

A MEMOIR

All the Pretty Things

THE STORY OF A
SOUTHERN GIRL WHO
WENT THROUGH FIRE
TO FIND HER WAY HOME

Eddie Wadsworth

All the Pretty Things is a transparent journey into the heart of a little girl whose broken father is her hero. I haven't read a memoir like this since *The Glass Castle*. It takes you to the hard places, and those places bring you home. Highly recommended.

EMILY T. WIERENGA

Founder of The Lulu Tree and author of *Atlas Girl* and *Making It Home*

A bittersweet mix of crushing heartbreak and wry humor, Edie's story captured me the very first page and didn't let go. An honest and unapologetic look at the reality of growing up amidst poverty and alcoholism in East Tennessee, *All the Pretty Things* is ultimately a story of redemption we can all relate to—and one we all need to read. I literally couldn't put it down. If you only read one book this year, let this be it!

RUTH SOUKUP

New York Times bestselling author of *Living Well, Spending Less* and *Unstuffed*

Edie Wadsworth is an observer of people, a lover of words, and a masterful storyteller. All those qualities converge to make *All the Pretty Things* one of the best memoirs I've ever read. I sat down with the intention of reading the first few chapters and looked up hours later to realize I'd finished the entire thing. And her story, her people, and her heart stayed with me for days afterward. You will find yourself alternately cheering, laughing out loud, and crying, but I guarantee you won't be able to walk away unmoved.

MELANIE SHANKLE

New York Times bestselling author of *Nobody's Cuter Than You*

Part Southern gothic, Part C. S. Lewis, part pure poetry, *All the Pretty Things* is one of those books that will stay with me for a long time. Beautiful, heartbreaking, redemptive. I knew going into it that I'd be captivated by Edie's story, but what I didn't expect is how much I'd fall in love with her people. Her affection for those people, in the midst of heartache and hardship and hilarity and everything in between, makes the already vivid images in this

book just flat-out leap off the page. Now that I've finished reading it, I'm more awed by the author—and the Author of it all—than ever before. You will be too. Don't miss it.

SOPHIE HUDSON

Author of Giddy Up, Eunice and Home Is Where My People Are

The most beautiful things are born in pressure and birthed through pain. Pain is the silent author behind thousands of great stories and songs. Edie's story is born of pain and rejection—it is raw-throated and broken open; it is fragile and strong and bright. It is ten thousand fireflies dancing over a Tennessee field. And Edie is masterful in the telling. Read this book—but more than that, open your soul and let this book read you.

JOHN SOWERS

Author of Heroic Path

Edie's memoir is a rare gem in this world of books, one where I actually felt like I was growing up right alongside her. You will laugh and cry and cheer and be dismayed. Her storytelling is gripping, and it is easy to find ourselves in her shoes, looking for all the pretty things in this harsh world as we live each day, putting one foot in front of the other. The pinnacle of this piece of art are her encounters with the fiery pursuit of God—the same relentless pursuit He uses to come after you and me, no matter how we try to burn it all down.

BRI McKOY

Writer at OurSavoryLife.com, speaker, leader of Compassion Bloggers

Through Edie's blog we've come to know her as a gracious, joyful soul with a passion for loving and serving others. Now within these pages we meet the innocent little girl who loved with a brave fierceness, and we champion her on as she gracefully walks through fire time and time again. We cheer alongside the perpetual cheerleader as she dusts off the ashes and holds forth with an open, hospitable hand a crown of beauty adorned with all the pretty things.

PAIGE KNUDSEN

Lifestyle and portrait photographer and blogger

Eddie Wadsworth drops the needle on her life's record and lets it play. The result is a vernacular collection of moments both beautiful and terrible; in other words, intensely human. Each reader will hear it a bit differently, but I was struck by two constant refrains: The Father will never forsake us, and there's something hauntingly precious about a daddy. Thanks, Edie.

