

Unfaltering Flame:
A Linked Essay Collection

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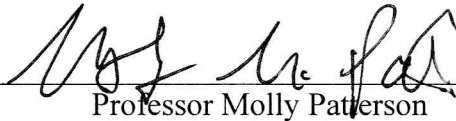
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The University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, 2021
Under the Supervision of Professor BJ Hollars

Unfaltering Flame represents Stephanie Nesja's exploration of faith from childhood into adulthood. Along the way, she encounters various forms of grief, including losing a close friend after high school and an aunt in her thirties. Additionally, Nesja struggles with finding her identity, a prospect made even more difficult following her father's divorce after 25 years of marriage. Presented as a linked essay collection, each of the four essays focus on the major themes of faith, grief, and places of importance. These themes ultimately form a collaborative bond by the end of Nesja's essays, linking together the literal and metaphorical moving throughout each physical location in relation to her journey of grieving multiple hardships in her life. Places explored include a small community in Honduras, as well as a beloved wine bar once owned by her aunt, and her father's house in Nesja's hometown of Eau Claire, Wisconsin. As she struggles to understand her evolving identity, Nesja recognizes the role of her spiritual growth from childhood into adulthood and how it has shaped the woman she has become.



Thesis Adviser (Signature)

Nov. 17, 2021

Date

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Memory Evades

Five months before he died, Dave and I met at a local coffee shop in our hometown to listen to live acoustic music and catch up. After ordering homemade hot cocoa, Dave, his friend, and I sat in one of the oversized wooden booths. I'm sure he asked me if it was alright if his friend joined, and I'm sure I said yes, but really, I wish it would have been just the two of us.

We talked about school while sipping our cocoa. Dave was still on winter break after finishing his first semester at a university an hour away, while my classes had already resumed; the local technical college offered a much shorter break. He was in the initial stages of studying to be a dentist. This always made sense to me; his teeth were impeccable. Not crooked, like mine, and almost perfectly white. To me, his smile was flawless. So perfect, in fact, that one time I burned him a mix CD with song lyrics that referenced a "secret smile."

I wonder if his parents or sisters ever listened to that CD, or if it's even still around.

He smiled (I blushed) and thanked me as he unwrapped a paperback copy of *The Catcher in the Rye*—a late Christmas gift. I knew he hadn't read it yet based on our phone conversation between classes a few months prior.

More than a year later, when I met his mother for lunch, she handed the book back to me. She finally found it safely tucked away in their Wisconsin family cabin. She said she found no markings, but I rifled through the pages anyway, hoping she missed even the smallest note in the margin. I think we shared the same disappointment that there wasn't another piece of him left to linger in our memories.

Trying to remember everything I can about him is like playing the telephone game. Each memory feels slightly out of order, as if twisted like a spinning top, starting in one place but ending in another.

Another piece of a memory to put together like a puzzle.

I've read through his obituary countless times, but the details often escape me, evaporating like a dewy mist.

Researchers describe false memories as part of the truth, or even fabricated all together.

I wonder how well he would have remembered our hours-long walk at summer's end before his first semester of college. A walk around town I've yet to retrace, some 15 years later.

In my reconstructed memory, it usually goes something like this:

Midmorning, we met downtown for coffee. The sun was shining, the air warm, and the trees still hung onto their green leaves—a perfect summer day, not quite ready to transition into fall. He wore his trademark look: a flannel over a t-shirt, jeans, a hemp necklace, green Chuck Taylors, and perhaps even his Papa Murphy's hat or a bandana covering his thick dark hair.

We chatted about his excitement to begin college, and about the end of my first year at the tech. He was smiling and laughing and walking with a bounce in his step. He told me about his annual family trip to Canada with his dad and grandfather, time spent fishing and canoeing. I couldn't help but think how handsome he was as he mentioned one of his beloved dogs, Tucker. I mentioned my new job at Sam's Club, and that his

parents frequently came through my checkout lane. We had long finished our coffee, but our walk continued. He smelled faintly of hemp and coffee as the sun shined down on us, illuminating his face. Regardless of my having a boyfriend, I blushed every time he looked into my eyes.

I should have breathed him in more, committing his scent to memory.

I admitted to him that I missed working together at Papa Murphy's, though, I didn't confess how I'd sometimes watch him make pizzas. His long sturdy fingers moving quickly, tossing 80 slices of pepperoni over the mozzarella, just like the recipe stated. His lips slightly twitched as he counted each slice. His lips, a deep pink, parted slightly as he smiled back at me.

I wish I would have asked him about the sticky notes we used to leave on each other's cars between shifts. Little flirtatious notes of our affection. Little pieces of him I've hung onto after all these years. Did he keep them, too?

Another reconstructed memory: the night we went to a movie at the local budget theater. I saved the ticket to help me remember, though the black ink has faded and is nearly illegible. I had recently been dumped. Still heartbroken, I didn't want to rush into a new relationship, even though Dave and I were already friends. I tried not to lead him on, but it was so obvious we were completely in-like with each other. We rested our arms on the armrest between our seats. Our hands, they barely touched, as we lightly brushed our fingers against each other. Focusing on the movie grew difficult; I could only think about how badly I wanted him to kiss me.

But there we sat, barely holding hands.

I imagine he never would have expected to die so young. Why would anyone expect that? He was always so vibrant, energetic, charismatic. Everyone who knew him would agree. Everyone who knew him better than I did probably remembers him better, unless their false memories invade their true version of him, too. If I think about it, I only knew him for a fraction of his life, but he was still one of my favorite people. I should have told him that.

He was gone, in just three words.

Steph. Dave's dead.

I heard the words, but I couldn't understand their meaning. My mind became a vortex, swirling and jumbling my thoughts. I couldn't understand why God would take him from this world at 19. He was going to be a dentist. But not now. What about his family and friends he never meant to leave behind? I felt my faith faltering. How could this be?

He will always be my "what if." What if God would have let him live, and I hadn't started dating someone else before he left for college—would we have ended up together? What if he was still alive—would we have gotten married like a dream I once had?

On May 28, 2007, David slept in a cabin in Tofte, Minnesota, where he worked as a summer camp counselor between his freshman and sophomore years of college. An outdoorsy gig with camping, canoeing, fishing, and hiking. A perfect fit for him.

For the longest time, I thought the owner of the place checked the carbon monoxide detector in his cabin a few days before his arrival. But I recently found out it

wasn't the owner; it was Dave. Not that it matters now because he's still gone. He even changed the batteries before testing the detector. He did everything he was supposed to, following the rules of safety. But the detector, old and outdated, malfunctioned. He used a propane space heater to heat the cabin on a chilly spring night, but the heater was old, too. The next morning, his alarm clock was chirping, but he never woke up.

Did he have any dreams that night?

Details of him are fortified into my mind's eye. Like his contagious happiness, even when he came into work. It wasn't a secret that I hated working at Papa Murphy's but working with him made it tolerable. I can still hear his voice greeting me, bright and cheery. I can still hear his laugh, sure and strong.

Sure and strong, like what I used to think about my faith. After he died, I scolded God for taking him away from everyone. I struggled to understand how the all-powerful and all-knowing master of the universe could be so deceitful. How is it that He allows people to die so young? How are His plans supposed to fit into our lives—my life—if He keeps taking people away?

When someone dies unexpectedly, especially if they're young, it's best to have an open casket. Because everyone processes death differently, the ability to see the body offers a form of acceptance or closure, and sometimes, it offers a form of grievance. Or so the experts say.

His eyes were closed, emphasizing his long, dark eyelashes, while hiding his coffee brown irises from the world. Hidden for the rest of eternity. How easy it seemed for him to just open his eyes. How easy it seemed for him to just wake up, as if playing

pretend. What I would have given to see those lips—the lips I never kissed—turn up into a smile once more. I turned away, as a tear silently fell from my cheek.

As I hugged his family, his younger sister said she knew who I was after I mentioned I worked with her brother.

He talked about you, she said.

Part of me wonders how the grief can still feel so intense. Perhaps it's the inability to remember everything about him or the details of every memory. But more than likely, I think, it's the guilt I've carried for leading him on and for feeling like, even after all these years, I broke his heart. A feeling of conviction I've yet to learn to forgive myself.

What, I still wonder, did he say?

Several months, or perhaps even nearly a year after his death, his parents asked me to dog sit. Though I picked him up at home once when we went to the mall, I had never stepped foot inside his house. An unfamiliar place, yet familiar. I climbed the stairs and followed the hall into his bedroom. I sat on the perfectly made twin bed, imagining him and his dog Tucker asleep under the handmade quilt. Posters still clung to the walls. A pile of hemp necklaces and bracelets sat atop his dresser. His room must have looked the same, untouched, with memories preserved.

CDs and papers scattered the desktop around the family computer with a few books left unattended. His mother apologized, saying his room was a bit messy. "He would have hated that." But I didn't mind. Being in his room felt like he was still around, in a way.

I looked through his collection of books, neatly nestled on the bookshelf. I hoped to find *The Catcher in the Rye* tucked between Ernest Hemingway or Louis L'Amour—authors I only knew he liked because they were listed on his Facebook page—but at that time, it was missing from his collection.

