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Contents

The GOD I LOVE

Part One

Chapter One

My son, preserve sound judgment and discernment, do not let them out of your sight; they will be life for you, an ornament to grace your neck. Then you will go on your way in safety, and your foot will not stumble; when you lie down, you will not be afraid; when you lie down, your sleep will be sweet.

Proverbs 3:21–24

I dug my toes into the sand of the Delaware beach, hugged my knees, and drew as close to the campfire as I could. The flames warmed our faces while behind us the night air chilled our backs. Huddled with my sisters and cousin, I smelled the burning logs and breathed in the fire's heat. We all sat in awe of my father. He stood across the campfire from us, a figure a-swirl in rising heat and smoke, his face underlit by flame as if he were a prophet on Mount Sinai. We clutched each other as he wove his story. And we didn't dare look over our shoulders toward the ocean, lest we catch sight of—

"The Flying Dutchman!"

My father's eyes widened as he fixed his gaze on us. "Just a few hundred yards across the water, he was, standing on the bow of his ship. He was so close I could see the glow of his pipe!"

The campfire crackled and popped, a burst of sparks twirling upward in the smoke. Another wave crashed on the sand, *shissh-SHING*, spilling its white foam over the ridge of the beach. Each wave edged closer to our campfire than the last one. Now I couldn't help myself. I peered over my shoulder, wondering if the Flying Dutchman's phantom schooner was out there, somewhere on the dark ocean.

"All the mates on board our ship had nearly given up," my father intoned. "Our vessel had been caught for five days in the Sargasso Sea. The thick seaweed had entwined our rudder and held us fast in its deadly grip. The water supply was gone, and our tongues were cracked and swollen. We knew our hope was spent when—"

"You saw the Dutchman," my sister whispered.

"Oh-*hoh*! you're a sharp lassie," Daddy commended.

We knew the legend by heart. It started on a wind-whipped, stormy night in the 1600s, when a Dutch sea captain steered his ship into the jaws of a gale at the Cape of Good Hope. The mounting waves hammered the vessel's sides, and the ship began to sink. As raging waters flooded the deck, the captain raised his fist and railed, "I *will* round this cape, even if I have to keep sailing until doomsday!"

As the legend goes, he did. And anyone who had the misfortune of sighting the old Flying Dutchman would surely die a terrible death. To this day, if you see the dark clouds of a gathering squall looming on the horizon, beware. You may spy the old Dutch sea captain smoking his pipe, and if you do, you too may seal your fate.

"But if you saw the Flying Dutchman when you were caught in the Sargasso Sea," one of us asked, "why didn't you die?"

We knew the answer. But we had to hear it again.

"Your daddy isn't afraid of any old curse," our father declared. "Why, I looked over the bow of our ship, and I spotted a great devil-fish. That gave me an idea."

I didn't know what a devil-fish was. But as Daddy spread his hands wide and flapped his arms, I knew it was something really big and powerful, like a giant manta ray. "I called for a harpoon," he gestured, "and waited for that devil-fish to float by. Slowly, I took aim—and I hurled the spear into his back!"

I grimaced.

"The great fish strained against the rope, but I held tight, calling for my shipmates. 'I say, *you*, Angus Budreau, and *you*, Georgy Banks! Tie the end to the capstan!' They moved quickly while the fish pulled harder. 'Up with the foresail and mainsail and the mizzen! Set the jib and the flying jib!' I yelled.

"Slowly, our ship began to creak and groan. She was inching forward, pulled by the two-ton fish, straining and flapping his wing-fins with all his might. I could feel the weeds snapping beneath our hull—"

Our own muscles tightened at the mighty fish's effort—

"—and suddenly, we broke free. The sails began to flutter and fill with air. Finally, a gust caught the mainsail. The crew let out a

cheer. Our ship was freed from the grip of the Sargasso Sea! As that tired old devil-fish sank into the murky depths, having spent his strength, we waved our sailor's caps farewell. And once again, we hit the high seas."

I felt sad that the devil-fish had to die. But I was glad my father had lived to tell the story. So was Mom—I could tell by the way she looked at him. I always searched her face after Daddy ended a story, to see whether the tale was true. She never gave anything away, though. She just stood up to throw another log on the fire. If one of us asked, "Mommy, is that true? Did that really happen?" she gave a sly grin. Maybe she didn't believe Daddy's stories as much as we did. But to her credit, she didn't let on. She always left us thinking there may be some truth to his tales, with her faithful answer: "Good story, Cap'n John!"

A burst of sparks exploded from the fire, and a gust scattered them in the night.

"There's his pipe!" someone cried. "I see the sparks!"

"No you don't."

"Yes I do!"

"Don't."

"Do!"

It went back and forth that way, *don't-do*, *don't-do*, until Mother stopped the motor, shushing, "Quiet, you girls."

"So, what happened to the Flying Dutchman?"

My father stood silent for a long moment. All was quiet except for the pounding of waves. Smoke and flames danced in the wind, causing shadows to flicker in all directions. Daddy slowly ventured a few steps toward the blackness that was the ocean, the stars, and the night. I grew nervous as he moved away from the well-lit safety of our campfire. He stopped, placed his hands on his hips, and peered into the distance as if searching for someone.

"I escaped the Dutchman," he said softly. "Not many do, but I was one of the blessed ones." My three sisters and our cousin, little Eddie, leaned forward to search the darkness too.

"Don't look too hard for that old seaman," Daddy warned, "for you may not be as fortunate as I was." His voice took on an ominous tone: "You may one day hear, 'Heh-heh-heh!'" With that, he turned around swiftly, rubbing his hands and snickering in sinister glee.