JOHN D. BLASÉ

Poet and author

I looked forward to reading Edie's memoir from the day I learned she was writing it. In *All the Pretty Things*, she shares the story of her impoverished childhood in the Appalachian foothills of Tennessee with truth and vulnerability, weaving together feelings common to childhood with experiences unique to her situation. You'll ache for Edie as a little girl, starved both for food and the time and attention of the daddy she adores. The desire for a father's love and approval doesn't decrease with time and age, as Edie learns through the struggle and striving of her teen and adult years.

All the Pretty Things is a reflection on the importance of family and the sacred duty of parent to child; the hunger for an earthly father that sometimes only our heavenly Father can fulfill; and the truth that earthly riches are no guarantee of happiness—and how easily they can all go up in smoke.

DAWN CAMP

Editor and photographer of *The Gift of Friendship*

Within twenty-four hours of receiving Edie's book, I had read it from cover to cover. She warmly drew me into her story with her Southern charm and wit, and yet pierced my heart with the painful childhood memories of personal wounds left on her by her father. I was in awe of her strength throughout her struggles that would have left most of us in a crumpled up mess. Her story is one of enduring, hopeful love of a little girl for her earthly father, and the relentless, redemptive love of a heavenly Father for his beloved daughter.

TRACI HUTCHERSON

CEO and Founder, Beneath My Heart

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SOUTHERN GIRL WHO
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TO FIND HER WAY HOME

Edie Wadsworth



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The stories in this book are about real people and real events, but some names have been omitted or changed for the privacy of the individuals involved. Dialogue has been recreated to the author's best recollection.

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INTRODUCTION

ON JANUARY 4, 2016, my forty-sixth birthday, I am standing on the precipice of Cherokee Bluff, staring down into the cold waters of the Tennessee River. My sister, my cousin, and I, accompanied by our girls, have hiked (in not-so-appropriate shoes) a mile out to see the bluff, as a sort of memorial to Daddy, the man who gave us a life of equal parts blessing and curse.

With the winter wind howling, we cinch up our coats, laughing most of the way, and keep climbing until we reach the infamous spot a relative recently told us about—the place where Daddy pushed a blue Malibu right off the cliff nearly forty years ago. It says so much about our family that this story has just surfaced, not considered even remotely bizarre enough to count of as one of the “greatest hits” we’ve been recounting to each other over the years.

While the bare branches of the dogwoods flail in the frigid gust, I sit down on a rock and dangle my feet over the edge, imagining all the stories that lay cold and swallowed up by the river below, all the pretty things that lay rusted and buried beneath silt and debris.

I think about the book I am writing, the book about Daddy and me.

It’s the story I never wanted to tell.

It’s the story I’ve been trying to run from for forty years and

the story I've been skirting around for nearly three as I wrote. The words in these pages are all raw and fresh and hard-fought. What I don't want to write about is the thing that scares me to death. What I don't want you to know is that fatherlessness is my deepest ache, and being untethered and unspoken for is my suffocating fear. These are the memories that have wrecked me for far too long.

Above all, this is the story of my homecoming; the demons that are always holding me back and the legions of angels that keep me safe along the way; the way everything was always falling apart and the beautiful ways God has been piecing it back together; the dark and lonely parts and the parts where God dazzled me with His light shining deep into my heart; the way I was always trying to hide and the way He never stopped finding me.

A sliver of sun is now warming the edge of my face. I stand back up, peering down over the edge of the rocky outcroppings. The view is stunningly beautiful, but fierce and dangerous, too, as the wind whips the river into swirling motion. Standing there, at the top of that drop-off, I think of you, my reader. I imagine that you and I and a multitude of our sisters are huddled together at the edge of the bluff, wondering what it'd be like to jump, to live our lives from the deep end, unafraid to be jolted awake from the sleepy lies we've believed about who we are and what we were created to do. I look around and see courage on your face, bravery in your eyes.

