later did I find out that he was trying to stall the relationship until my divorce had been finalized.

This was the best thing that could have happened. It was more like a courtship than being a couple. I would rock Joel and we would talk. We spent hours and hours every third day just talking. Back and forth I would rock Joel and back and forth we would exchange stories.

Because of the situation, there wasn't any physical contact. We

always called our relationship “just friends”. It didn’t take long for me to realize that Nick was an amazing guy. His heart was so humble and sweet. He tried so hard to help me anytime he saw a need.

Joel hadn’t slept much since his birth. He was extremely colicky. He had to be in constant motion, and I was the only one he wanted. I needed rest so bad.

One night Nick came over. He looked at me and said, “You are going to get some sleep.” He walked me upstairs to my room. I laid down and he took Joel. He stood next to my bed for an extremely long time rocking and bouncing Joel while I closed my eyes and slept. It was the sweetest thing anyone had ever done for me.

For our third date, Nick picked me and Joel up one night and drove us way out in the country to a gigantic bonfire that he had been invited to. Nick had put a lot of consideration into this date. He had taken great care in preparing some fantastic rib eye steaks to be grilled at the party for us. He had marinated and seasoned the steaks with a “special recipe”. This was going to be a grand meal and Nick was beaming with pride.

He placed his prize steaks on the enormous barrel grill with everyone else’s selection of hot dogs and hamburgers. As the meat was almost cooked to perfection, he decided to move the steaks to the far edge of the grill to keep them hot without burning them. He pushed them to the farthest corner of the barrel, unaware of the fact that the grill rack did not extend as far as the barrel did. To his surprise the steaks plummeted into a heap of ash and coal.

Disappointed only momentarily, Nick decided to reach with some tongs down into the ash heap and rescue his treasured steaks. When he had brought the meat out of the danger zone he surveyed the damage. It was covered in soot with little chunks of coal caked all over the exterior. Undaunted by the issue, Nick proceeded to take the leftover marinade from its container and “rinse the soot and coal from the meat”.

“See,” he said, “it’s just fine!”

He served my plate to me with a big smile. I politely took the first bite, smiling back at him. I tried to hide the obvious crunching noises coming from inside my mouth. The meat really did have a great flavor,

but the crunchy characteristic was too hard for me to ignore. Nick was having trouble ignoring it too. We both looked at each other and began to break out into a hearty laugh.

We feasted on chips and soda for the remainder of the evening. I couldn't help but think what a sweet gesture those crunchy steaks really were.

Over time, every third day became every other day. It was difficult to stall this relationship because we both enjoyed each other's company so much. Now our relationship went to another level, just "*frieeends*". Still a platonic relationship, we had both come to realize that feelings were starting to get serious.

Because Joel was so colicky, going to dinner and a movie was not an option for us very often. However, the neighborhood I lived in had a lot of land surrounding it. The property was in the process of being developed for future home sites. During the fall and winter months in Nashville it rained a lot and created a lot of mud. It especially created a mess in those areas where the land was being developed. Nick looked at this as a beautiful opportunity to 4x4. All of the fun was practically in my backyard, just waiting for us. So when Joel slept, (which wasn't very often) we would sneak away and take every trail, and jump every berm and bump we could find.

Before Nick, I had only been off-roading a few times. On each of those occasions, the off-roading experience had been reduced to a guy with a brand new, shiny pickup truck or jeep who was scared to get his baby dirty or scratched. Instead, they would gently drive their prize vehicle over a few dips and down a perfectly graded dirt road and call that 4x4ing. Yawnnnn!

Not Nick. After he was done "courting me" the alignment and suspension in his truck had to be overhauled. It sure was fun though.



This pic was taken in December of 1996

Chapter 19 Laying Love On The Alter

Nick had never dated a girl for longer than a month before. His girlfriends had never been very serious. Of course, when you “court” a girl with a child it can be a little different from the carefree dating idea. At this point, he never so much as held my hand or gave me a kiss. We just talked a lot.

