

REVELATIONS
of a
Single Woman



loving the life i didn't expect

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CHAPTER 1

An Uncharted Desert Isle



Over the years, a number of friends have shared with me that the best thing they have ever done was to jettison the crazy dysfunctions or strangling grip of the generations before them. Shaking the dust off their feet from legacies of abuse or addiction has been a privilege. The past, more than one friend has said, needs to be left behind. But while I have related to this in part—I'd love to be fully free of the racism tainting my Southern heritage or the devaluing of "feminine" traits such as mystery or intuition implicit within my Protestant background—there are certain aspects of my past that I have always longed to hold on to. Modify, perhaps, but hold on to nevertheless.

I think of my mom, who was married in her early twenties and had three children. She's the daughter of a woman who married in her early twenties and had three children. And *she* was the daughter of a woman who married in her early twenties and had two. An assumed

paradigm shaped my mother's, grandmother's, and great-grandmother's lives. It centered around some givens—like loving God and people; marrying young, having babies, and building families; laughing in the always-busy kitchen; and inviting others in. There is a core legacy of vegetable gardens, rolled-up sleeves, hot soup, and blanket shaking. These women's lives were not limited to those givens by any stretch—all three went to college, ran organizations, and, in my mother's case, served on boards, but the givens were the building blocks on which life was constructed. I have not wanted to let those givens go. I always figured that twenty-five might be a nice age for marriage.

Of course, I've never hankered to morph into June Cleaver from *Leave It to Beaver*—after all, I like to wear jeans, and my vision has always outstripped domestic duties. But June Cleaver was never these matriarchs' reality, and she's not what I'm talking about. I'm talking about a framework that, in my experience, created space for good, if decidedly imperfect, things to happen. Good things like forming communities of messy families which, headed by one man and one woman imperfectly loving one another, in turn created space for imperfect kids to live, explore, fail, and dream.

The reality is, however, that these and many more experiences as givens have been leaking out of the broader culture for a long time. Their slow exit has left my guts in a low-grade cringe for a while. Like a child straddling the center of a seesaw, I've teetered between that solid world of givens and the increasing counterweight of other worlds over the years.

There was the early lesson learned when Mr. Nixon's cronies (including my good friend's dad) went to jail for Watergate—*can't trust the president*. There were beloved and trusted high school teachers who promoted their confident agnosticism—*teachers don't always have all the answers*. Or a dear college friend who, after falling in love and getting pregnant, endured a wrenching abortion while I made vain,

nineteen-year-old attempts to walk with her—*life isn't always easy*. There were those two neighborhood girls who each married young (in their early twenties), but then each divorced before the dust had settled—the “*marry young*” thing doesn't always work. Add to that a few experiences with men who were keen to get to know me until it cost them some personal convenience—*guys, who are supposed to “lead,” aren't all dying for the marriage dance*.

Throw on top of that the confusion about a profession—Just what is this whole career thing supposed to be about anyway? Is it always progress to move up the ladder? And how do you know?—and the list could go on and on. Whatever gaps in this life have remained have been steadily filled by the relentless onslaught of change agents: microwaves, e-mail, shifting national demographics, and economic globalization. You get the picture.

My mother said once in a moment of candor, “I feel as if I've enriched you for a world that no longer trades in our currency.” A treasure chest of Confederate cash, you might say. She was, at least in part, right. While I still know how to grow tomatoes and make vegetable soup from scratch—and do—the wildly shifting culture has a gravitational pull that I've not been able to control. The seesaw has tilted, and the bottom line is that, try as I might, I haven't been able to find my way back home, at least to the home of my mothers. The past really is the past. As much as I've wanted to deny it, and as hard as I've worked to change it (find that man, simplify my life, build a world where I know how to operate), I am in my upper thirties, single, making my own money (of sorts), and foiled in almost every attempt to birth some past paradigm into my present life. My life is now sprinkled with—or, more honestly, *shaped by*—irrepressible technology, speed, and change. That's reality.

I hate this because sometimes I feel scared. It's like looking over my shoulder and noticing that the bridge leading back home has collapsed. That sinking feeling in my gut returns. The theme song from

Gilligan's Island pops into my mind: "The ship struck ground on the shores of this uncharted desert isle, with Gilligan, the skipper too, the millionaire and his wife . . ." An uncharted desert isle: that's where I have landed.

Growing up, I read (at least four times) the Laura Ingalls Wilder *Little House on the Prairie* series. I thought nothing could be more fun than to be a pioneer with a big, strong "Manly look-alike" husband. It seemed as if a pioneer life would stretch me in its simple, if relentless, rigor and that somehow fighting out hard winters with others—milk-ing the cow in a blizzard, making snow ice cream, etc.—would satisfy me deeply. However, I never dreamed that the uncharted desert island in which I would "pioneer" would be in Washington, DC, and that I'd first have to learn how to find a skipper, a millionaire, and the rest amid hundreds of thousands of people. But here I am.

I think of a greeting card I once received. The cover pictured a windblown cow sporting sunglasses against the backdrop of whirling neon lights. The caption read, "Dorothy, you're not in Kansas anymore." It cracked me up even as I cringed. "But I liked Kansas! If this is Oz, send me home."

The truth is, however, that although there might be no place like home, there are also no sparkly red shoes to get me back there. I have clicked my heels and mantra-ed until I'm blue in the face, but I'm still stuck in a world replete with wicked witches, fake wizards, and a bunch of kindhearted munchkins (not to mention a few other traveling companions). It feels a lot like an uncharted desert isle where all I have left is an internal imprint, one that shaped my expectations for life but doesn't fit easily into the world I have been catapulted into.