In my mind, I take a running start and leap wild off the edge, arms and legs flailing against the free fall, splashing into the deep blue river. For what seems like a long time, I am underwater and everything is in slow motion. But then I spring up toward the light—that same light that is always calling me home. Breaking the surface, I gasp and choke, and then I cry—sob, even—surprised and thankful that I am still alive, that I have breath. Tears turn to laughter as I yell back up to you who are still poised on the edge of the precipice, “Come on, my sister. Don't wait until you're not afraid—jump scared.”

This book is my cliff jump.

I pray it will lead you to your deepest bravery, your most vulnerable self, knowing that your Father who has baptized you with water and blood and fire will turn your sorrow to joy, your suffering to gifts of grace, your terrifying deep waters into soul-quenching cisterns that refresh us all as we walk through fire, together toward home.

See you soon, dear sister.

I'll be waiting for you in the deep end.

XOXO,
Edie

P.S. I changed a few names and left out portions of my life that were not pertinent to this story. I also left out a few tender memories, sometimes to protect others and sometimes to protect myself. Some wounds take their slow time healing, so I chose to hold them close to my heart. I know you'll understand.

P.P.S. Sometimes the only tangible thing I had of Daddy's was the music he played when we were together, music from a different time, almost a different world. So I've used his favorite country songs—along with some favorites of my own—as chapter titles. I hope they'll make you smile. Maybe you'll find yourself humming a few notes as you go along.



RING OF FIRE

I DON'T KNOW HOW OLD I was the night the trailer burned down—or if the rumor was true that Daddy was the one who set it on fire.

What I do remember is cracking open the back bedroom door of the single-wide trailer just the tiniest sliver and poking my nose through to see why everything had gone so quiet inside. I could see beyond the living room to the yellow porch light that was swarming with moths. And I could see the outline of Daddy's face.

I nudged my head out farther but still couldn't tell what he was doing, maybe just fumbling for another bottle of beer in the Styrofoam cooler set by the front door. Out of the corner of my eye, I spotted the needle lowering on the record player to start another twangy country song.

I shrugged my shoulders and shut the door with a thud.

"I don't know what they're doin', but they went outside on the porch for something," I said to Sister and Jamie.

I hadn't started school yet, and my sister, Gina, was sixteen months younger. Our cousin Jamie was four years older than me,

and it was always a treat when Daddy brought us to visit her on a Saturday night.

Jamie lived in Rockford, a little town south of Knoxville, Tennessee, with her mother and stepdad—my aunt Glenda, who was Daddy’s closest sister, and her husband, George. They lived in a trailer park called Rocky Branch, just down the road a piece from Aunt Glenda and Daddy’s mother, Mamaw.

We’d paused our game so I could check on Daddy, like I always did. When my mama was working nights at Genie’s Bar, Daddy had a tendency to get himself into trouble, so from as early as I can remember, I put myself in charge of making sure he was okay. He rarely was.

His presence usually meant there’d be drinking and loud music, since Daddy’s inclination was to turn every kitchen into a certifiable honky-tonk. Through the wall, I heard the raspy voice of Tammy Wynette, so all seemed right with the world again. I knew that the adults would soon begin dancing around the kitchen or out on the front porch, smoking Winston cigarettes and clanking their bottles of beer while they jigged.

Daddy was always shirtless and half-lit, leading the drunken parade and hollering “Woo, doggies!” whenever the pure joy of it all hit him just right.

“Okay, let’s start over then,” Jamie said to my sister and me, always keeping us on track with our games. She had us corralled in the back bedroom to play *Bonanza*, our version of house inspired by the Cartwright family in the popular seventies television show.

“Gina, you play like Hoss is just coming home,” Jamie said, ushering Sister over to the corner of the room that we designated the kitchen.

“I’ll be married to Little Joe again, and Edie, you’ll be married to Adam. Gina, you’re living with Hoss, and we’ll play like he’s just come home drunk, wanting you to fix him some breakfast.”

“Why do I always have to be married to Hoss?” Sister complained. “He’s mean, and I don’t like fixing breakfast.”