One night, I had an aching feeling inside that our friendship would be over. I just had that unexplainable feeling. I told my parents that I thought that Nick was coming over to tell me that he wouldn't be part of my life anymore. My parents thought that I was crazy. They asked me what could have possibly given me that idea. I had no explanation, I just felt like it was that way. My parents absolutely loved Nick. He had become part of the family over the last few months. They assured me that he would not be coming over to tell me that.

I didn't listen to them. I went up to my room. I locked the door and got down on my knees. I began to sob. God spoke so clearly to me in that moment. He asked me, "Do you trust me?"

I said, "Yes, Lord you know I trust you. I want your will not mine. I already had things my way. I never want things my way again."

God spoke again, "Then you have to let Nick go."

I sobbed. All the lights were off in my room. It felt like I was sacrificing Isaac on the altar. I told the Lord, "Okay, I'll let him go. He is not mine but yours. I don't want anything or anyone more than you, God. I know that you are my husband, Lord."

It was a beautiful moment of surrender. I rested in the arms of my Lord, my Savior, and my Husband all at the same time. I could almost feel Him stroking my hair and wiping the tears from my cheeks. I really trusted him. I really wanted his will more than mine. I had fallen in love with Nick, but I was willing to release him to God and never see him again if that was God's will.

As it turned out, I was correct. Nick did come over that night. He was directed upstairs to my room. He politely knocked and I let him in. I kept the lights off. I didn't want him to see my face.

He had a lot of trouble getting it out, but finally he blurted, "It has been a month." It actually had been three months and he knew it. He was trying to say it had been long enough. Nick was done with me.

Instead of crying, I said, "Okay." It seemed odd to him that I didn't fight to keep him. We talked for a little while after that and then he left. I didn't know if he would take his boots off at my front door ever again. But I was okay. To be sure, I was sad, but God had warned me and I was able to pass the test. I went to bed that night with the thought that God's ways are better than mine.

The next morning was a beautiful, crisp, sunny day. It was almost Christmas. My sister Anna had been planning her wedding and I had done some footwork for her.

Back in the summer before Nick and I had ever really known each other, Mark, my other guy friend that I mentioned earlier in the story, had done a lot of driving around with me to help me with my sister's wedding preparation.

It just so happened that Mark decided on that very morning to drop by and see me. In my mind I considered the timing no coincidence. We sat and talked for a while. He really loved Joel. He was just such a nice guy.

He reminded me that I had asked him to be my date for my sister's wedding earlier in the year. I remembered and said, "Yeah, will you still come?" He agreed that it would be fun.

Then the phone rang. I answered. It was Nick. "Hey, whatcha up to?", he asked. I was confused.

"Not much," I said, "Why are you calling? Didn't you tell me last night that you weren't going to call or hang out anymore?" I asked.

"I know I said that, but I was just driving near your house and I wanted to check on you. Are you okay?" he asked.

"I'm fine, don't worry about me," I retorted.

"Actually, I was wondering if I could take you to breakfast?" he asked.

In my mind I was thinking, "Who is this guy? He breaks my heart and then wants to take me out to breakfast." I answered him "I guess so, I'm here if you want to."

A minute later he drove up. There was Mark sitting on my couch when Nick walked up to the door. Mark, sensing the awkwardness, promptly left.

Nick acted as if nothing had happened. He took me out for breakfast. We talked and laughed and nothing was ever mentioned about the night before. After that, he continued to come over and visit every other day just as he had done before. It became obvious over the course of time that God just wanted to know if I was willing to lay down my own desires. After God tested my heart, he brought Nick back to me.

Chapter 20 On The Banks Of The Brazos

Early in the morning on Christmas Eve, Nick came over. He had a motorcycle trader magazine in his hand and a big smile on his face. He proudly announced, "I am buying you a four wheeler for Christmas." I was a little taken back by the generous offer. It was an incredibly sweet gesture.

He had it all planned out. We would drive his truck all the way to Dallas for Christmas. We would buy a quad on the way and use it when we got to my friends and family there in Texas. I packed Joel in the truck and off we went.