We squealed and grabbed onto one another, kicking sand to keep the ghost at bay. But the tale-teller was finished now. He gave a swooping bow, and we applauded generously.

"Please, *please* tell another one!" we chanted.

No, enough was enough. My father was always one to leave us hanging for more. I was glad for that. It made whatever else we did next sweeter. Like singing. When the stories ended, it was usually time for songs. Campfire songs, Girl Scout songs, hiking, sailing, or cowboy songs.

My mother and father crisscrossed more logs on the fire, creating an inferno, and we kids backed away our blankets. We had all spent the day digging for clams on the other side of the barrier island. The shallow, clear water of the Indian River inlet there concealed hundreds of fat clams just inches below the sand. The day's labor had been successful, and now our white-canvas Keds were lined up by the fire to dry out. My father's best friend—Uncle Eddie to us—ambled over and plopped a couple of ice buckets next to his son, little Eddie, "our cousin." They were filled with clams.

We each reached in and took one. Squinting our eyes against the heat of the campfire, we carefully placed the clams on the end of a log near enough to the flames to steam them. Soon the clams were bubbling around the edges. One by one, they popped open. Using our thumb and forefinger, we gingerly picked up a hot, half-opened shell, *ouch!*-ing and blowing on them until they cooled. We could hardly wait to get the clams, wet and salty, hot and chewy, into our mouths.

Daddy tilted his sailor's cap and began dancing a silly jig. He launched into a song written for him by an old sweetheart from his merchant marine days, in the early 1900s. It was a song to eat clams by.

> *I would not marry an oyster man, I'll tell you the reason why:*
> *His boots are always muddy, his shoes are never dry.*
> *A sailor boy, a sailor boy, a sailor boy 'twill be.*
> *Whenever I get married, a sailor's bride I'll be!*

Reaching farther down into the ice, past the clams piled on top, we pulled out fresh oysters. Our Uncle George, Daddy's brother, was in charge of knifing them open. This was one of those artful

Maryland skills we hoped we too would one day excel in. It requires piercing the shell, heart, and muscle in a way that keeps the oyster plump and intact.

Uncle George passed out the opened oysters to us, and I held mine up, comparing its size to my sisters'. To hold in your hand the biggest and juiciest was a triumph in the art of gross. Balancing mine just so, I flattened my bottom lip, pressed the edge of the shell to it, tilted the oyster slightly, and slurped. I had seen some people swallow an oyster whole, but I preferred Daddy's way: chewing it. It tasted better that way, releasing a musty, salty flavor. The ritual never seemed odd when I was a child, but years later I would understand what people meant by the phrase "acquired taste."

Sea songs eventually gave way to cowboy songs, and then, when Daddy was sure we'd squeezed all the play we could from the evening, we sang hymns. Suddenly, the scene around the campfire was transformed from one of clam-slurping, sand-kicking, and tall-tale camaraderie into a sanctuary under the stars. The glowing sparks that rose now didn't come from a seaman's pipe, and the Atlantic Ocean no longer held fearful secrets of Davy Jones's Locker. Even the hissing foam of the retreating waves sounded soothing. Never was there a sweeter satisfaction than to lie back on a blanket, my hands under my head, and gaze at the starry dome above while singing a hymn.

I forgot all about tall tales as my father, full of warmth and tenderness, led us.

> *On a hill far away stood an old rugged cross,*
> *The emblem of suff'ring and shame;*
> *And I love that old cross where the dearest and best*
> *For a world of lost sinners was slain.*

We all joined in on the chorus. I loved adding harmony, fitting my notes under my parents' melody. We swelled the first part, like the flowing of the tide, and then sang gently on the last part, like the tide as it ebbed.

> *So I'll cherish the old rugged cross,*
> *Till my trophies at last I lay down;*

I will cling to the old rugged cross,
And exchange it some day for a crown.

As the rest of the family went on to the second verse, I stopped singing. I was listening to a larger song, one that came from the star-splattered heavens. With my knees bent heavenward, the fronts of my legs caught the heat and light of the campfire. A deep, cool shadow was cast over the rest of me as I lay listening to the universe drift by. Tiny clusters of stars and great constellations speckled the night, while the surf pounded away. The Atlantic Ocean was yet another universe of mysterious currents, touching the toes of Ireland and England, places too far away for me to believe they were real. And here we were, huddled around our small fire, a tiny ember on a beach stretching north and south for miles, with nary another camp in sight. We were a single point of light among thousands that night on the eastern seaboard, a coast on one of many continents, all on a planet dwarfed by galaxies spinning above.

I had never felt so small. Yet so safe.

Safe, secure, and significant. I couldn't imagine a kid anywhere else on the planet that night, much less among the sand dunes of the Delaware coast, who felt as safe as I. Part of that feeling was the stories. Most of it, the hymns. When someone started up, "I come to the garden alone, while the dew is still on the roses," I felt as though God himself were among us, illuminated by the fire and breathing a sigh with each wave.

My earliest recollections of being stirred by the Spirit happened through hymns. Soft, sweet, old hymns—the kind my Aunt Kitty liked to sing when she and Uncle George visited us on Friday nights, to go over the books from Daddy's business. Or the kind we sang at our little church in Catonsville. The sort of hymns we sang in the truck as we came over the Chesapeake Bay Bridge to the eastern shore, down Highway 1 through Queen Anne's County, over the bridge to the barrier island and our camping site. The same hymns whose words I knew by heart yet could not explain.

I know whom I have believ-ed and am persuaded
That he is able to keep that which I've committed
Unto him against that day.

I treasured this family hymn, but as for its meaning, I was clueless. It didn't bother me that I couldn't grasp it. Five-year-olds are able to tuck words into cubbyholes in their hearts, like secret notes stored for a rainy day. All that mattered to me now was that these hymns bound me to the melody of my parents and sisters. The songs had something to do with God, my father, my family, and a small seed of faith safely stored in a heart-closet.