“You’re the youngest and you have to do what we say, and besides, fixing breakfast ain’t that hard and he ain’t that mean,” Jamie declared.

Being the oldest, Jamie always got to be Little Joe’s wife, he being the most handsome and respectable of the Cartwright brothers. As Adam’s wife, I was treated well too. Although I didn’t think he was as handsome as Little Joe, he never came home drunk trying to pick a fight.

In our game, Hoss seemed to be a composite character of all the worst men in our lives, a character who pretty much embodied some of Daddy’s kinfolks. He was always pushing Sister down on the bed, cussing her out, busting out the windows, or making her cook scrambled eggs for him in the middle of the night—like we’d seen some of the men in our family do.

“Play like Hoss is throwing his work boots at you, Sister.”

“I don’t want him to throw his work boots,” Sister said, sitting down on the bed with her arms folded in rebellion.

Just as Jamie picked up Uncle George’s boots to throw them across the room, we heard Daddy yelling.

“Girls, hurry up and get in the car! We gotta blow this joint!”

I grabbed Sister’s hand as the three of us bolted from the back room out the front door. We dodged empty beer bottles on the floor and ran by the record player, which was still blaring. The next thing I remember, I was standing outside, staring at the other end of the trailer, trying to figure out why everybody was leaving so quick.

Daddy herded us into the backseat of his white Plymouth, us girls still wondering what was causing the commotion. It was a crisp spring night, and we watched the tree swallows swarming around the power lines looking for a place to land. With the windows down, I could hear Tammy still twanging out her last song as Daddy shifted the car into drive and we began to move. Through the back window, it looked like flames were shooting out of the other end of the trailer, and I began to worry over what was going on.

“Daddy, what’s wrong? Did something happen to the trailer?” I said, on the verge of tears as I always was when things went south, which they had a way of doing when he was around. Jamie went quiet, like she usually did when things got crazy, and Sister was oblivious, leaning her head on my shoulder.

“Nothin’. We’re going up to your mamaw’s,” he said, wiping from his forehead the sweat that was rolling toward his eyes.

Mamaw’s trailer sat on the side of Brown’s Mountain and was the official gathering place in good times and bad for the clan—a group of un- and underemployed relatives, subsisting largely on government checks, government peanut butter, and huge yellow blocks of government cheese.

All the way to Mamaw’s I worried about the trailer and especially about the Tammy Wynette album that I loved more than anything. Jamie and Sister remained silent beside me, staring out the window.

I was sniveling when Daddy turned onto Mamaw’s steep dirt driveway, careening over the washed-out ruts and bringing us in on two wheels, with us kids bouncing up and down in the backseat like whack-a-moles.

At the top of the hill, Daddy hit the brakes, put his arm over the seat, and looked back at me. “Listen here, Nise. Don’t start squawlin’; there ain’t nothin’ to cry over. Bad things happen and there ain’t no way you can make it better by going on about it.” Daddy nearly always called me by a shortened version of my middle name, Denise.

Daddy was right—bad things did happen—and I tried my best not to get worked up over it. But all the country records I loved were in the trailer, along with all the pretty things Jamie’s daddy bought her when he won a card game, which would eventually make it to Sister and me as hand-me-downs.

And why were all the grownups acting so funny? Daddy was wrong when he said there was nothing to cry over.

I rubbed my eyes and dried my hands on my dirty navy turtle-

neck and plaid polyester pants that were two inches too short, quietly asking Daddy, "Can we call Mama and tell her?"

Mama and Daddy were divorced, and Mama didn't like it when Daddy took us places he shouldn't or when bad things happened because he was drinking.

"Listen, Nise, ain't nobody hurt and ain't nobody crying but you," Daddy said as we walked up to the porch, his gait not quite as steady as it ought to have been.