I have always loved a good road trip. This one sticks out in my memory as the best road trip I have ever been on. Nick and I really had great dialogue. We talked most of the way there. Joel responded well to being in his car seat in the truck. The tires were extra big and it had a great hum on the freeway. It lulled him to sleep. He slept most of the way. That was great for me.

I dozed off to sleep for a while at one point and I awoke to the sweet sensation of Nick grabbing my hand to hold it. It was the most incredible feeling I in the world. I pretended to sleep, but the smile on my face must have given me away. We held hands the rest of the way there.

We bought a four wheeler and it was a fast one. It had big shocks like I requested and everything. We hauled it to some friends who lived on the Brazos River in Waco.

Leaving Joel asleep inside with our friends, we went out for a night ride. It was a clear, beautiful night and the stars were out in all their glory. There happened to be some perfect trails and jumps along the river. Nick found one particularly large jump. He jumped cautiously the first time. I held on. He made a second attempt with more gusto and found that I held on quite tenaciously.

After his third jump, he drove out onto a tiny peninsula and slowed to a stop. The moon was full and looked so beautiful shining through the trees and reflecting on the water.

As quickly as he stopped, he started again. Off we went over the same big jump. This time we got a lot of air. Then he rode to the end of

the peninsula stopping for a second time, only to take off again. We did this routine for quite some time.

Finally Nick got the nerve up. He drove to the end of the peninsula and shut the motor off. Carefully he turned around. With resolve in his eyes, he placed his hands gently on my face. Pulling me towards him, he kissed me for the first time. That was the best kiss I've ever had.



He swept me off my feet with the quad.

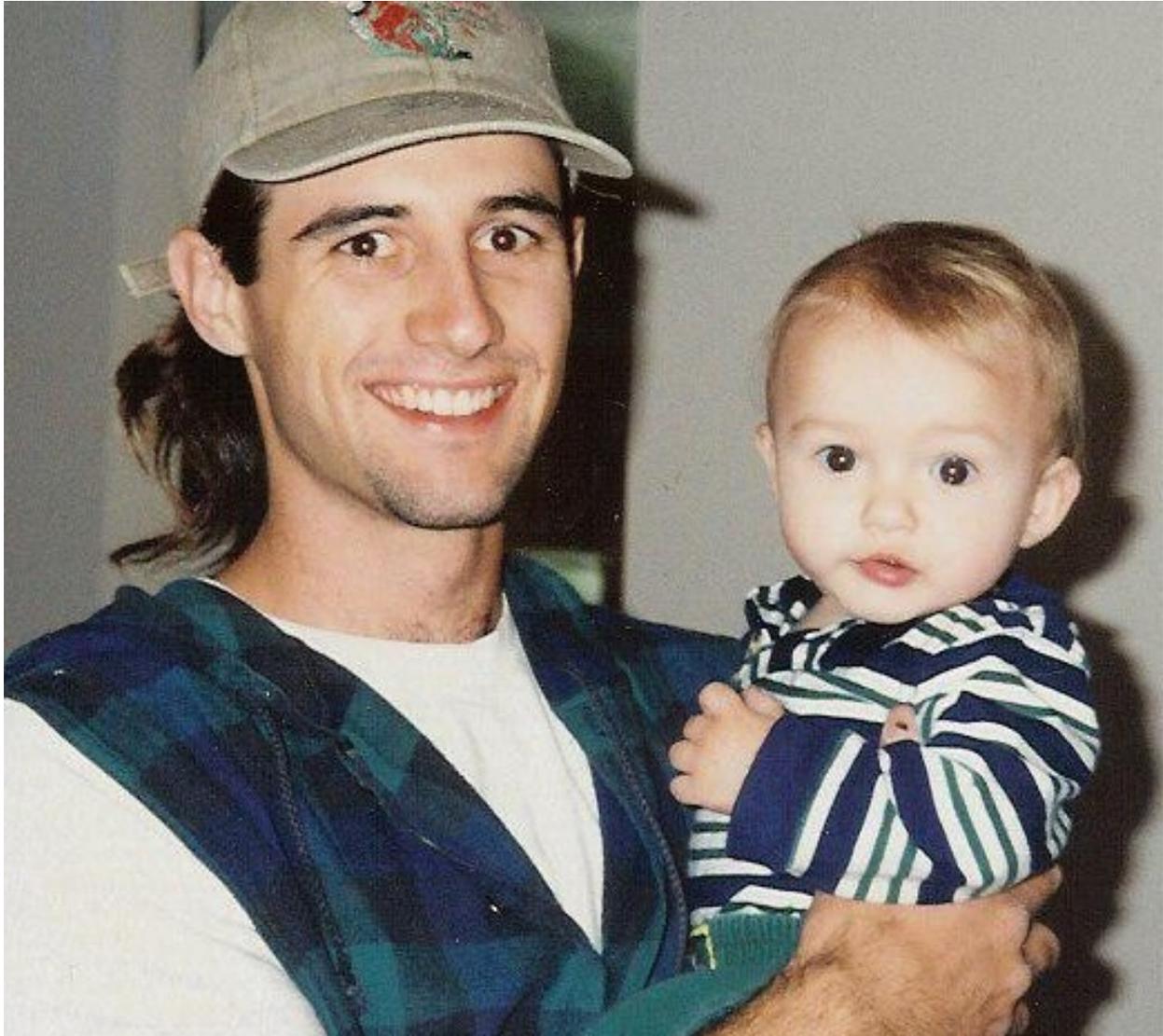
Back in Nashville, my sister's wedding was approaching. It occurred to me that I had already asked Mark to be my date for the wedding. Nick didn't seem to mind. He offered to take care of Joel for me, since I was a bride's maid in the ceremony. I gratefully accepted his generous offer.