Comprehending the grief a parent must feel seems a nearly impossible feat. The inability to remove a child's personal items from a bedroom, once full of life. Once full of him. An empty bed, the shell of his presence. The crippling torment of knowing he'd never walk through the front door again. His daily greeting, now an echo against the walls of his childhood home.

His parents introduced David's Day—his day—a few years after he passed. On the anniversary of his death, we celebrate that he lived. His parents provided bandanas to his family and friends. Each bandana has images printed on it—items that represent him: music notes, pine trees, a canoe, and their family flower, the trillium. We bring the bandanas with us when we travel, do things outdoors, or even celebrate the smallest moments in life. It's like he's here with us, in way.

I've carried him with me. To the backyard, to the cabin. On hikes, on road trips. Up mountains, down rivers. The red bandana tied tightly around my backpack, ankle, wrist, or worn like a headband. On his birthday, the bandana rests on the table, next to a drink. Cheers. The bandana waves in the wind. Hello, friend. An ode to you.

Had he lived, would he still be wearing bandanas, flannels, and hemp necklaces?

I used to carry one of his hemp necklaces with me. He had a collection of them. Come pick one out, his parents said. I wore it around my wrist until someone picked it up

off the floor at work, asking if it belonged to me. I hadn't even realized it fell off. I began carrying it in my pocket, but I feared I might lose another piece of him. His necklace with the round beige bead found a place in my home, tucked safely away on my bookcase where I can see it every day. But it no longer smells like hemp. It no longer smells like him.

Even after 14 years, the grief is still present and real. Those three words still linger.

“Steph. Dave’s dead.”

I received the text from an old co-worker from Papa Murphy’s while watching TV with my boyfriend. She asked if I had heard the news. No, I replied. My cell phone—one of those clunky blue Nokia phones preprogrammed with the snake game—immediately began to ring.

False memories often creep in, blurring the real memory, but those words will never escape me; the emotion, still attached to the memory, makes it impossible to forget.

The questions remain present into my thirties and still linger as I continue my attempt to understand why he’s gone. Although I’m still uncertain why God didn’t wake him, I’m no longer angry. As humans, I’ve learned, we’re simply incapable of understanding God’s reasons.

Three weeks after Dave’s death, while ringing up customers at Sam’s Club, a mom and her four-year-old son came through my checkout lane. I greeted them, forcing a

smile. I considered calling in, but I thought it best to have the distraction from the grief and the lingering questions surrounding my relationship with God.

As we neared the end of the transaction, I watched the boy sitting quietly in the front of the cart, legs dangling. He watched me, too, head tilted, eyes slightly narrow. He surprised me when he asked a question.

“Can I give you a hug?” The boy smiled.

I looked to his mom for approval. She nodded. I reached toward this child, a stranger, and he wrapped his arms around my neck. Our heads touched briefly as I returned the hug. I thanked him for a hug I desperately needed.

In that moment, God was still there.

Unfaltering Flame

“That’s where they *live*?” I asked my youth pastor, Bart.

As a 13-year-old about to enter eighth grade, I spent a few days in Monterrey, Mexico with my church youth group in the summer of 2000. While inviting families to la iglesia azul—the blue church—we passed through a small village. Pieces of sheet metal stacked together imitated the card houses I made when I was a kid. These pieces had a purpose, however. They were somebody’s home. As a young teenager, I didn’t yet understand privilege, rendering the idea of living in a tin shack incomprehensible.

Suddenly, a young girl grasped my hand. “Beba,” she said with a smile, as she led me to the communal water spigot. My limited Spanish made it difficult to tell her I couldn’t drink the water because it might make me sick. So, I simply returned the smile, shook my head, and retreated to my group.

“It’s a different world here, isn’t it?” Pastor Bart said, smiling at my interaction with the child. “It teaches us to be thankful for what we have.”

Not long after returning from Mexico, my dad and stepmom, Theresa, decided it was time for a change. We began attending a new church during my freshman year of high school.

“Why do we have to switch churches?” I asked. “We’ve been going there since I was in, like, second grade. And I have so many friends there.” Dad and Theresa also met at that same church, marrying three months later.

As Theresa cooked dinner, she mentioned she and my dad felt a conviction from God. “Your dad and I just feel like it’s time to move to a smaller church. It seems like

their priorities aren't in order there anymore," she said, handing me a stack of plates to set the table.

The new church was small. Most of its members were over 50, with only a few kids mine and my stepbrother, Luke's age. Somehow, though, there were just enough teenagers to constitute holding a youth group on Wednesday evenings. Luke and I were joined by our best friends, Brian and Nikki, who also happened to be siblings.

At the time, I was more concerned about boys than I was about my relationship with God, even though I recited a daily prayer, which mainly consisted of my asking God to forgive me of my sins. My attention, though, was immediately returned to my newest crush. I nudged Nikki, gesturing toward the boy with the light brown hair wearing a Linkin Park t-shirt.

"He's cute," I said.

Nikki nodded. "His name's Ben."

Each week I returned to youth group excited to see Ben, even if he tried to sway me into not liking him because he didn't want a girlfriend at the time. Regardless, I still often took advantage of the idea of prayer by asking for something I desired. I was begging God to change His plans for what I wanted: Ben to like me in return.

Regardless of our small youth group, Luke, Nikki, Brian, and I attended a youth convention in Iowa with other teenagers from our church, along with Theresa as one of the chaperones. Unfortunately, Ben didn't join, but in hindsight, I think God had bigger plans for me that weekend.

One of the leaders at the convention invited us to come forward to either accept Christ for the first time or renew our faith in Him. I already knew Jesus was in my heart, but I still felt compelled to go forward. Though I had been attending church since I was a child, I felt like I had gone slightly astray. My focus in church was never truly on the sermon; rather, Nikki and I would pass notes to each other in the pews, setting our plans for the rest of the day, or gossiping about our latest crush. If Nikki wasn't there, I'd fight falling asleep, only to be awakened by Theresa. Though I didn't fully understand why I felt the nudge to go forward, I recognized my focus had been blurred and I wanted God to know He was still important to me.

“Wanna come with?” I asked Nikki.

“Sure, let's go.”

We joined a hundred other teens near the stage in the convention room while the pastor prayed over us. He prayed for our hearts to open to receive Jesus and His blessings. He prayed for us to feel God's presence in the form of the Holy Spirit. And suddenly, I did. I felt His presence fully as an inexplicable transformation washed over me. Standing next to Nikki, I started to cry. I looked at Nikki and she, too, was crying. As soon as we made eye contact, a fit of laughter escaped our mouths. We tried to stop, but the laughter only intensified. Tens of minutes passed, and our laughter still felt beyond our control.

“What's going on?” Nikki asked. “Why can't we stop laughing?”

“And crying!” I said. “I don't know, but this is so weird.”

Upon returning to our hotel room, Theresa gave us a puzzled look. “What's so funny?”

“We don’t know! We just can’t stop laughing!” Nikki wailed.

I sat on the bed, wiping tears from my eyes. “After the pastor prayed for us, we started crying and laughing, and now we can’t stop.”

“That,” Theresa said, “is the Holy Spirit.”

Over the next few years, the appeal of attending church began to diminish. I struggled with my commitment, especially my senior year of high school. I turned 18 in the middle of the school year and thought I could set rules for myself, such as skipping church on Sundays. As much as I protested, my dad and stepmom wouldn’t give in and continued to enforce their rule: if I lived in their house, I had to go to church.

After graduating, I drifted even further from God, allowing my faith to be uprooted, and pulled like a weed. I moved out and refrained from attending church, especially after having felt forced into it for the last year.

I soon began the criminal justice program at the local technical college in my hometown. I’d wanted to be an officer since I was a child. Thinking about helping people filled my heart with joy, but as I grew older, I started realizing that there was more to being a police officer than simply helping others.

As my first year of the program neared the end, I witnessed the aftermath of an accident while driving home from class. An officer directed traffic while a tow truck was readying to tow one of two cars. I barely glanced over my shoulder as I passed the scene. The car’s front end was smashed. I began to weep. *Is this really what I want to do?* I thought, as sirens faded in the distance.

Not long after, I learned that my close friend, Dave, had passed away from carbon monoxide poisoning. After he died, Dave's mom and I frequently met for coffee or lunch. During one of those meetings, I'd mentioned struggling with my career choice.

"You don't want to be the officer knocking on someone's door, telling them their son or daughter has died," she said.

She was right. As much as I yearned to help others, there had to be a better option for me.

I spent the next year completing general education courses, intending to transfer to my hometown college, the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire. I enrolled in the English education program with a Spanish minor. This time, I felt teaching would allow me to answer my desire of touching the lives of those around me.

As I neared the end of the program, I assisted a teacher in her middle school classroom. At the end of the five-week requirement, some of the students gave me notes, expressing their gratitude for my time or stating they enjoyed having me as their teacher. My heart felt full, but regardless, I still sensed a seed of doubt growing inside me. Was I really meant to be a teacher?

Later that semester, I prepared for the PRAXIS II exam—a requirement to move onto the professional semester of student teaching—which covered the fundamentals of teaching through multiple choice and essay format. I studied for hours, completing multiple practice tests, but still, I choked. After two failed attempts, I once again began questioning my potential career. *I'm such a failure. Why can't I pass this stupid test?* I thought.