"Come on, everybody!" Daddy clapped his hands and roused us from our blankets. "Up on your feet and try this one."

Climb, *climb up sunshine mountain*, *heavenly breezes blow*

We climbed the air and waved our hands hula-style—

Climb, *climb up sunshine mountain*, *faces all aglow*

—made flower-faces with a smile—

Turn, *turn from sin and sadness*, *look up to the sky*

—we frowned on the word *sin* and lifted our faces on the word *sky*—

Climb, *climb up sunshine mountain*, *you and I.*

—we pointed to someone else's heart, then to our own.

A hymn or Sunday school song that included hand motions demanded to be performed with no less confidence than a secret clubhouse handshake. Anyone who missed making like a flower, or looking sad when singing *sin*, was demoted to the last rung of the clubhouse ladder and thereby eyed carefully on the next motion-song. One had to keep up.

The hours around the campfire passed too quickly. Mother hadn't piled any driftwood onto the glowing coals for a while, and now the embers merely breathed small ghosts. We closed out the campfire with my father's favorite hymn. It was a hymn of the sea:

Brightly beams our Father's mercy
From his lighthouse evermore;
But to us he gives the keeping
Of the lights along the shore.
Dark the night of sin has settled,
Loud the angry billows roar;

Eager eyes are watching, longing
For the lights along the shore.
Trim your feeble lamp, my brother!
Some poor seaman, tempest tossed—
Trying now to make the harbor,
In the darkness may be lost.
Let the lower lights be burning,
Send a beam across the waves!
Some poor fainting struggling seaman,
You may rescue, you may save.

When the ocean mist began to overtake our campfire, we gathered our blankets and trekked back over the dunes to our tents. A flashlight led the way to the top of the barrier dune, between the beach and the smaller sand mounds where our tents nestled. The youngest Eareckson, I trudged behind my father, dragging my blanket.

As we crested the top of the mountainous barrier dune, we paused. To the south I could spot the Fenwick Island lighthouse. To the north, the glow of the town of Rehoboth Beach, miles up the coast. We were high up enough to see the starlight shimmering on Indian River Bay, several hundred yards to the west. The peak of sand we stood on was the only defense between the dark, dangerous ocean and our home continent. I reached for my father's hand.

"Daddy, what does it mean, 'Let the lower lights be burning'?"

My father looked out over the bay. He lifted a hand and pointed straight ahead, into the night. "See those?" he said.

I looked into the dark. A red light on the bay blinked on, then off. A green channel marker did the same.

"Those are the lower lights," he said.

That fact alone amazed me. I was always amazed when some mysterious word or line in a hymn found its counterpart in my world. Seeing a cross on a hill far away. Or coming into a garden alone, where the dew was still on the roses. The first time I ever won a trophy in a Brownies contest, I clutched it tightly and happily, "'til my trophies at last I lay down" on my dresser that night. I was amazed to think heaven might have a judge with trophies to hand out. And here, amazingly, were actual lower lights.

"Lower lights mark where the water is deep enough for a boat to sail safely," Daddy explained. "If those lights go out, sailors won't be able to tell where the sandbar is. Ships have wrecked on many shores for want of channel markers."

"So, why are they called 'lower lights' in the song?"

"God is the lighthouse, and we are his lower lights. We point the way, we show where it's safe to go," he explained. "That's what you do."

"I do?"

He held my hand, and together we slid down the side of the dune.

"Yes, you do," he said. He pronounced it as a fact about me, a fact I knew I was too young to absorb. "It's like what you've learned from the Lord," he said, shifting to a more serious tone, "'Let your light so shine before men.'"

I didn't know much stuff from the Bible. But the way my father said the words made them sound like something King James said, if not the Lord. Or like something Daddy would make up. Whichever, my father expected me to let my light so shine before men. I didn't quite understand what my light was or how I should shine it before men. But that was okay. I could never quite keep straight when things were from the Bible or from my father. This was probably because of the impressive way he shifted his tone of voice, as though he were speaking *ex cathedra*, like a real prophet with a message from heaven. Or it might have been the way he pronounced *Lord* with an Irish brogue. He never did that with any other important word beginning with *L*—only with *Lord*, as if he were Spencer Tracy playing the Irish priest in *Boys Town*. I figured the accent came from my Scots-Irish grandmother, Anna Verona Cacy, whom I never knew. Like Daddy, she was the source of many adventure stories. My father and grandmother had a corner on the *Laard.*

My dad, born John King Eareckson in 1900, should have been born a cabin boy on a clipper ship. He might as well have been. One of his earliest jobs was serving as errand boy for a crew of carpenters and shipbuilders who worked at the Baltimore dry docks, repairing wooden clipper ships. Those men's names were Angus Budreau and Georgy Banks—yes, the same guys who showed up in Daddy's

stories—as well as Joe Dowsit and Pete DeVeau, sailing with him out of the Sargasso Sea or prospecting gold in Wind River Canyon. They could handle an adz with the best, and they were rowdy ruffians who drank heartily and cursed loudly. Yet when they tried to entice my father to drink, he refused, as he often told us proudly. He chose instead to go for ice cream made on Pratt Street, near the harbor. Naturally, they dubbed him Ice Cream Johnny. I was convinced my father had made up the rhyme, "I scream, you scream, we all scream for ice cream." I found out otherwise only later, when the Good Humor man told me so.