The day of my sister's wedding Nick arrived at the church and took Joel from me. Fortunately Joel was asleep, but I knew that wouldn't last forever. It had been such a hectic day that Joel needed to be dressed for the reception afterwards. I didn't really think anyone could do that besides me or my mom because Joel was a screamer. I gave the extra clothes to Nick. As I walked away, I felt really bad for him because typically Joel would begin to scream and he wouldn't stop until I came to get him.

I went inside the church and attended to my duties as a bride's maid. Mark waited patiently for me. When the ceremony was over we walked outside to get Joel and go to the reception. To my surprise, Nick had dressed Joel perfectly. Not only that but Joel was happy and content. Nick said, "He cried at first while I was changing him but I took him for a walk and he was okay. It was fun." I was absolutely floored.

Mark and I took Joel to the reception. He was so sweet to me, but in my heart all I wanted to do was see Nick. I wanted to tell him that I loved him. My sister's wedding and reception was truly beautiful, but I had a hard time thinking about anything but Nick.

When I got home it was late and I didn't think I would see Nick that night. He ended up coming over and I had the opportunity to tell him that I loved him. It was really that day that I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that Nick was the right one. He loved Joel and he loved me. It was so obvious.



Nick holding Joel when we first started hanging out.

I don't have any crazy romantic story about how Nick proposed to me. We just kinda knew. As it turns out, Nick told me he had always known he was going to marry me, from the very first time we went to the Chinese restaurant after church. Our relationship was not the typical love story you read about, it was shaped around the circumstances of the mess that I had come out of. It was those circumstances, though, that made our relationship so strong. It was being "just friends" that allowed us to learn so much about each other in the hours and hours of rocking Joel and talking and laughing.

Nick did surprise me with my ring and take me to a beautiful dinner the night we took this pic.



Nick wanted Joel to have a daddy as soon as possible, so it was not long after that that we started planning our own wedding. We were so blessed to have my dear friend Suzanne come and help with the wedding. Suzanne spent an entire week working to make each flower arrangement, bouquet, and boutonniere absolutely perfect. We ended up with the most gorgeous flowers. She also organized the reception and prepared appetizers for the guests. Suzanne was so busy trying to get the reception ready that she ended up missing the ceremony. Her efforts did not go unnoticed.