Daddy didn't call Mama. He marched us up the porch steps in single file like soldiers going to war and pushed through the screen door to a trailer full of relatives. Papaw was in the corner strumming some Hank Williams song on his flat top guitar with his head down and his eyes closed. Uncle Gene, Daddy's brother, was nearly passed out over the arm of the couch. Daddy's sisters were there, too, as well as the fire victims, Aunt Glenda and Uncle George. Before long it felt like a regular old family reunion. Daddy told Mamaw to make a pot of coffee, which was always the answer to a family crisis.

Within a half hour, most of the clan was crowded around a table in the tiny kitchen and the adults were telling stories, like they always did when they gathered, Daddy's version, of course, being the most interesting and the most likely to be embellished. I glanced up at the wall where the oversized wooden fork and spoon hung slightly crooked, which reminded me I was hungry.

"Daddy, I'm starving," I said, peering around the television. I was trying not to listen too closely to what was being said, afraid I might hear things I shouldn't. I let it all become a jumble of noise.

"Daddy, did you hear me?" I said, walking up to tap him on the shoulder.

He gave a sort of nod, but after a few more futile attempts to get his attention, I gave up and crawled up on the couch in the living room. It felt like something heavy was crushing me as I agonized over things too complicated for a child to process. A strange sensation came over me and my eyes began to water.

It was as if I were floating above the room looking down on everyone. I could see their mouths moving amid the cacophony of voices, but the sound seemed to come from a million miles away.

Mama's finishing her shift at Genie's Bar right about now, I thought. *I wish she was here with me.* Daddy said nobody was hurt and there was nothing to tell her, and maybe he was right. But everything seemed better when she was around.

Sister and Jamie disappeared into the bedroom, but I stayed on the couch, hoping someone would fix something to eat. My stomach gnawed like it might bite a hole in my shirt—hunger mixed with sadness pulled by a strong longing for something I couldn't define.

The women stayed up most of the night rolling homemade cigarettes and drinking black coffee, while the men eventually passed out drunk from whatever was being sloshed around the room in a mason jar.

The sensation of being in another world eventually left me, and I was just a little girl again with dirt under her fingernails and cold, clammy hands. Before too long I fell asleep on the couch in my clothes, using Papaw's scratchy plaid wool coat as a blanket.

I woke up before dawn to the sizzle of fried potatoes cooking in lard, with the smell of liquor still floating around the room like a kite.

Daddy stood shirtless at the stove, waiting for the coffee grounds to boil. I watched him hitch up his faded blue jeans that always hung loose below the waist of his Fruit of the Looms.

"Well, if it ain't ole Edie Nise, up like her daddy before the crack o' dawn," he said, pouring coffee into his cup, grounds and all.

He grinned from ear to ear, whistling snatches of "Dixie" like everything was right in the world. I threw off Papaw's coat and rubbed my eyes to get the sleep out, then moved a chair over to the stove to help Daddy cook. Climbing up on the seat and leaning my head on his shoulder, I wished the potatoes in the iron skillet would hurry up so they could ease the ache that was burning in my stomach.

I had a feeling like something wrong had happened the night before, but there was no sign of it on Daddy's face so I tried not to show it on mine either. Besides, could anything really be wrong when Daddy was grinning and whistling, with dawn spilling like watercolors in the eastern sky?

The two of us sat at the table and ate a heaping plateful of fried potatoes apiece while the sun came up, taking turns sipping his black coffee, the bitter hot numbing my tongue.

We didn't talk; we just let the early morning wrap around us, somehow making everything all right again.

Later that afternoon, we went to the trailer site and dug through the ash heap with Aunt Glenda, looking for anything that could be salvaged. There was no sign of Jamie's canopy bed or any of her clothes or furniture. All we took away were two eight-track tapes and a smell so fierce it took up permanent residence in my memory.

A few weeks later, Jamie moved to a new trailer and Daddy never mentioned the night again.

No matter what the circumstances, the time Daddy and I spent together felt like time that stood still.

Mama said I was the apple of his eye from the minute he laid eyes on me.