So what do I do? If in my heart of hearts, after the adrenaline of being marooned on the uncharted desert isle dies down, I really do miss Kansas—or more accurately, the best parts of Tyler, Texas, or Charlottesville, Virginia—what do I do? The "doer" in me determines to dream up alternative realities: a commune in the Virginia foothills, an

urban enclave with diverse neighbors, front porches, and corner stores . . . the whole village raising the children . . . perhaps going on a special mission to a foreign land, with a team who would function "all for one and one for all." However, my few attempts in these directions have not worked; it's easier to dream than to create. So my temptation, as you might imagine, is finally to sit on the stairs of my rented house and cry. Or, when I'm in an ornery mood, circle the wagons and try to hold off the outside world.

Problem is, I can't do either of these things for long. Eventually, one has to get up off the stairs to go eat. And meanwhile, living in an age of global everything, it's virtually impossible to create an insular world. However, even if I could overcome these obstacles and hide, one big barrier remains: I can't escape the real presence of a God who continues to call me to love him and to love others, regardless of where I find myself.

My mom, in her humility, was basically right. The culture of my past has bequeathed me a chest full of currency, much of it now undervalued; I know rules for games that almost nobody plays anymore. Rightly or wrongly, salad fork placement isn't so crucial in a fast food world. But one piece of my past that is galvanized in my soul, one thing that neither seesaws, nor wrecked boats, nor new territories seem able to knock out of me, is the reality of words I heard my mother and her mother (and perhaps her mother too) say: "Just remember, only two things are eternal: God (and his Word), and the souls of people."

It sounds so simplistic, so quaintly anachronistic. And the English major in me has asked questions over the years like: What does it mean that something is *eternal*? What is the *Word of God*? And please, who really can define the *soul* of a person? But even as I've asked, I've not been able to escape the reality behind those words. Like a compass, those words have pointed me to a God who is still real, even after dreams have failed to materialize. They have pointed me to bigger

truths, even when my little life looks like nothing I ever anticipated. They have served as “true north” for me: what matters is God and people.

Honestly, I’m very glad that there is something that lasts, something that is real, something that matters. In college I decided that if Kafka was right and we are in essence cockroaches (my very lay interpretation of his philosophy), then I’d accept that. But amazingly, in spite of the roller coaster of change and so many givens having been flung into space, I somehow continue to “know in my knower”—as an elderly African-American woman I once met called gut-level conviction—that God and people really *are*. These building blocks are eternal.

Frameworks about when and whom and how to marry might be up for grabs; confusion over the nature of work might continue; debates about the essentials—or lack thereof—of gender might rage; and a myriad of other wild cards might get thrown onto the table, but really, none of that ultimately matters. As important as these questions are, the answers to them do not, at root, define me. Sure, I’ve always hoped that my life might be a Broadway musical, with big choruses singing and dancing while Mr. Right and I twirl into oblivion. But in an unanticipated way, the chaos of the culture in which I now find myself twirling is becoming for me a strange, unsolicited gift with far greater depth than Rodgers and Hammerstein could have ever foreseen.

In large part, the gift has taken the form of a push. Living in a world I cannot even pretend to control, whose rules prove consistently elusive, I’ve been pushed toward creative dependence on God and other people. I carry in my mind an image of the westward move of the railroad across the United States: I see sweaty people riding on one of those flat train cars propelled by their own effort. (Can you picture the team of people pumping the handle back and forth?) In contrast, I’ve wanted to run on an inherited grooved track, flying smoothly like

a high-speed train into the horizon. And I have spent endless hours of analysis, angst, and tears trying to bring this about. But instead, what's really been happening is that I—with the much-needed help of so many others—have simply been slowly moving forward, laying one section of track at a time, praying that wild animals won't eat any of us along the way.

Lest the picture be too one-sided, however, I have gotten wonderful tastes of life en route—moments when, gathered around that homemade soup, laughter infects a table full of friends; times when I see a group I'm leading coalesce around a burgeoning vision; or instances when, driving in the car, I gaze out the window at the ever-dancing sky and feel in awe of the loving people God has woven into my life. These tastes are delicious. They are perhaps doubly sweet because they often emerge out of what can seem like the lifeless ashes of a busy, cynical, and detached age.

I'm starting to suspect that the craziness of our current culture and the loss of so many givens might be proving, at least in my life, to be the thing that Sheldon Vanauken referenced in his book *A Severe Mercy*. His wife's early death was the push that catapulted him into a far greater understanding of the love they had shared and of the God who had made that love possible. Though he grieved her passing, he could not deny the gifts that came with it. For me, the craziness and loss have shaken me so hard that though my teeth haven't fallen out (yet), my tight grip on the good things from the past, real or imagined, has been loosened. My hands are more open to receive whatever gifts God wants to give me in the present.

The Old Testament patriarch Abraham was commended by a New Testament writer for his willingness to keep going even when the path was not clear. "By faith," the author of the book of Hebrews wrote, "Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, *even though he did not know where he was going.*"⁴ Virtually clueless about where this journey would take

him, by *faith*—by knowing in his knower what is real and eternal—he kept going, wandering through much desert on his journey.

Perhaps Abraham got scared and burst into tears along the way. Or perhaps as the adrenaline of the journey wore off he dreamed of going back to the days when he was named Abram and lived in good old Ur of the Chaldeans, as his neck of the woods was called. Maybe not; I might just be imposing my own psychological profile on the man. But regardless, like Abraham, I want to keep going by faith. For better or for worse, my life does not look much like those of my foremothers. But regardless, I gratefully take with me the inherited and life-giving knowledge that God and people matter. In the end, these are the best building blocks I could have. These truths are the rails on which I sweat, rest, and am learning to run.