I decided to talk to the education director, hoping for advice. She offered for me to graduate with my bachelor's degree—without the teaching certificate—hoping it would reduce the pressure and self-doubt.

When I returned to take the test for a third time, I initially felt more confident, but the feeling quickly waned. I tried to ignore the clock and focus on the questions, but my mind reeled. *God, help me pass, I prayed. But what if I don't pass this time? What happens next?*

I began marking answers, filling in random bubbles without reading the remaining questions. I had grown so frustrated with the process. I still wanted to prove to myself I could pass the test, but I also felt like it no longer mattered.

My hands were sweating as I opened the envelope with my test score. The closer I came to becoming a teacher, the more daunting the reality felt. The pressures of teaching had changed significantly since my primary and secondary education experiences. It seemed the blame shifted from holding the child accountable to blaming the teacher for the child's failed efforts. *Is this really what I want to deal with for next 40 years? Would I be able to handle the pressure from parents?* I retrieved the enclosed letter and much to my surprise, I passed. I said a prayer of thanks and received congratulatory messages from family and friends, but even with the positivity pouring my way, I still felt lost.

My faith remained a mere seedling as the self-doubt continued to grow. I felt guilty, like I had abandoned God. Even with easy access to a church on the university campus, I still took a hiatus for close to seven years, aside from occasional visits with my dad and stepmom during some holidays. I still said the occasional habitual prayer, but I

wasn't willing to put time into my relationship with Him. Rather than being passionate about my relationship with God, my heart was merely lukewarm.

I spent the next few years moving from job to job, never feeling satisfied with each new experience. After questioning my life's purpose, I began praying again, asking God to open my eyes to Him and lead me in the right direction.

A few days later, on a spring afternoon in May, as I drove to my house from my mom's and stepdad's, I was suddenly overcome with an urge to turn the radio off. In the silence, I felt overwhelmed, like a voice was speaking to me.

I felt calm and at peace, and as I tuned the radio from classic rock to the local Christian station, I heard a song that rooted what I knew to be God's plan. Phil Wickham sang, "Can you hear it? The gentle voice of the Spirit. There's no reason to fear it. He's calling you to life." Tears formed in my eyes and goosebumps flecked my arms. I immediately set for my father's house, rather than returning home. When I arrived, my dad and stepmom were inside.

"I need to talk to you," I said. My voice was caught in my throat as I attempted to hold back tears. They looked concerned. "It's good news, even though I'm crying."

Dad reached out for a hug.

"I was just driving, and I felt like God spoke to me," I said, as Theresa handed me a tissue. "I feel like I'm being told to go on another mission trip, like when I went to Mexico." Even though I followed my sister's footsteps, I loved spreading the hope of God to the community in Monterrey.

"That's great!" Dad and Theresa said.

“I’m not sure when or where, but I really feel like this is what I’m supposed to do,” I said.

After not seeing each other for a few years, Ben and I reconnected at my cousin’s wedding. We were 23, though we still flirted like we were in youth group. He even eventually ventured into my aunt’s wine bar to see me while I was working. This time, I didn’t want a boyfriend; I wanted to focus on my relationship with God. I knew I’d be leaving to serve a community in need, though I was still unsure of the details. The more time Ben and I spent together, however, the closer we were drawn together.

As my feelings for Ben grew, I also began feeling a strong desire to return to church. My friend, Jen, invited me to join her at a local church. After six months of attending, Pastor Paul spoke of God’s works and the sacrifice of giving time through mission or volunteer work. He proceeded to draw attention to various organizations and upcoming trips, inviting us to visit the booths at the end of the sermon.

I moved from table to table, pondering the opportunities. As I wandered, I paused at a table where a husband and wife smiled in return. They informed me of Nuestros Pequeños Hermanos (NPH), which translates to “our little brothers and sisters.” Founded in Mexico in 1954, this catholic organization is spread across Latin America and the Caribbean. Each location houses and educates children who are orphaned or abandoned, as well as children whose relatives are unable to care for them due to illness or a lack of resources.

Dana and Nino said they had been traveling to NPH’s el Rancho Santa Fe in Honduras for years. With my background in Spanish, this seemed like the right fit.

Leading up to the trip, our group of 25 met monthly to ask questions, pray for one another, and learn about the Ranch.

One meeting, Dana pulled me aside. “It’s been on my heart to talk to you.”

I listened intently, unsure what she meant.

Dana told me about her past 13-month long volunteer commitment. “You’ve been thinking about a longer trip, too, haven’t you?”

I was taken aback. The only people I had mentioned this to was Ben, my parents, and my closest friends.

Dana invited me to her house to discuss her experience and allow me to ask questions. Once again, my mind raced. The idea of leaving home for over a year was both intriguing and frightening. Not to mention, Ben and I had now been dating for a year and he had just proposed. I disliked the idea of being away from him so soon after the proposal, even though he was supportive of my going. I decided to make a final decision after spending a week at the Ranch, even though I felt like I knew the answer.

On the sixty-minute bus ride from the Tegucigalpa airport to el Rancho Santa Fe, I was transported back to my trip to Mexico. Heaps of trash lined the streets. The neglected buildings and roads were tarnished with dust and time. Motorcyclists zigzagged between cars, cutting off motorists amid their dance with death.

The smell of rancid trash slowly transitioned to fresh mountain air as we neared the Ranch. The self-sufficient community was surrounded by barbed wire and guarded by men with semi-automatic assault rifles. Crime rates, especially gang violence, in Honduras were high, making it a dangerous country. But the Ranch’s duty was to keep its community members safe.

In addition to housing 300 children, the Ranch sheltered elderly individuals, local staff members and caretakers, and year-long international volunteers. Taught by local teachers and long-term volunteers, the Ranch offered training in various trades, such as shoemaking, hairdressing, tailoring, welding, and electrical and carpentry skills. The kids valued these trades and even made their own shoes and school uniforms. Prioritizing education taught the children to be self-sufficient after graduation.

Long-term and short-term volunteer houses existed at the Ranch. Our group stayed in the short-term house—a rectangular construction with a courtyard in the middle, where the sky was visible, and songbirds perched on trees feet from us, and hammocks hung from support beams. Bedrooms, a kitchen, and a lounge framed the courtyard. Married couples were offered individual rooms with private bathrooms. I stayed in a dorm style room with other women from the group. We shared a bathroom with a few toilets and shower stalls.

Although we arrived in the middle of the wet season in July, it was relatively dry, and rain was sparse during our weeklong visit. We were asked to pack long shorts or pants, as it wasn't proper to wear shorts that didn't pass the fingertip to hemline rule. After a long day of traveling and touring the Ranch in the heat and dust, I was ready for a warm shower.

I had been warned the water was cold, but I was hot and sweaty. The cold, murky water offered a relief from the heat, only to immediately chill my skin after the initial shock. Goosebumps spotted exposed skin. I soaped up and rinsed quickly, thankful for the hot air outside of the shower stall.

The next day, we interacted with the kids during their free time after school. Their large dormitory style houses separated the children by age groups and gender. Unlike the US, their schooling was year-round, with short breaks throughout the year. School days were structured with a strict schedule: wake up, breakfast, chores, school, lunch, resume classes, homework, chores, free time, dinner, bedtime.

While the kids studied in their classes, the 25 individuals from our group split up responsibilities to help around the Ranch. We worked in the garden, tortilla hut, kitchen, or farm. With their own clinic and surgery center, the Ranch had the ability to be a self-sufficient community. Although some supplies, such as rice and kidney beans, were purchased, the Ranch's cattle, pigs, and other animals provided meat, milk, and cheese, while the farm fields provided fresh produce, such as green beans, tomatoes, and corn.

I worked in the garden with others from our group, picking green beans by hand, hunched over for hours. By the end of the morning, my legs—bare from the knees down—were covered in bug bites. The no-see-ums were relentless.

At the end of the school day, we were again invited to spend time with the children during their free time, and we often ate dinner together in their homes. I opted to get to know the adolescent girls, since I still felt a connection to the age group, regardless of my continued lacking interest in teaching. One of the staff members who oversaw the girls' home noticed me scratching my legs. She winced.

“You should wear pants,” she said.

“But it's so hot!”

After only a couple of days, being at the Ranch felt like a battle between the bug bites—now swollen and painful—the cold, murky showers, and the raging heat. I began

showering during the hottest part of the day, hoping the cold water would feel less frigid. Plus, it gave the solar panels the opportunity to warm the water, but only slightly. No matter what I did, as soon as I stepped outside, the dust and heat settled across my skin, rendering the shower useless. My hair began feeling like straw and I felt like I always stunk.

Culture shock quickly took hold. Even my trip to Mexico hadn't felt this discouraging. I silently cried myself to sleep wishing I was home. *I can't do this. God, is this really what you want for me?* The thought of living there for 13 months seemed unfathomable.

As the days continued, I kept praying, in hopes of changing my perspective of the situation. In the evenings, I started talking more with a few of the girls I had been visiting with that week. I began learning about one girl's story, who for reasons of privacy, I'll call Maria. Maria and her three siblings—one older and two younger—had already lived at the Ranch for a few years. Their mother was affiliated with a gang and suffered from drug addiction. They didn't know their father, and their grandmother, once their caretaker, became too ill to continue as their guardian.

I brought my camera with each night we visited the kids. They loved seeing themselves in photos, especially Maria and her friends. They posed, making silly faces, then immediately asked to see the photos.