When Johnny Eareckson became old enough to harness horses, he was up before dawn, hitching the family wagon and making deliveries for his father's coal company. He never completed his schooling, for reasons of which I'm not sure. By the age of nineteen, though, he had started his own flooring company, hurrying to and from jobs on his bicycle. He had to scramble to keep up with his three more-learned brothers: Uncle George, an accountant, Uncle Vince, an architect, and Uncle Milt, a preacher.

John usually came home late to the family's small, brick row house with marble front steps on Stricker Street. He was exhausted every day from heavy labor—a kind of labor different from what his brothers did at their desk, drawing board, or pulpit. There was hardly a night when, creaking open the back door, Johnny didn't encounter his mother, Anna Verona, sitting in the kitchen by the coal stove, an afghan on her lap and a Bible in her hands. She was reading and praying for her boys. Especially for Johnny, the son who didn't fit the mold of his brothers, the one whose heart was a bit more tender and tumultuous, full of passion and adventure. How Anna Eareckson loved her Johnny, she said with an Irish lilt.

And he loved her.

"I'll never forget," he said, shaking his head, "I'd come home from wrestling at the YMCA, my brothers from school and work downtown, and Mother would say to us, 'We need coal for the stove tonight. Vince, it's your turn.' My brothers and I would be clowning around by the sink, snapping towels at each other, and Vince would say that it was George's turn. 'Not mine, it's Milton's,' and Milt would point at me, and I would push Vince and . . . before you knew

it, there we'd see Mother, smudged with black dust, trudging up the cellar steps in her long skirts, carrying a heavy bucket of coal in her frail hands. It about busted my heart open."

My father's mother died young. She worked herself into an early grave. It was something Daddy never seemed able to forgive himself for, as if a family of four strapping, healthy boys could have—*should* have—somehow eased their mother's labor. It explained why, whenever my father spoke her maiden name, *Anna Verona Cacy*, he did so with such fondness of heart and with that Irish lilt. It also told me why he loved to sing "Let the Lower Lights Be Burning," one of my grandmother's favorite hymns.

Let the lower lights be burning,
Send a beam across the waves!
Some poor fainting, struggling seaman
You may rescue, you may save.

When Daddy and I got back to camp, we plopped our things down by the picnic table. Uncle George was closing up the Coleman stove. He had fried his prized soft-shell crabs for dinner that evening. Nearby, aglow with the light from the hissing propane lantern, my mother and a few aunts were putting things away in the coolers. Taking the lantern in hand, Mommy led my sisters and me to the little pup-tent beyond our camp, which served as our makeshift latrine. From there, she lit the way back to our huge army tent and through the wooden screen door. We slid off our sandy shorts and donned sweatshirts over our damp underwear. That's what I liked about camping at the beach—we could sleep in something fun beside pajamas.

Brushing the sand off our feet, we ducked under the mosquito netting and climbed into our cots. My cot was in the corner, and I loved it when the weather was pleasant enough to keep the tent's sides rolled up. That way, I could hear the adults whispering and the hissing of the lantern. As a night breeze flapped the netting, I would nestle into my pillow, clutch my stuffed rabbit, and fight off sleep as long as I could. I wanted to savor the taste of salt air, the aroma of coffee being prepared for tomorrow's breakfast, the hushed conversation of my mother, father, and relatives, and the cotton down of my

warm sleeping bag. I knew no mosquito buzzing overhead could invade. Under the protective netting, I was safe. As safe as under the covers in my own bedroom, gazing at my favorite bedside plaque, the one of the little girl in her boat.

Dear God, my little boat and I
are on your open sea.
Please guide us safely through the waves
my little boat and me.

I wondered what adventures tomorrow would bring. I hoped I would be wakened by the smell of sizzling bacon. Maybe Daddy would make his poached eggs—an egg fried in a hot skillet, a cup full of water splashed in at the last minute, a lid to cover, and salt and pepper to season. I hoped Uncle George had put the ice from Lewis Dairy into the big milk jug, so the water would taste icy-cold from the dipper. I wondered if my cousin Little Eddie and my sister Kathy and I would discover any horseshoe crabs or conch shells in the tide pools. Or if we would play horse, galloping up and down the sand hills that stretched for miles on either side of our tent. I hoped the day would be bright and hot, so that when I lay on the sand with my cheek against my forearm, I would smell the sweet Coppertone.

I hoped we would make castles in the sand with Aunt Lee and Uncle Eddie, dig after burrowing sand crabs, watch the waves erase our footprints, shower when the sun went down, and slather Noxzema on our sun-pinkened skin. In the evening, after crab cakes, we'd help Mom wash the pots and pans in the ocean. Then we would drive to Rehoboth Beach, to walk the boardwalk and have ice cream or hot french fries with vinegar. Most of all, I hoped we would enjoy another fire on the beach. And another story from Daddy. Or Uncle George singing "Ramona," while holding up his cigar and leading us all like an impresario.

Whatever I hoped, I would not be disappointed. The flapping of the mosquito netting hypnotized us into sleep. "Goodnight, girls," I heard Daddy whisper. Or maybe—*I hoped*—it was God.

I don't know if they make many fathers like the one who raised me. No, I don't think so. How many daddies saw the Wright Broth-

ers plane fly over Baltimore, or one of the first Model-T Fords chug down Howard Street? How many dads weave their children into a whole world of adventure, through the tales they spin by heart? My father traded with Indians in British Columbia and fought bears near the Yukon border—yes, I'm sure he did fight that bear with his hands, and that it wasn't just a story. Really. But even if the one about the bear didn't happen, I knew my father's tender heart and fine character and love for the Laard were real.

The next evening, just as I'd hoped, we returned to camp from Rehoboth Beach early enough for a fire. Soon the driftwood that my sisters, Linda, Jay, Kathy, and I had collected during the day was roaring, and the stars were sprinkled above us from one horizon to the other, like vast powdered sugar. The curling of the waves glowed phosphorescent from the red tide, and my Uncle Eddie had just finished singing "You Are My Sunshine."