March 15, 1997, Nick and I were married in Franklin, Tennessee. It was a small, beautiful wedding. We danced our hearts out at the

reception. I have a lot of great memories from that day. As of now, (2013) we are going on seventeen years.



My father walked me down the aisle.



(My dear friend Suzanne with us)



Joel walked down the aisle with us.



Chapter 21
Above All I Could Ask Or Think

Joel's first birthday was fifteen days after Nick and I had gotten married. I asked Nick if he would go and buy a few little things for Joel. I strictly warned Nick to only spend \$50.

I stayed home with Joel and baked the cake and decorated for a very small family party. Joel wasn't entirely aware of what a birthday really meant. I wasn't overly concerned about this being a grand celebration; after all he was only turning one.

When Nick returned, he was beaming. "Did you get some good stuff?" I inquired.

"Oh yeah, Joel is going to love what I got him!"

When everything was ready and the family had gathered to watch Joel unwrap presents, Nick began to bring the gifts in. Load after load he brought to Joel. Legos, puzzles, toy trucks, games, riding toys, and more were presented to Joel. I looked at Nick. "How much did you spend?" I asked. With a sheepish grin, he admitted he had spent a bit more than I had suggested.

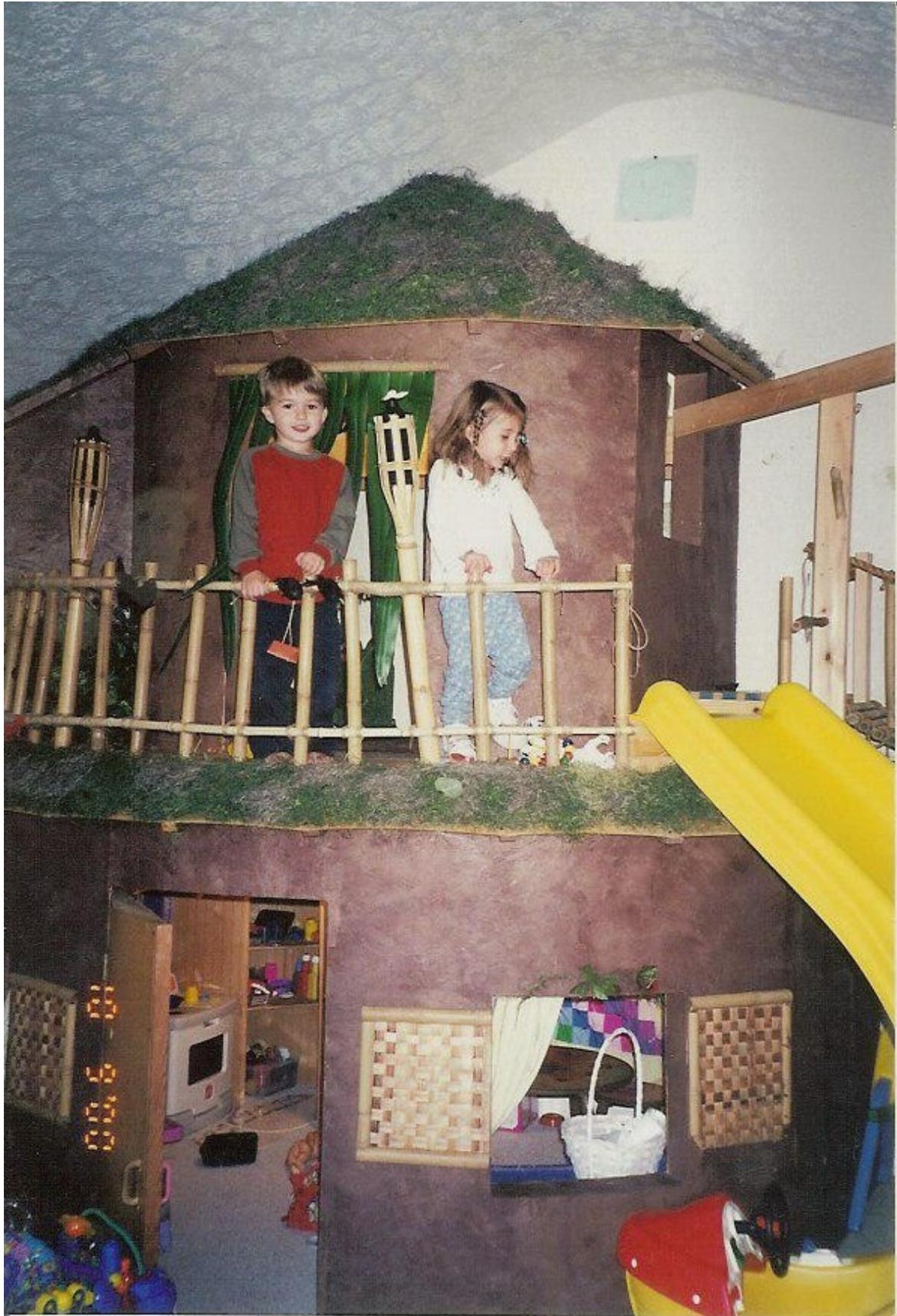
"But," he said, "I got something else for him, too."