Maria and I spent as much time together as possible. I learned she desired to be a lawyer or a photographer. She introduced me to her siblings, and I snapped a few photos. As Maria and I connected, I felt my heart slowly soften to the circumstances around me.

Though I was still rusty, having not practiced much since college, my Spanish skills slowly returned. Instead of stumbling over my words, however, I wrote Maria a letter. On our last night together, I gave Maria photos of me and my family, in addition to the letter. I asked Maria if Ben and I could be her godparents.

Being a godparent meant sponsoring a child at NPH. Sponsorship included a monthly donation to the organization to help cover daily expenses for the children. Although it varies annually, in 2020, approximately 78% of donations were utilized directly for the children and program services. The remaining 22% was split between fundraising and management. In addition to sponsorship, as her godparents, we could write letters to Maria, send her small gifts, and visit in the future.

Maria hugged me. “Sí,” she said, with a smile.

She asked me to wait while she went to her room. She returned, handing me a necklace engraved with a prayer and an image of the Virgin Mary. I held it to my heart, reaching for another hug.

As I drifted to sleep in the volunteer house for the last time, I reflected on the last week. I realized I had been focusing too much on amenities and what I didn't have—hot showers, the privacy of my own bathroom, a washing machine to launder my dirty, sweaty clothes. It suddenly seemed so petty. How could I even think this way when these children had circumstances much worse than I had?

The kids at the Ranch were always smiling, always laughing. Their belongings consisted of items tucked inside of their lockers: a few changes of clothing, school supplies, letters and photos from their godparents. Not one child walked around with a cell phone or laptop unless they were fortunate enough to have a godparent to gift these

luxury items. Like the families I'd met in Mexico when I was 13, they had so little, yet, they had so much. The seed of faith planted inside me was finally growing as I learned to appreciate the vast differences between their world and mine. *Maybe I could make a difference here*, I thought as I drifted to sleep.

Ben and I married in 2015—two years after my trip to Honduras. We had become regular attendees of our church, occasionally missing services when life became busy. The Ranch and Maria had been lingering on the back of my mind for months, especially when I saw Dana and Nino at church, but I still had a difficult time comprehending the lengthy commitment. I continued to pray about the possibility of going. Whenever I brought it up, Ben urged me to apply. I knew what the answer was, but I still refused to accept it.

Over the next two years, Ben and I had multiple conversations about the long-term volunteer experience. Maria and I had been writing letters to one another for four years. I missed her, and I knew she'd appreciate seeing me again. I often looked at photos of the moments I captured with her and others at the Ranch.

Ben motioned to the letter on the coffee table. "Did you write Maria back yet?"

"Not yet. I'll do it later," I said, as I looked longingly at my favorite photo of Maria and me.

I finally admitted to myself that I had been hushing God's voice. It became easier to hear on days when I longed for more than the dead-end customer service positions I worked. I returned home exhausted as I struggled with a constant negative work

atmosphere. As I continued seeking counsel from Ben and my parents, God's voice was becoming more prominent and difficult to ignore.

I finally surrendered and listened to what God had been telling me to do for four years: I filled out the long-term volunteer application. Instead of volunteering to teach English, I applied for the communications position, hoping for a chance to write and take photographs for NPH's website. I grew excited about the opportunity, even if it wasn't a paid position.

A month passed before I finally received an answer from NPH. For the previous four years, I had been expecting to hear *yes*, but when I opened the email, I was shocked. My application was rejected.

I began questioning God's motives for putting this idea in my head. As a catholic organization, I learned, NPH required married couples to serve together because of the emotional distress the lengthy separation caused.

What if I'd have listened to God two years ago before we got married? Why didn't I listen? Ben and I talked about both of us going, but it just wasn't feasible between our finances, home, and two dogs. My heart was crushed. I had grown excited and looked forward to this experience, but most of all, following through with God's plan, and seeing Maria for a year. What lesson was He trying to teach me?

I spent months pondering why God prioritized my applying for the trip. Then I remembered the Bible speaks of faith like a mustard seed. Matthew 13:32 says, "Though it is the smallest of all seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree." God had been speaking to me and I finally mustered the courage to

follow His plan. After I did, I put my full faith in Him. The application, it seemed, was a test of my faith. I felt the seed within my heart growing into a small plant, budding with anticipation for what would come next.

I scrolled through Facebook one day, coming across an event at a local brewery. El Rancho Santa Fe's assistant director, Steve, was speaking at an event hosted by NPH. I had long accepted I wasn't going to Honduras for the long-term trip, but I couldn't pass up the opportunity to learn about the current happenings at the Ranch, especially since Maria was continually on my heart. Ben and I attended the event, happy to see a few others from my first trip.

Steve began telling a story of a teenage girl who became pregnant out of wedlock. Because of the organization's traditional beliefs, sex before marriage was frowned upon. The girl was forced to leave the Ranch and was on her own. How, I wondered, is this a good example of Christianity? Why wouldn't they allow her to stay and help her in her time of need?

"I hope he's not talking about Maria," I whispered to Ben.

Steve continued, moving on from the girl to discussing her sister.

"Maria admitted she felt depressed. Not only was her sister no longer welcome at the Ranch, but their mother was also killed. She was involved with a gang and drugs. Maria, during all of this, attempted suicide by overdosing on her anti-depressants."

Surprised to hear this news, I immediately looked from Steve to Ben. I received multiple letters from Maria over the last six years with updates on her schooling and her anticipation for me to visit again soon. She never mentioned feeling depressed or

suicidal. She never said her mother was no longer alive. I felt blind to the suffering she felt.

“Thanks be to God,” Steve continued, “the medication didn’t harm her, and she’s doing fine.”

The upcoming trip to the Ranch was scheduled for July, just as I was getting an itch for another adventure. Plus, I had a difficult time dismissing what Steve said about Maria. It seemed like another opportunity presented by God and this time, I wasn’t going to let the spirit of fear hold me back. God’s plans were teaching me to be faithful by trusting in Him. As I continued praying for my future, I asked God to help me answer the fundamental question, “Who am I?”

Amid learning about Maria’s challenges, I had moved from one reception position to another, but this time with managerial responsibilities. The staff included many young college students. One employee asked if I considered another degree. I laughed, immediately responding no. As much as I appreciated her suggestion, school was never easy for me. Returning to college seemed daunting, especially in my thirties. But once the seed had been planted, I couldn’t get the idea out of my head. I decided to ask Ben what he thought.

“I think you should at least apply,” he said. “You haven’t been happy with work since we’ve been together. What would it hurt?”

In April, I sent my application for the master’s writing program at my alma mater. I graduated with my bachelor’s degree eight years prior, and as terrified as I felt to return to campus, I happily accepted the challenge. I had always been passionate about writing and had even dreamed of writing for local publications but was always too afraid. The

words “you aren’t good enough” often lingered in the back of my mind, preventing my will to even try.

A month later, I received a letter from the university congratulating me on my acceptance to the graduate program.

In July, a week before my group’s departure to Honduras, Dana and Nino alerted our group of civil unrest within the country’s capital city. Tegucigalpa was experiencing violent protests. A level three advisory suggested Americans to reconsider travel. Our group reconvened at Dana’s and Nino’s to discuss options. I asked Ben to join me, since it seemed we had a serious decision to make as a family.

“For our safety, the kids and I are opting to stay behind,” Dana said. “This is the first time we’ve decided to stay back and not go as a family. Nino is still happy to go with anyone who still feels called to go.”

As our meeting continued, a few people admitted they, too, didn’t feel comfortable.

“You have a couple more days before you need to make your final decision,” Dana continued. “Think it over, talk to your loved ones, and pray.”

On our drive home, Ben and I weighed our options. “What do you think? Should I still go?” I asked.

“Yes, I think you should go,” he said. “You’ve talked about going back for so long, and I think this is a great opportunity. I know you’d regret it if you didn’t.”

I prayed, asking God for guidance, although I knew Ben was right. *This*, I thought, *is what God wants me to do.*

Prior to our arrival, the Ranch's staff surveyed the route to and from the airport, ensuring a safe ride to the Ranch. We arrived without incident, and I arrived with a new perspective as I continued to pray for God to change my heart.

While touring the Ranch, I saw Maria from a distance. She was home for the weekend before heading back to Tegucigalpa, where she attended high school. High school students routinely visited every other weekend. I broke into a smile. I wanted to run to her, to hug her, and tell her how much I missed her. *But will she recognize me?* I looked down at my dusty feet. I didn't know how to talk to her about the suffering she'd endured the last few years, especially since it had been years since I routinely practiced Spanish. *How will I talk to her?* It was also customary for godparents to bring their godchild a gift, and I realized I hadn't brought anything. The guilt I felt was stronger than the courage I needed to talk to her. Our group moved on as we continued our tour. I felt my opportunity was lost.

A couple of days passed, and Steve, the assistant director I met at the brewery, asked if Maria found me over the weekend.

"No," I said, "but I have to admit something. I saw her the day we arrived, but I was so nervous, I didn't say hi."

Steve laughed lightly at my childish admission. "I'll get ahold of her for you."