"Do your poem, Daddy," I chimed, "the one about the bar." Ever the literalist, I had only recently discovered that this, my father's classic recitation, wasn't about a saloon.

Daddy stuck his hands in the pockets of his baggy pants and stared at the fire. Then he began his litany, which was more Eareckson than Tennyson. The poem came from somewhere deep down in my father's breast. As he spoke its haunting lines, I wanted badly for someone to please reach up and hold onto him, lest he turn toward the waves and cross the bar without me.

Sunset and evening star,
And one clear call for me,
And may there be no moaning of the bar,
When I put out to sea.
But such a tide as moving seems asleep,
Too full for sound and foam,
When that which drew from out the boundless deep
Turns again home.
Twilight and evening bell,
And after that the dark!
And may there be no sadness of farewell,
When I embark;

For tho' from out our bourne of time and place
The flood may bear me far,
I hope to see my Pilot face to face
When I have crossed the bar.

No one ever broke the silence that followed one of my father's poems. We simply kept listening while the lines settled in, the way you'd listen to a retreating sheet of surf before the next heavy wave crashed down. I didn't understand the poem, except for the part about seeing the Pilot—I surmised that was God. But my heart nearly twisted in half to think that my father loved a poem about dying.

I remember reaching for Kathy's hand. I knew she would understand my fear. We shared a bed together back home. Often, after Daddy finished telling a bedtime story, and we heard him walk down the stairs, we lay in the dark listening to our breathing. I reached for her hand once then and murmured, "What if something awful happens?"—I wanted to add "to Daddy" but couldn't choke out the words.

"I know what you mean," my sister whispered back. "I know what you mean about Dad." She held my hand then, and she held it now too, in the dancing shadows formed by the fire.

Daddy closed the poem with the same beautiful hymn we'd sung the night before. My sisters and I crescendoed on the line,

Some poor fainting, struggling seaman,
You may rescue, you may save.

Once again, all felt safe.

Surely my father rescued poor, fainting, struggling seamen. If not on the Sargasso Sea, then for certain during his merchant marine days. Yet never did I dream then that, in the not-too-distant future, I would be the poor, struggling, fainting one, going down for the third time, drowning in waves of grief higher than any surf. More terrifying than any Dutchman's curse.

And even Daddy wouldn't be able to help.

Chapter Two

Listen, my sons, to a father's instruction; pay attention and gain understanding.

Proverbs 4:1

Memory means everything to me. I was the kind of kid who could look at an African violet on a window sill and later retrace in my mind the blue-green of the stamen, the fuzzy leaves, and the soft purple flowers, when others might forget there was even a window sill.

My memory became all-important to me in 1967. That was the year I was paralyzed in a diving accident.

I remained in the hospital for nearly two years. Most of that time I spent on a Stryker frame, lying face-up staring at ceiling tiles or being flipped face-down to stare at floor tiles. With a body that could basically no longer move or feel, I pulled up from my memory bank every jaunt to the beach, every horseback ride, every tennis game, every song, *everything*, and turned it over like a diamond, savoring its color and light. If I couldn't use my hands anymore, I would bear down hard to recall what it felt like to hold a bottle of Coke and feel the ice-cold droplets run down the glass and over my fingers. If I could never walk, I would revive every sensation of bending, stretching, stooping, running, or wiggling my toes.

Memories were all I had back then. They became as reassuring to me as gazing up from our beach campfire to check how far a constellation had drifted. Or snuggling under the covers back home in bed and gazing up at the stars my father had painted on my bedroom ceiling.

Back in 1955, I think I was the only kid in my neighborhood—maybe in our whole town—who went to sleep each night under the stars, even if they were only painted. Daddy seemed to understand that children love sleeping under a night sky, and so, since we couldn't always be at camp, he brought camp to us. And since Daddy

was a housing contractor, he built our rambling, rustic stone-and-timber, lodge-like house where all the nooks, crannies, arches and banisters, gables and dormer windows—all hand-crafted in warm oak and Douglas fir—and all the massive stone chimneys, crowned by elk and moose horns, just waited for children to appear. Living there was like living at camp. It was fun.

From any room you could hear, "Ready or not, here I come!" because ours was the perfect house for hide-and-seek. Terror and joy seized our hearts as our feet frantically raced to find the ideal hiding spot. You could choose the second-story balcony. Or dive behind the big wooden chest in the nook at the top of the back stairs. Or hide behind the large drop-leaf table in the dining room. Or wrap yourself in Mother's raccoon coat in her closet, if you could stand the smell of mothballs. I didn't worry that my heavy breathing or stifled giggles would give me away; our large home embraced us and played along with our every game.

Other rooms joined in. The living room with its tiger rug in the corner, bear rug in the middle, and elk antlers on either end, could be on one day, a jungle; on another, the Northwest Territories. "Daddy bagged those when he was trading with Indians in the Yukon," I said of the antlers. I had no idea what the Yukon was, but it sounded far and distant, wild and exotic, a place where my father could really find elk that big. Linda even got in on the game, insisting the gigantic logs supporting the ceiling "really came from Captain Hook's ship. Really."

For years our living room played along, keeping our childhood secrets safe. I always assumed our house was typical, until I went to other kids' houses to play. I discovered homes with white carpet, low ceilings, "do not touch" silver services on buffet tables, and porcelain Marie Antoinette figurines atop fireplace mantles. Even the couches were covered in clear, stiff plastic. Those houses had sheer curtains, see-through china cabinets, and absolutely nowhere to hide. It was then I realized something that would stick with me for years to come. The Earecksons were different. And maybe a little odd.