Nick bounded out the front door for the grand finale of surprises. A minute later he returned with a power wheels four wheeler. Joel was in hog heaven and so was Nick. I didn't bother to scold Nick for overspending. It was too sweet of a gesture to say anything negative. Nick has since gone more overboard with his children and me. He is a giver at heart. He always wants to lavish the very best on us and others. In return, the Lord has always blessed our family. Nick has taught me a great deal about giving. I have in turn been a bit of balance to his over the top generosity. We make a great team.









Joel's first birthday

(above) this is a playhouse Nick built for the kids in the playroom of our house in Nashville





When we moved to San Diego Nick decided to build an outdoor playhouse and a skateboarding half pipe for our kids as well as all the kids in the neighborhood. It has turned out to be a great ministry tool for winning kids to the Lord!

We were happy to be married, but we still had a looming heaviness over us. While my divorce from Ryan had been finalized, the situation had still not been resolved. Joel was still a target, and the thought of losing him turned our stomachs. Kelley, our lawyer, was working diligently to figure out a situation that we could live with.

One thing that we found out was that the state of Tennessee will not allow a person to give away their parental rights unless another

person is already available to take the position as “the new parent”. I now see just how miraculous our short courtship and timely marriage really was. It was amazing to me how quickly God had provided Nick to step in and be Joel’s new father.

Ryan was increasingly less interested in Joel and more interested in the mounting child support bill that the state was sending to him. Kelley had advised me to sign up for a state funded child support program shortly after Joel was born. I had really hated the idea, but she was right. It worked.

The state had given me a small amount of money each month. In turn the state billed Ryan for child support. Ryan hated the idea of owing the state money. He also knew that the day was fast approaching when I would ask the court for real money from him if he ever wanted to see Joel. He also knew that there were numerous warrants out for his arrest.

One day, Nick called Ryan at our lawyers suggestion. They talked and God softened Ryan’s heart. He let go. He was very angry, but he didn’t really want Joel and I was remarried. I believe it was nothing short of a complete miracle. Ryan decided that day to sign away his parental rights so that Nick could adopt Joel. November 17, 1997, Ryan signed the papers. Shortly after that, Nick and Joel were legally father and son.