In the days ahead, we spent time with the children, staff, and volunteers. With a smaller group, we had more freedom with tasks around the Ranch. I pushed myself out of my comfort zone and milked cows on the farm, asked a Honduran to ride a horse, and spent time with elementary age kids. I learned to embrace the dust, sweat, and cold showers. I moved past the petty things and lived in the moment.

The week quickly passed. Friday suddenly arrived, and we were leaving the next day. Steve popped his head in the volunteer house, where we stayed again.

“Hey, Stephanie. Guess who’s here to see you?” Steve smiled.

Maria waited for me at the gate. She looked beautiful, her dark hair and skin against her bright pink floral romper. She was no longer the 13-year-old girl I had met 6 years prior. She was a young woman.

We embraced one another and chatted, regardless of the language barrier. She told me how much she adored her new nephew. She told me of her mother’s death. I hugged her again; it was all I felt I could do.

“I want you and Ben to see me graduate in two years,” Maria said.

I agreed, letting her know we’d do our best to make it.

“I’d like you to have this,” I said, handing her a small photo album I brought with pictures of my family and dogs, and of the different seasons in Wisconsin. She smiled wide as she accepted the album. I flipped to the back, where I had added photos of the two of us from when we first met. I had a gift for her after all.

Graduate school began just after Labor Day. I walked around campus, taking in the buildings and the people around me. Everything looked different—refreshed and renewed. I took a deep breath and wiped the palms of my hands on my jeans before I entered the classroom. I looked around to see students around 12 years my junior. *It’s okay to feel vulnerable*, I reminded myself. *It’s okay to feel uncomfortable*. These words, along with prayers, became daily reminders; if I’m uncomfortable, it means I’m growing, learning, and changing. I raised my hand after the professor asked a question.

After class ended, I looked up to the sky and drew in a deep breath. The air was cooling as the weather shifted from summer to fall. I closed my eyes and thought of Maria, of Honduras, and of the confirmation I received over the last six years. I felt the mustard seed growing, the yellow flowers taking root in my soul.

I'd Rather be Kayaking

"Isn't that Mike?" I asked my husband, Ben, as we wandered around a local hardware store.

"I think so," Ben said.

"It's so hard to tell who people are with everyone wearing masks," I said.

As the man walked closer, I could tell it was Mike by his eyes. I waved. "Hi, Mike." As a long-time family friend to my parents, Mike also knew my aunt, Kathy, and my uncle, Ken. We chatted for a few minutes, checking in to see how everyone was doing three months into the pandemic.

"Oh, and I'm sorry about your aunt," Mike said, before walking away.

Even three months after Aunt Kathy passed, I could barely muster a small *thank you* without tears welling in my eyes. Instead, I nodded and offered a slight smile of gratitude, but it was hidden behind my face covering.

"Let's go," Ben said, briefly rubbing my shoulder.

My face suddenly grew hot, my cheeks reddening. The handmade cloth mask covered my face, blotting out the air I desperately needed. I felt my chest tightening as I gasped. Tears formed in my eyes all over again. I held my breath, forcing them away. Ben looked at me. I turned the other way, walking down the plumbing aisle where no one else was around. I quickly removed my mask and immediately drew in a deep breath.

Oh, God, help me to focus on breathing, I prayed. *In*. I inhaled through my nose. *Out*. I exhaled through my mouth. *Again*.

Later that night, I opened a bottle of cabernet. I poured two glasses, breathing in the notes of oak, spice, and berries. I handed a glass to Ben as I took a sip of my own. He asked if I was okay.

“Do you remember when we were at the wine bar and Kathy...” my voice broke. “...and she gave us her Beatles vinyl?”

“Of course,” Ben said, rising to put the record on the turntable. “Do you wanna listen to it?”

“Thank you.” I took another sip of wine and closed my eyes. I was transported back to From the Vine.

After Aunt Kathy retired from the local health department, she and her husband, Ken, opened From the Vine Wine Room in 2011. A place for friends and family to relax and enjoy wine—two of Kathy’s favorite things—and she happily invited the community to share the space. It soon became known as Kathy’s Place.

One night, a local band played the Beatles’ “Blackbird.” The singer didn’t play it one Wednesday evening, but after I told him how much I loved that song, it became a weekly tradition. “This one’s dedicated to Stephanie,” he would say. Aunt Kathy nodded her head to the music, enjoying the song as much as I did.

A few months after returning from a semester abroad in Spain, I was ready for a new adventure. I asked Kathy about a job at her new wine bar.

“Sure, you can work with me,” she said, “but I’ll still have you fill out an application. Just to have it on file.”

When From the Vine first opened, business was slow. As we waited for customers to trickle in, Kathy taught me one of her favorite card games: double solitaire. We sat

across from each other at one of the bar-height tables. Cards flung across the table as we launched forward, hoping to set our card on the opposing solitaire stack before the other person. Our wine glasses rested safely on a table nearby.

As business picked up and the word spread about the wine bar, it became known as the area's best kept secret to those who wandered in. Uncle Ken helped by bussing tables, running the dishwasher, and opening bottles of wine. After we closed, Aunt Kathy often invited me and other staff to pour ourselves a glass of wine and unwind.

"I suppose you earned a glass, too, Ken," she joked with her husband. She sat at the bar with a glass of zinfandel—one of her favorite varietals of wine. Her trained palate distinguished the bold, berry flavors, with a tobacco-like, smoky finish. "Phew! My dogs are barking!" she said, as she let her feet rest after a long night.

We often poured extra samples of new wines for some of our favorite clients. "Here," Kathy said, as she poured a glass of Chocolate Shop, "try this." The wine had a bold but smooth chocolate flavor, like a Tootsie Roll in liquid form. "I like to call it 'attitude adjustment.'" A mischievous twinkle shined in Kathy's eyes as she smiled.

Even after being opened for two years, customers were sparse on holiday weekends in the summer, especially around Independence Day. Kathy was alone in the wine bar when Ben and I arrived after dark.

We had just returned to town after a couple's sunset sailing cruise about an hour away. Ben asked the captain to take a photo of the two of us. I walked ahead of him, and when I turned around to ready myself for the photo, he was down on one knee, asking me to marry him.

I couldn't contain my smile when I saw Kathy. She looked at me eagerly. I held out my left hand, revealing an engagement ring with a deep blue stone, reminiscent of my favorite color.

Kathy's eyes lit up. "Oh! Congratulations, you two!" She immediately went to the wine cooler, retrieving a bottle. "This calls for champagne!"

We clinked our glasses together, toasting our happy news. "We called our parents and siblings after Ben asked," I said, "but you're the first to know in person."

Already one year into our two-year long engagement, our wedding day was quickly approaching. Ben and I discussed who we wanted to officiate our wedding.

"Well, Aunt Kathy always says she'd love to officiate a wedding at From the Vine," I said. "I know we're not getting married there, but maybe she'd still officiate for us?"

Ben approved.

After Kathy and I closed the wine bar during my next shift, she slid a glass of wine across the top of the bar—a familiar tradition. I took a sip of the malbec, with notes of plum, berries, and spice dancing along the tip of my tongue. She poured herself a glass of zinfandel. Though my skills were improving, I still admired Kathy's knowledge. Frequently reading the *Wine Bible* during down time helped refine her skills.

"So, you wanted to ask me something?" Kathy said, taking a drink of wine.

"Ben and I are wondering if you'd be willing to officiate our wedding?" I swirled my glass, watching the legs stick the bowl. "I looked into ordainment online, and it seems like an easy process."

Kathy took another drink, noting she had also already investigated it, too. “I would be happy to.”

Our wedding day finally came the following June in 2015. The morning began with sunshine, but the threat of rain loomed over the day. The clouds eventually covered the sun’s rays, leaving behind thick bouts of humidity. Our afternoon ceremony moved from the winery’s yard to inside the old barn.

As Kathy officiated the ceremony, she recited the script she wrote herself, incorporating personal commentary, memories, lyrics from the Beatles, and offered blessings to us and our guests through prayer.

Rain settled in after the ceremony, slowly sweeping away the humidity. A heavy fog came next, hovering above the grass while a rainbow stretched across the sky.

A year after Ben and I married, I received a call. *Kathy has cancer*, I reminded myself minutes after talking to Uncle Ken. Kathy was diagnosed with ovarian cancer in August 2016. Tumors riddled her body, extending from her ovaries into her abdomen.

But why? She and Ken lived a fairly healthy lifestyle. They walked their dogs regularly, ate healthier foods. They did the things experts say we’re supposed to do to live long lives.

Tears silently fell down my cheeks, landing in soft puddles on my jeans. The spots slowly grew larger as Ben rubbed my back. We sat for a few more minutes before I asked him if we could go out for dinner.

“I just need to get out of the house,” I said.

We walked downtown to a local Mexican restaurant about a mile away. I thought about how I reacted the same after my friend, Dave, died from carbon monoxide poisoning when he was 19. The need to escape the reality of devastating news. The need to forget, even though it lingered in the back of my mind.

After dinner we returned home, brushed our teeth, and prepared for bed. Alone in the bathroom, as I washed my face, the water and tears became impossible to separate. My knees grew weak, and I felt weary and exhausted. As my body crumpled to the floor, I began praying.

I pleaded with God to heal Kathy's weakened body, to make her whole again. I selfishly begged for a miracle so we could have more time together. But I also wanted her to have more time with Uncle Ken, and their dogs, Gunner and Flint. They never had children; something I always wish I would have talked to her about but fear always crept in because it can be a sensitive subject.