It was a fact I pondered under my bedroom-ceiling stars. Actually, it wasn't my bedroom, it was Kathy's. She was slightly older than I was, and she had the room first. That meant she had dibs on

the best dresser drawers, the larger side of the closet, and the best side of the bed—next to the door. Usually before lights out, Kathy would kneel on the bed, draw an imaginary line down the middle, and say, "See this?" From the headboard to the baseboard, her finger traced the demilitarized zone between us. "This is *my* side of the bed, and you better not cross this line."

I was five years old at the time, and the last of four girls. I was afraid to cross her, or her line.

Rooming with my sister was not that bad, although I was constantly reminded to close the bathroom door after a shower so the moisture wouldn't warp her dresser. She had neatly taped cotton balls on all four dresser corners to protect the wood from me and my toys. I couldn't understand why she prized that dresser so—it wasn't as if she was about to get married at the age of nine. No matter. It felt good to lie in bed next to someone, feel her warmth under the covers, listen to our parents' hushed conversation downstairs, and through the glow of the hall light, gaze at angels on our bedroom wall.

Yes, angels. Three of them. A brunette, a blonde, and a redhead.

Our bedroom was a little like an attic dormer, and Daddy had painted the angels on the slanted wall to our left. *There's no one like my dad*, I prided myself in him. *He can sing, tell stories, and paint angels!* Not only that, on the entire wall behind our headboard Daddy had oil-painted Jack climbing a beanstalk, an old woman living in a shoe, rock-a-bye baby in a tree top, the Pied Piper with children in tow, a cow jumping over a moon, and finally, Humpty Dumpty sitting on top of the door jamb. In the middle of this menagerie, he hung a simple painting he rendered of a dog and a boy kneeling by his bed in prayer.

Sometimes I twisted around on my elbows and peered up at the nursery-rhyme and fairy-tale characters or the dog-and-boy painting. But mainly, it was the angels that captured my attention.

The three angels nearly filled the slanted wall-ceiling, all singing with sheet music, their mouths open like big O's, and their feet firmly planted in the clouds. The first angel looked like my oldest sister, Linda. That made me chuckle. Linda was anything but an angel. Almost ten years older than I, she was into James Dean, slicking back

her hair with Vaseline, rolling up her jeans and rolling down her socks, scuffing her new saddle shoes, and wearing oversized cotton shirts with the collar turned up. At school, it was too-tight sweaters with straight skirts. Elvis was king and Pat Boone was a nerd—milk and white bucks were not her style. Not that Linda walked on the wild side; she just played the part. Once, when I had to sleep in the room she and Jay Kay shared, she turned out the lights, climbed into bed next to me, and, after a few minutes of silence in the dark, turned and whispered in my ear, "Would you like to see the werewolf that lives in my closet?"

It was from Linda I learned the spirit song for Milford Mill High School:

I go to Milford Mill, so pity me
There are no boys in the vicinity
And at nine o'clock they bolt the doors
I don't know why the heck I ever went there for
And then it's on the bus and homeward bound
I'd like to burn that durn school to the ground
I'd like to smoke, drink, cuss, neck,
Be a wreck, what the heck
I go to Milford Senior High.

That year, my parents placed her in an all girls' school.

The angel in the middle had blue eyes and a thick tousle of blonde curls. I guessed that was Jay Kay, except for the fact my sister had brown eyes. Jay was my favorite angel. She was a few years younger than Linda and tamer. She liked Elvis, but less for "Jail House Rock" than for "Oh, Let Me Be Your Teddy Bear." Jay looked just like Betty, the fair-haired girl with the ponytail in all the *Archie* comics. She didn't treat me like a tagalong. She liked me. "Jonathan Grundy," she affectionately called me. When Jay played "Sentimental Journey" on our upright piano, I tried to mimic her. When she sewed skirts, I gave it a try. When she artfully messed with her hair, I twisted mine up. I couldn't understand why Bob Barker didn't want Jay as Miss Maryland every September when the Miss America Pageant came on.

It was never clear who the red-headed angel was. Kathy and I hadn't yet been born when Daddy painted them, so maybe he filled

the space with Linda's next-door neighbor friend, Audrey Espey, who had auburn hair. That bothered me. I studied the mural to try to figure out a way my father could paint me in it. There I'd be, the hazel-eyed towhead angel, with pigtails that stuck out like the ears of a Yorkshire terrier. I was Rocket J. Squirrel's niece.

Then again, maybe Kathy should be painted next, not me. Kath-Kath, as I called her, deserved it. She was, well, different. Chubbier, with a generous splattering of freckles and a silly grin, she was often the brunt of much teasing by Linda and sometimes Jay: "Fatty, fatty, boomba-latty," they chided. Sometimes at night, lying next to me, I heard Kathy crying.

It was not easy being the youngest. I wasn't teased the way Kathy was, but I was the end of the line. I didn't have first dibs on the T-bone from Daddy's plate at dinner. It was hand-me-down jeans, dresses, and underwear, used bikes, scuffed skates, and musty sleeping bags. The real insult was when I was dumped at Grandmom's house on Saturday mornings, after which Daddy and my sisters drove away to the horse stables.

"You can't go horseback riding with us. You're a twerp. You'll slow everybody down," Linda said.

As if that weren't bad enough, I faced the boredom of watching Mom clean my grandmother's house all day. And so, as Daddy's truck pulled away, I wrestled against my mother's grip, wailing and kicking the curb with my cowboy boots. "Enough of this!" Mother demanded. Since she was the chief disciplinarian of the family and could swat a behind pretty hard, I'd clam up.