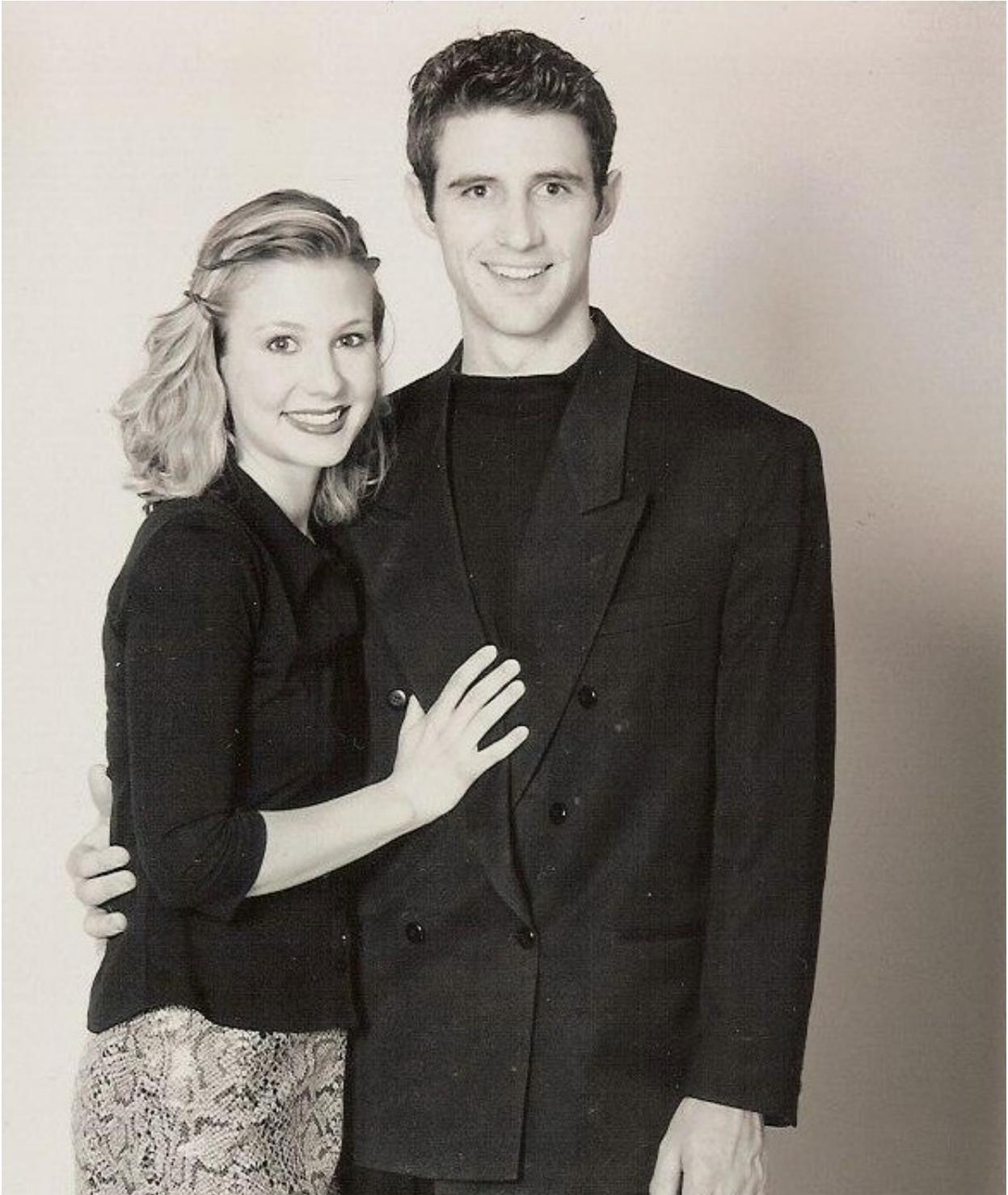




These snapshots were taken the day Joel was adopted

The scripture promises God gave me came true. *“All your sons will be taught by the Lord, and great will be your children’s peace. In righteousness you will be established: tyranny will be far from you; you will have nothing to fear. Terror will be far removed; it will not come near you.” Isaiah 54:13-14*

My son is now twelve years old. I also have two beautiful daughters. I am a blessed woman. My life is full and God has begun to fulfill my ministry dreams. I always wanted to sing. Now all I want to do is sing for Jesus. He is the love of my life. He set me free from the law of sin and death. With everything in me I want to praise Him.



And we lived happily ever after.