Who's going to take care of Uncle Ken if she dies? I thought. I knew he would still have the dogs, but clearly that's not the same. Nearly half of women diagnosed with ovarian cancer will live only an additional five years post-diagnosis. *Will Kathy live that long?*

Stage four cancer meant invasive maneuvers. After extensive surgeries, radiation, and chemotherapy, hospice care became Kathy's best option. Visitors came and went. Light caused pain from the chemo and radiation, so Kathy sat in her dark walk-in closet. Her hospice bed sat just outside the door, in her bedroom, next to the window. The curtains were drawn shut.

During spring break of my second semester of graduate school, the Wisconsin Governor issued the stay-at-home order for all non-essential employees. We learned the entire world was locking down. Groups of 10 or less was considered acceptable. Remaining at least six feet apart was the new rule. Wearing a mask in public spaces—even outside—was becoming mandatory.

Uncle Ken called me on a Sunday, nearly a week into quarantining. He told me Kathy wanted to see me; she had something to give me.

“When?” I asked.

“Soon,” he said. “Today.”

When Ben and I arrived at Kathy’s and Ken’s, Flint greeted us at the door. Flint seemed to enjoy the extra company after losing his companion, Gunner, a few months prior. We gathered in the kitchen, saying hi to the other visitors. Their house was full, regardless of the new group size rule.

Ben and I made our way to Kathy’s office-turned-bedroom, where the curtains were open, allowing the afternoon sunlight to pour in. Kathy’s voice was soft and frail as she greeted us from her bed. Ken handed her a bag and she removed three items, one by one, handing them to me.

She gave me two books—*From the Mouths of Dogs* by B.J. Hollars and *If Only they Could Speak* by Nicholas H. Dodman—and a Snow Baby figurine with a husky licking a baby’s face.

As we continued to visit, Kathy expressed her newfound love of kayaking she discovered the summer before.

“You know,” she joked, the familiar twinkle in her eye, “I’d rather be kayaking.”

I found myself wishing we had kayaked together. After all, their cabin was a short drive from our family cabin. Why had we never planned a weekend to go together?

Kathy fought the urge to fall asleep, but her voice gradually trailed off. Her weak body demanded her to rest, even mid-sentence. We decided to let her sleep.

“I love you,” I said, unsure if she heard me.

We passed Ken in the hallway as we headed back to the dining room, but he stopped us. He woke Kathy, telling her we were leaving soon. Kathy muttered something, but her whispered words were lost before they reached my ears.

“Did you hear her?” Ken asked.

I shook my head.

“She said, ‘I love you.’”

Two days later, my aunt called to let me know Kathy passed. “It was peaceful,” she said, “in her sleep.”

While Ben went to work, I stayed home alone with our two dogs. I remained in bed longer than I should have, even if classes hadn’t resumed yet since the university extended spring break. My mind was swirling. The fear and uncertainty of the pandemic muddled with the grief from losing my aunt.

Once again, I was questioning God’s purpose for life to cease while allowing pain and death to continue. My unfaltering flame appeared to be wavering. I felt guilty for not spending more time with Ken and Kathy after her diagnosis nearly four years prior. After I began graduate school, my free time was limited. I still saw them occasionally, and Kathy and I even had the opportunity to work together again at my friend’s dog daycare

and boarding facility where I was the office manager. But it just wasn't the same. It wasn't From the Vine.

Why do we blame ourselves for uncontrollable circumstances? Why do we burden ourselves with such remorse when we lack the ability to understand God's reasonings and timing? *But maybe*, I thought, *I've been asking myself the wrong questions. Maybe I should be asking what is this situation trying to teach me? Better yet, what is God trying to teach me?*

I pulled the blankets off my legs, letting the cool air settle over my skin. One at a time, I placed each foot on the floor. The carpet warmed my bare feet. I changed into athletic clothes before heading downstairs with both dogs trailing behind me.

I had recently asked my friend, Jen, if she could recommend a Christian podcast. She suggested Mark Driscoll. I scrolled through the episodes, looking to begin a new series while I exercised, when one called *Joy to the World* caught my attention. One of the seven episodes—“Find Joy Even When You are Suffering”—seemed to call out to me.

The series focused on the biblical book of Philippians, written by the apostle, Paul. In the sermon, Pastor Mark Driscoll said, “There is a joy that is inexplicable. There is a joy that is supernatural. There is a joy that is big enough to enjoy your life.” As I listened to each episode, I read through Philippians, which reflects Paul's story.

Imprisoned because of his belief in Jesus, Paul remained chained to a Roman guard, devoid of freedom as he sat in his cell day after day. Paul's heart ached as he grieved his uncertain future, being away from his family in Philippi. I imagine Paul

would have gone through a similar process, asking himself similar questions about his circumstances.

What is God trying to teach me? I wondered again. After all, Paul had it much worse than I did. But I felt guilty. I spent most of my life only being half-in for God. I had been neglecting to care for the seed of faith that had sprouted in me when God led me to Honduras and when I journeyed back to grad school. Although Ben and I were attending church, it still wasn't on a regular basis. I lacked discipline and dedication when it came to spending time with God. I rarely read my daily devotional, let alone the Bible.

My free time felt limited, especially with studying and completing assignments. When homework didn't eat up my time, I mindlessly scrolled through social media apps, numbing my brain to the stress. I let the small, sprouted seed dry out and wither.

Suddenly, Paul's story struck me. He wrote a letter of hope to Philippi. Even he, an imprisoned man who faced potential death, recognized that after his physical death, his soul would be united with Jesus in heaven. Through his suffering, Paul found a way to find happiness.

Reading Philippians and my daily devotional opened a gateway. Reading the Bible no longer felt like an obligation. I learned to recognize it as something I get to do, rather than something I must do. The chains of grief around my heart slowly released, while the mustard seed of faith began growing again.

While feeling hopeful and free in one way, I also felt trapped and lonely. The pandemic loomed in the background, adding continued stress. I spent countless days at home finishing out the semester as it transitioned online. I felt isolated after being laid off

from work at the flower shop, and I felt especially secluded with limited interactions between friends and family.

I continued to worry about Uncle Ken, since the pandemic made it impossible to properly mourn Kathy without having a funeral. Even though we had time to prepare for Kathy's passing, the sense of resolution felt necessary. I knew I needed to focus on one day at a time.

Before diving into the school day, I spent each morning listening to a Christian podcast, reading my devotional and the Bible, and writing out my daily prayers. The more time I spent with God, the more I felt I was shifting from isolation to solitude.

Paul could have chosen to live in isolation; he was alone in prison. But instead of focusing on his loneliness and unhappiness, he chose to focus on the hope of helping his family and friends in Philippi through his letters. He chose to focus on the hope of Jesus, whether he lived or died.

One morning, I sat silently after reading the day's devotion. With my head bowed and eyes closed, I focused on the words I had just read. I suddenly felt an intense desire to open the Bible to the Book of Psalms. My eyes immediately went to the middle of the page, focusing on Psalm 28:6-7. It reads, "Praise be to the Lord, for he has heard my cry for mercy. The Lord is my strength and my shield; my heart trusts in Him, and I am helped. My heart leaps with joy..." It seemed God spoke directly to me through these verses, offering healing and a new perspective. Offering a new beginning.

Nearly five months after Kathy passed, we were finally able to hold a memorial service. Instead of a traditional funeral at a church or funeral home, the service took place

at an event venue. The large room and outdoor gardens provided enough space for everyone to spread out, as the pandemic continued to linger.

Upon arrival, each guest was required to sign in. Contact tracing became part of large group events. In case of an outbreak, the venue would be able to contact everyone on the list to inform them they had potentially been exposed to the virus.

In addition to their funeral clothes, nearly everyone wore a mask, covering their nose and mouth. It also became habit to ask for a hug, even during a time when human touch was so important. I yearned for hugs from my family. We hadn't seen each other in months because everyone was told to quarantine and to only see people if we must. But Ken didn't just lose his wife and I wasn't the only one who lost an aunt. Sharing condolences and the ability to embrace a loved one with a hug are practices of healing.

Kathy's urn finally rested on the table for all to see, surrounded by photos and loved ones. Uncle Ron, the same man who built the bar inside From the Vine, also crafted the handmade wooden box storing Kathy's ashes. Her urn spray, filled with flowers in shades of deep reds and purples was accented with wine corks, incorporating Kathy's love of wine. Alongside the urn also sat a trio of wine glasses—two of which were emblazoned with the From the Vine logo. Kathy's name, painted by hand on the remaining glass, was a gift I made, thanking her for officiating mine and Ben's wedding. Kathy's cross necklace was draped over her photo on the front of the urn. Left over remnants from her past.

In lieu of a pastor or funeral director officiating Kathy's service, her best friend, her sister, and I all spoke. We shared stories and memories and thanked Kathy's family and friends for celebrating her life. After Kathy's diagnosis, she asked one of her

employees to sing at her funeral. In addition to the Beatles, Kathy also loved the Eagles. The service ended with a rendition of “Take it Easy”—a fitting tribute to the woman who always did.