Underneath, however, my fierce competitive spirit festered. Anger too. I was not about to be left in the dust. Or told I was too little to ride a bike. Or that I could not go horseback riding until next year. I would insist my sisters respect my "Seat saved!" when I got up for a snack during *The Red Skelton Show*. I scrambled not only to keep up but to excel. I would learn how to play the piano better than Jay, learn the words to more Elvis songs than Linda, cross Kathy's stupid line in bed if I wanted, handle a tennis racket as well as Mother, and—*and what about my father?*

The thought of outdoing Daddy was unthinkable. Yet, as I lay in bed pondering the angels, I wondered if I could paint. Perhaps as

well as Daddy. *I felt guilty.* But I couldn't deny it. As I examined the painted angels, it occurred to me their hands looked funny. *Hmmm, he didn't get the hands right . . . I bet I could do better.*

Life was a competitive race to keep up with older, more athletic sisters and a father and mother with their own swimming, diving, wrestling, and tennis medals. There was no time to gripe over the fact that God had assigned me the lowest rung of the Eareckson ladder. No chance for whining or hanging onto anyone's coattails. It was keep up with the rest or get left behind.

For all the competitiveness, there was still room—lots of room—for gratitude. I'm not sure how my parents cultivated a spirit of gratitude in us, but it was commonplace for us to express appreciation for everything from food to Friday night roller-skating at Vernon's Roller Rink. "Daddy, *thank* you," or "Boy, Mom, this tastes great!" Maybe showing appreciation came from seeing the way Daddy always said, "Mommy, you're something else!" I remember noticing during dinner at a friend's house how no one said anything as bowls of food were placed on the table. I felt badly for the mother. Around our table, gratitude was ingrained early on when, with a nod from Mother, our father would lead us, saying:

> *Come Lord Jesus, be our guest*
> *let this food to us be blest.*
> *Make me kind and make me good,*
> *help me to love Thee as I should.*
> *Amen.*

If I knew safety on the beach at Delaware, it was peace I knew at home. Yes, there was the occasional slammed door and "You took the blouse out of my cupboard! Gimme it back!" and "You said *what* to my boyfriend?" There were nights when I crossed Kathy's line, kicked her in bed, she pinched back, and I screamed bloody murder, to which our mother threatened from the bottom of the stairs, "I better not hear another peep from you girls, or I'm coming up there!"

Still our home reflected peace. The kind of peace I sensed when lying in bed and listening to the night breeze rustle through the tall oak trees outside the open window. Or the way the wind would

tinkle the glass chimes at the back door. Or how, when the breeze subsided, I could hear the crickets call. Or the peace that would wash over me just knowing the angels on the wall were watching. Most of all, that my parents were downstairs, talking in friendly, low tones, eating ice cream and watching *Mitch Miller* and his men sing on TV. It was pure peace. It all made me believe the Lord Jesus really *had* come and been our guest.

On special nights after dinner, Daddy pulled out his paints. He kept his large wooden paint box underneath his desk, a box I was forbidden to touch, let alone open. My heart raced and I squirmed while holding onto the end of his desk. "Oh boy, we're going to *paint!*"

"No," my father would remind me, "*I'm* going to paint."

Painting was my father's sole hobby. I kept my distance but watched closely. Setting his tubes of color in a row to the left—he was left-handed—he poured turpentine and linseed oil in little metal cups, wiped the edges with his rag, and placed the cloth out of the way. The aroma of paint filled the room.

Daddy took each of his brushes and began gently bending the stiff bristles, eyeing me the whole time. "Want to open that tube of blue for me?"

I eagerly twisted off the little cap on the wrinkled tube and handed it back to him, at which point he squeezed a generous glob of shiny, dark blue color on the palette. Then red, yellow, and a big glob of zinc white. The colors had fascinating names like cobalt blue, burnt umber, crimson red, and Payne's gray, and they sat on the palette like wet jewels. Daddy then propped a large piece of white Masonite against the bookshelf that backed his desk. He adjusted his desk lamp, picked up a large wide carpenter's pencil, and began sketching.

"What are you drawing?"

"You'll see."

I leaned on my elbows and observed how he lightly touched his canvas here and there, making broad, big lines. I spied a *National Geographic* magazine to his right, opened to a photograph of an Indian on a horse. I figured that's what he was drawing, but the marks he made on the canvas didn't resemble a horse at all.

Remembering the funny hands on the angel painting in my room, I felt I must remind him of this.

"That doesn't look like a horse."

"I know. But it will." He worked on in silence.

"When will it look like a horse?"

"When I finish the composition."

"What's a compo-o-o?"

"Composition. It's what is underneath the painting," he said, looking at me over his glasses.

Whatever that compo-zit-thing was, I still wasn't sure why Daddy didn't just start painting or, at least drawing, the horse. The stuff underneath the painting couldn't be *that* important. After many long pauses, erasures, and corrections, he put down the pencil and leaned back to look at his work. It was an interesting but obscure combination of squares and circles, none of which resembled a horse or an Indian.

"See what I've done?" my dad asked as he adjusted the lamp. Parents are funny. They know you don't know the answer to the question asked, but they ask it anyway.

I leaned over. "Hmmmm." I was embarrassed for him.

"That's my composition."

Now I was really disappointed. He had worked all this time to produce *that?*

"Joni, the composition is the most important part of a painting. If I don't get it right here," he said, pointing to his canvas with the pencil, "then I won't get this right," he patted the *National Geographic.*

I looked at the array of squares, lines, and circles. "But nobody will see this stuff," I said.

"That's why it's so important. A composition is like the bones underneath your skin. Like the foundation of this house. My horse and Indian won't look right unless I make a balanced arrangement of these squares and circles." He paused a long moment, and then added, "It's like having the Lord in your heart. Nobody can see him inside you," he said, pointing to my chest, "but he makes everything right on the outside."