Speaking at my aunt’s funeral provided a moment of transformation and clarity. Even though I thought I already mourned and lived through the pain, I realized I needed to let those feelings in again. No matter how hard I focused on each word of the eulogy, they got caught in my throat. I choked on the memories from my childhood, when Aunt Kathy and Uncle Ken babysat my sister and me. I choked on the thought of working together at From the Vine. Even the Beatles’ lyrics from “Across the Universe” restricted my ability to speak. My lips quivered and eventually, I could no longer hold back tears. I had been grieving for months and found an acceptance of Kathy’s death, but being there, in that moment, provided me with the ability to let go.

In the days that followed, Ken and I spent more time together. While putting away photos from the service, he mentioned Kathy’s two cross necklaces.

“She would want you to have one,” he said.

Kathy’s necklace is a small treasure; it’s a piece of her and a piece of God that I can wear and carry with me day after day.

“I also have Kath’s kayak,” Ken said. He was contemplating selling it at an upcoming garage sale. “Do you want to see it?”

I followed him to the basement, where he had his and Kathy’s kayaks stored.

“I’d really like you to have it,” he said, “if you want it.”

Dust follows me as I pull into the boat landing, where I unload Kathy's kayak. I use the paddle to push myself out onto the water. Sparse, white clouds float endlessly across the open blue sky. As I paddle around the lake, I think of Kathy. Even though we never had the opportunity to kayak together in person, now we can in spirit. For a moment, I watch an eagle ascend in the sky before I close my eyes. I tilt my face toward the sky, embracing the sun's warmth.

I remember a verse that says, "Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength." I'm learning to focus on my faith instead of the pain as I continue to spend time in God's word. My heart is changing; the darkness is being overtaken by a candle flame, burning faster and brighter, snuffing out the dark. The amount of joy I have felt is sometimes overwhelming. I imagine this must have been how Paul felt as he sat in the tomb, finding solace in life, regardless of his circumstances. After all, faith is like a muscle, the more you use it, the stronger it gets.

I open my eyes. I feel a slight breeze as I watch the clouds float across the surface of the water. I paddle, pushing Kathy's kayak through the mirrored clouds, distorting their reflections into swirls.

My Father's House

My father's house is surrounded by undead bodies, their rotting flesh oozing as it dangles from their limbs. They stagger across the driveway and up the wide set wooden stairs leading to the basement door, their fists banging against the deep brown steel. I hide in my bedroom, directly above, making it impossible to drown out their moaning. *They can't get in*, I remind myself, as their moans and the thuds against the door grow louder. *I'm safe here.*

I wake with a start. My bedroom is dark as I realize I'm in my own home, in my own bed, next to my husband, Ben, and one of our dogs, Murphy. In my zombie-laden nightmares, no matter how hard they try, the undead are incapable of penetrating the walls of my place of refuge. I listen to Ben and Murphy breathing deeply as I settle back under the blankets, reciting a silent prayer for the nightmares to subside.

In my dreams, familiar places often appear unfamiliar, filtered through a funhouse mirror, mismatching my memories, like a distorted alternate reality. Yet even in dreams, my father's house remains stable, as sturdy as the sanctuary I've now come to recognize it has been throughout my life.

I've known the walls of my dad's house nearly my entire life, but *home* was not always at Dad's. My father's house has been in my life through two divorces. My mother and father divorced in the early 1990s, just before I started kindergarten and my sister, Melissa, began third grade. My dad kept the house, and Melissa and I stayed with him every other weekend, since our mom had primary custody of us. Though Mom moved multiple times during our childhood, her house always felt more like home. Our bond

with Mom almost seemed stronger. Perhaps it was the lack of familial consistency at Dad's house since we didn't spend as much time with him. Or perhaps it was because my relationship with my dad was simply different than it was with my mom. Even when my stepmom was there for 25 years, Dad's house still didn't feel completely like home. And it felt even less like one when she left my father in April of 2019.

"How are you doing, Dad?" I asked.

He sighed.

I pulled my cell phone away from my ear as he continued breathing heavily.

"I'm really sorry, Dad," I said.

"She said she can't deal with the negativity anymore," Dad said.

"That's what she told me, too. And your depression. I don't get it."

"Yep. And she doesn't want to try counseling."

"She made it sound like you've tried counseling a few times before."

"No!" Dad scoffed. "That was a long time ago. We went a few times, and that was it."

"It's like she's given up," I said.

"She doesn't want to try anymore," Dad said.

Growing up, Dad's attitude often made it seem like he didn't want to try. He'd let his negativity eat away at him, like a vat of corrosive acid. If Jake or Luke, my stepbrothers, didn't do a chore on time, Dad would argue to prove his point, repeating the same facts until his face turned red. After tens of minutes, he would finally calm down, usually after Melissa or I broke his angry trance.

Each time Dad and I talked about the divorce—Theresa’s Divorce, as he called it—we fed off each other’s negativity. We agreed that it felt like she’d torn our family apart.

Still, I struggled with how I felt. How could she, a Christian, church-going woman, disregard the covenant and sanctity of marriage through divorce? Especially after 25 years. To me, she wasn’t only giving up on my dad and our family, but I felt like she was also giving up on God.

We went to church consistently as a family when my siblings and I were kids. I always looked up to Theresa’s example and outpouring of love. While driving home one cold winter evening, Theresa saw someone without a coat. She stopped the car and offered the person the extra coat she happened to have in her car that night.

I looked up to my dad’s example, too. When he attended Sunday service, he was a God-fearing man. Because of his respect for Christ, he prayed with passion, and he wept when he felt God’s presence. He worshipped and sang, regardless of his inability to find the right pitch.

“I sing like this vent,” he once told me, pointing to the broken vent in his old Toyota pickup truck. “I can sing high or low, but there’s no in between.”

He even wrote poetry. As a child, I enjoyed when he read his poems aloud. One of my favorites was called “God is Great.” It went like this:

God is great
 God is grand
 God will take you by the hand
 Open your heart and let him in
 For He will fill you with love within

Albeit simple, at a young age, my father's words taught me the love God offered.
The love of a father.

But some Sundays when our family went to church, Dad's depression got the better of him. Theresa gathered us kids, leaving Dad behind in bed. He refused to get up, blaming his absence on the aches and pains from the lingering effects of Lyme disease. Some days, if we tried hard enough, Melissa or I were able to persuade him to join us.

"Dad, get up," I said, nudging my father's shoulder. "It's time to go to church."

He groaned as he rolled over, pulling the blanket up higher.

"Dad. Please."

Dad sighed, rolling back over to face me. "Alright," he said, slowly rising from bed.

"Thank you, Dad. I love you."

"Love you, too, Steph," he said, kissing my forehead as he walked by.

Through the divorce, I couldn't help but feel the disconnect from Theresa leaving my dad. My stepbrother, Luke, four years my junior, disinited Dad to watch his kids play at sporting events. When Dad asked why, Luke said he didn't want any drama. Soon, I began distancing myself not only from Theresa, but also from Luke, his wife, and kids. Though Theresa always ended her texts to me with "Love you," it took me months to be able to text it back. A part of me understood why she left an angry man consumed by negativity, but it still felt like she hadn't fought hard enough or long enough to make their relationship work, especially given what I'd come to know of a Christ based marriage.

Dad's birthday came in July, just weeks before what would have been his and Theresa's 25th anniversary. My sister was busy, so just Dad and I met downtown for ice cream. We walked for a bit, then settled on sitting on a park bench.

"She won't even sit down and talk to me," he said. "She'll barely respond to my texts."

I listened quietly, only speaking when Dad paused long enough for me to interject. "After you and Mom divorced, do you remember talking to me and Melissa about it? How you sometimes said some pretty mean things?"

"Yes, I do," Dad said.

"We were just kids then, and it was hard enough being in the middle, even if we didn't understand what was going on." I fidgeted with my spoon, scraping ice cream back into the dish. "And even now, in our thirties, I think it's almost even more difficult to be in the middle of this divorce, too."

Dad sighed between each spoonful of ice cream. "I'm sorry, Steph." His voice cracked. "It's just been hard. She hasn't even said happy birthday."

For months, I dreaded our first Christmas as a newly split family. My husband, Ben, and I both have divorced families, plus extended family Christmas gatherings. Adding one more felt like a burden. Plus, every conversation with Dad was surrounded by how miserable he felt.

It surprised me when Christmas at Dad's still felt customary. He cut down a scraggly Charlie Brown tree from the woods behind the house and decorated it with the ornaments the four of us kids made when we were young. He even hung decorations on

walls and curtain rods. Melissa and I helped him clean and prepare food—tasks Theresa used to do. Although I felt obligated to fill in, I knew my dad needed a hand.

Everyone was there—my husband, sister, two stepbrothers, and their families and children. Everyone but Theresa. We ate the homemade pies Dad and I baked together. We watched old home movies from when Dad and Theresa first married, when the four of us were children. We laughed and grew teary eyed.

My father's house felt full of warmth and love.

Later that same weekend, all 10 of us—everyone but Dad—crammed into Theresa's tiny 800 square foot house. We huddled in the living room as we ate the dinner Theresa had prepared. We chatted for a while after opening gifts. Someone brought up Dad.

“So, Stephanie,” Theresa said, “how's your dad doing, anyway?”