The Lord in my heart. Now there was a statement that raised weird questions. Like, how does he get in there? I kept imagining

a tiny Jesus figure living inside my heart, making everything go smoothly on the inside, like a little traffic cop. There were many times I wasn't so sure he was in there, but Daddy seemed to think so. I think he believed if we sang the following hymn often enough, the lesson would rub off on us.

Since Jesus came into my heart,
Since Jesus came into my heart,
Floods of joy o'er my soul
Like the sea billows roll,
Since Jesus came into my heart.

I felt floods of joy fill my soul when we held out that last note, where the sea billows rolled. But then, an hour later, when I found myself playing with matches or coloring in the little white tiles on the bathroom floor or sneaking change off Daddy's dresser, I knew in my heart of hearts that Jesus wasn't there. Or if he was there, I'd thrown a wet blanket on him. I wondered if there was really a balanced arrangement of spiritual squares and circles inside of me.

Daddy went back to his squares and circles while I sat on the floor and pulled out my Roy Rogers coloring book. I flipped to my finished crayoned pages of Trigger. "Look, Daddy." He would smile and suggest I do another one.

Mother especially prized a crumpled church bulletin I had once scribbled on. We were visiting a church, the sermon was boring, and I was given the bulletin and a pen to keep me quiet. I was intrigued by the photograph of the church building on the front—it had many gables, a steeple and belfry, a side building, steep steps at the front, and bushes all around. While the speaker droned, I sat slumped, swinging my feet and studying the photo. After staring for a while, I got an idea. I took the pen and drew a little devil on the sidewalk getting ready to swing his pitchfork through the stained glass window. In the belfry I drew an angel aiming his machine gun at him. Other devils cropped up behind the bushes only to find bigger, stronger angels with pistols and swords, poised, ready to chop them down. One angel I drew was sliding down the steep slope of the roof in order to ambush a devil doing graffiti on the church's welcome sign.

While Daddy kept painting, I colored. They say the mark of artistic talent in a child is when he or she grabs any old color and begins smearing it willy-nilly all over the page, that real talent can be spotted when a youngster is brave enough to color outside the lines as would a budding Picasso or Andy Warhol. I disagree. And I would have disagreed as a kid had someone told me that. To me, the prescribed lines in the coloring book were—lo and behold—composition. Somebody who knew better than me had put those lines there, and I instinctively obeyed them, reserving my bravery for the coat of the horse where I'd shade tan into soft brown into dark brown, so as to contour the neck muscles or accent the legs. The face of Roy Rogers required at least four tones of pink and peach. Bullet, the German Shepherd, had to have gray, brown, and black.

Finally I finished another Trigger drawing—this one also had in it Buttermilk, Dale Evans's horse. I stood up and showed it to my father.

"He-e-ey, this is good." He was impressed.

Nothing catapulted me into art more vigorously than his approval. A few words, a glance, a smile, or a nod of the head can strike a match to a child's creative spirit, and I wonder if fathers understand this power of casting a vision. It's like surf-fishing at the ocean, where you lean back and cast a long line, throwing it out there for all you're worth. You're bound to get a bite. My father cast far, knowing full well I was bound to get hooked on art.

"Come over here," Daddy said. I stood up, and he hiked me up on his knee and swung me around. There I sat, front and center, at eye level with his canvas. He reached for a brush and wrapped my short fingers around it, just so, as though he were a tennis coach instructing the proper grasp on a racket. He then covered my right hand with his left. Together we jabbed the brush into the blue paint, smeared it on the palette, added a tad of yellow, and mixed well. There before my astonished eyes, we produced green. A much smoother, truer green than using crayons.

"Hold on," he said, proceeding to lift my hand with the paint-laden brush to the canvas. I was mesmerized as together we swept and swirled our way into the forest behind the squares and circles.

We moved quickly, adding a bit of tan here and a touch of blue there. I tried to second-guess his strokes, but whenever I started to wield strength, I heard, "Relax a bit." I tried to go limp in his grasp, but we were moving too fast. None of it made sense to me, but the euphoria of creating something big and beautiful with my father kept me breathless. I could hardly wait to see what we were doing.

The time went by too quickly, and I was disappointed when Daddy released our grip from the brush. Placing it down, he asked, gesturing toward the picture, "You did pretty good, don't you think?"

To my amazement, I saw the shape of an Indian on a horse, appearing out of a forest and hills. Just like in *National Geographic.* It was stunning. "But I didn't do that," I corrected him.

"Yes, you did."

There went Daddy again, giving me credit for things I knew I didn't and couldn't do. Things I knew I wasn't, like a lower light showing lost people the way or having a heart in which Jesus lived or being an artist who could create masterpieces worth framing. Then again, as I reflected on how much at home I felt in front of the canvas, perhaps my father wasn't far off. Maybe my Triggers and Buttermilks could turn into magnificent steeds on which Indians with bows and arrows would sit, hands to their brows, shielding their eyes from the western sun, scouting the wide horizons. Perhaps compo-whatever was something I did possess. In my life and on a canvas.

"Boy, did you luck out," Kathy whispered that night in bed.

In the dark, I smiled a Cheshire cat grin. Our father wasn't the sort who naturally hugged his little girls, reaching down to pick them up and give them a squeeze or a kiss on the cheek. In fact, I hardly remember him ever hugging me—maybe people weren't brought up to do that in his day. But to sit like a princess on the knee of the king of our most magnificent home, to be invited to join him in his private hobby, to touch his untouchable paints, and to create with him a scene worthy of the real Trigger, well . . .

The angels must have been smiling on me that night. And they were. Blonde- brown- and red-haired ones.