I felt my face grow hot as I attempted to dodge everyone's eyes, but I could still feel their gazes. I focused on Theresa. “Well,” I paused. “Not good. You left him and he's still trying to understand why.”

Theresa was shocked. “I told him why. What doesn't he get?”

Regardless of all of us stuffed into the small house, it didn't seem to radiate the same kind of warmth.

I had grown weary from hearing the same sob story from my dad over the months that followed. It had become embarrassing. I invited Dad to go snowshoeing with my friend and me, knowing he would enjoy the company. Before my friend arrived, I asked

him to rein in the conversation about the divorce. He said he understood and would keep it to a minimum.

As we snowshoed through the paths next to a creek, Dad brought up Theresa. I looked at my friend apologetically.

Afterwards, she said she didn't mind. "He's going through something. He needs to talk about it."

Nearly a year after Theresa left, the pandemic had taken hold of the world, causing confusion and disarray. We were told to quarantine and remain with only those we needed to be around to avoid spreading the virus.

"My dad's calling," I said, with a sigh. "Again."

Ben briefly looked my direction before continuing to watch TV.

I hesitated for a moment before answering. "Hey, Dad."

"Hi, Steph," he said. "How are you doing?"

"I'm fine," I said, my voice flat. "How are you?"

He sighed. I rolled my eyes. *Here we go again*, I thought. Living alone for nearly a year and now amid a pandemic, I knew my dad would enjoy doing something together. I knew he needed the company. I took a deep breath before asking if he wanted to go for a walk. *God, give me patience, please*, I prayed.

With little snow left on the ground, we started going for walks in the woods behind his house. Originally my grandparents' land, my dad and a few relatives who live nearby now own most of the land, allowing us to roam as we pleased.

I loaded my dogs, Murphy and Eleanor, into my Jeep before heading to Dad's. As soon as I pulled in the driveway, he came out of the house from the upper deck door.

“You’re actually ready to go?” I asked, surprised. Growing up, Dad would almost always be late for events, including church. I hated walking into service late. People always turned to stare at us.

As soon as I asked, Dad popped back into the house to grab the gloves he forgot inside. “Now I’m ready.”

I called the dogs and the four of us started our trek through the woods behind Dad’s house. Spring had barely just begun; the air was still cool against our exposed cheeks. I watched my dad walk, just a pace ahead of me. His strong arm leaned on the handle of the axe he always carried while we walked. Foxes, coyotes, and bears were known to prowl in the thick of the forest. I could hear Dad breathing steadily as we walked in the comfortable silence.

“Dad?” I said, interrupting the birds chirping around us as they welcomed spring. “Please don’t take this the wrong way.” I snapped a small tree branch off in front of me. “I know you’re still processing the divorce, but can you try to talk about something else. Please?”

Dad walked quietly beside me.

“I’m sorry you’re still struggling,” I continued, “but it’s exhausting hearing about it all the time.”

Dad’s face slowly sagged.

“I have a hard time, feeling like so many emotions are being dumped on me.”

“I’m sorry, Steph,” Dad said. “And, yeah, I get that. I’m sorry.”

“I love you, Dad.”

Dad smiled, slightly. “Love you, too.”

Murphy and Eleanor trotted next to us, tails wagging. The remaining snow crunched under our feet as we moved along.

We continued going for walks throughout the summer. The dogs could barely contain their excitement when I'd ask if they wanted to go see Papa Ron. Afterwards, we sat in the living room of his house, guzzling water, and eating overripe fruit Dad bought from the grocery store's discounted bin. The sweet, juicy flesh helped quench our thirst. Murphy and Eleanor watched us, waiting for a morsel to fall on the floor.

"I have a date next week," Dad said.

I looked at him, eyebrows raised. "How'd you meet her?"

"I joined a few dating apps."

"What?" I laughed.

"Next time we go for a walk, you'll have to take some photos for me so I can have some nice pictures for the apps."

"I think it's good, Dad, that you're trying to move on." The words surprised me as I said them.

I looked around the house. Photo cards with Christmas messages still hung on the wall from months ago. Mail cluttered the kitchen table. Most of the dishes were washed, drying in the rack next to the sink. Theresa's sing-song voice no longer echoed through the walls, but Dad's house was slowly starting to feel a little more normal again. The more time I spent with him there, the more it started feeling like home.

“Speaking of dates, it’s Wednesday,” I said. “I should probably get going soon.” Ben and I had started having weekly date nights, even if we usually stayed home watching a movie or playing a board game, it still gave us time to connect.

“I can’t wait to do that with a special woman in my life,” Dad said. “That’s good you guys do that. I wish I would have tried harder to do things like that with Theresa. I want a gal I can give foot rubs to.”

Dad’s perspective and heart seemed to be changing. He even admitted he felt like his eyes had been opened to his marriage with his ex-wife; how he could have done better, tried harder.

As summer and autumn waned, and winter came, between the time I had been spending with my dad, I also spent more time with God. I began praying more for God to transform my heart, like how He had been working on my dad’s. I knew both of us needed to forgive Theresa. I also knew holding onto resentment toward her was eating away at my soul, and I was tired of feeling angry.

I fell asleep, dreaming hard that night. In my dreamworld, I was back at my dad’s. I stood in the dining room, looking through the glass patio door leading to the woods behind the house. The moon illuminated a zombie pacing in front of me. He paused, briefly tilting his head to the side before slamming his fists against the glass until his hands were bloodied. The glass wouldn’t break.

“I had another zombie dream last night,” I said to my dad. “They still couldn’t get in.”

We spent the afternoon snowshoeing through the woods in early winter. The fresh snowfall reminded me of my childhood when Dad gently woke Melissa and me in the

morning. The sun, barely awake, peeked over the clouds. Dad had our coats and boots ready and helped us put them on. We headed out the patio door into the woods. A fresh frost covered the trees, sparkling against the early morning sun. As if in a snow globe, flakes fell from the heavens, gently landing on our noses and we looked up toward the sky. Dad held our mittened hands.

“Yeah? That’s pretty cool.” Dad breathed heavily beside me, kicking up snow as it fell from his snowshoes.

“It’s strange,” I said. “Your house is the only place that ever looks exactly the same in my dreams.” I watched the dogs hop from one snowshoe print to the next, trying not to sink too deep into the snow. “I’ve always felt safe there even through all of the changes—the divorce with Mom and with Theresa. It’s sort of like it’s my sanctuary. I think it might have something to do with growing up going to church with you when we were kids.”

Our second split-family Christmas rolled around at the end of 2020. My sister, Ben, and I had other family obligations on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. Though Dad spent some time with his nephew and his family, as well as with a friend, he spent most of the two days alone. We celebrated with Dad and my siblings a few days later. As I happily helped him clean and prepare the meal like the year before, Dad opened up about forgiveness.

“Steph,” Dad said, sorting through the mail on the table, “I feel like I had reconciliation.”

I asked him how as I continued washing the dishes.

“I was praying on Christmas Eve, and I felt the Holy Spirit comfort me.”

Goosebumps flecked my arms as my father told me of his encounter with God. My dad explained the peace he felt, like God told him he would be okay, and he could move on. He told me how he wept.

“I cried the hardest I’ve ever cried,” he said. “But I asked for my burdens to be lifted.” Though he was still working on forgiving her, Dad said he recognized the importance of forgiveness. “I want to be a better man for the next woman in my life.”

“That’s amazing, Dad!” I turned to look at him, drying my hands on the kitchen towel. “I actually had a bit of a revelation, too.”

“Cool. What’s that?” he asked.

“I was listening to a sermon, and the pastor said, ‘Release them, and you will be released.’ He was saying how the inability to forgive someone can make you feel chained down. So, I’ve been praying for the ability to let go. And I’ve been praying for Theresa. I actually feel like I’ve been able to forgive her.”

What I didn’t tell him, though, was how I had also been praying for God to change my heart and feelings concerning my father. I already knew I couldn’t change him, so instead of getting upset, I had been praying for a humble heart to be more compassionate, understanding, and patient with my dad.

The more I continued to pray, the more I felt the faith rooted in me growing. The mustard seed became a plant, full of green stems and yellow blossoms.

A house is made of foundation, which holds the walls together, sheltering those who occupy the structure. A house is filled with rooms where individuals gather. But what makes a house a home?

Each time I now visit my father's house, I'm reminded of who my dad is: a loving, tender-hearted man. Though he still suffers from depression and continues grappling with full forgiveness, I've recognized both my dad's heart and my own are transforming to better versions of ourselves. I'm reminded of the father I had when I was a child—the man who prayed and taught me about the love of God our Father.

The foundation of the house parallels God the Father. God's sturdiness and strength holds His children together by their right hand. "Do not let your hearts be troubled," Jesus said. I've learned to lay my burdens down, allowing God to take control and help me through my struggles as He lifts the burdens in His timing. Jesus continued, "In my Father's house are many rooms... I am going there to prepare a place for you." My Father's house is my place of sanctuary, my place of refuge, my place of holiness. In my Father's house, my dad and I are children of God. "How great is the love the Father has lavished upon us," 1 John 3:1 says, so that in our Father's house, my dad and I can be called children of God. God who loves us, as my father loves his daughters.

I sat in my reading chair, covering my lap with a blanket. I picked up a book and just as I began reading, my phone rang. It was my dad.

"Hi, Dad," I smiled. "How are you?"

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