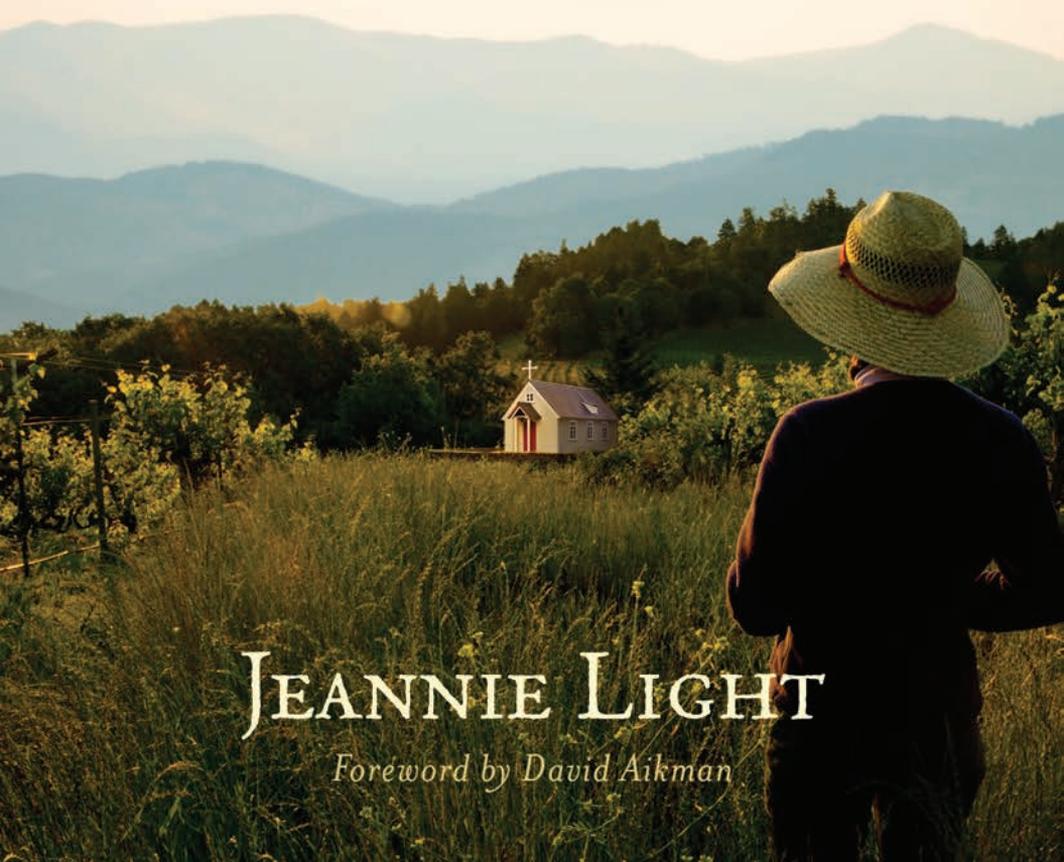


AN INSPIRING TRUE STORY



BEAUTIFUL ON THE MOUNTAIN

When there was trouble in Graves Mill,
God sent the most unlikely answer



JEANNIE LIGHT

Foreword by David Aikman

Beautiful on the Mountain



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Beautiful on the Mountain: An Inspiring True Story

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This work is a memoir based upon the author's best recollection. Some of the dialogue has been recreated and some people's names have been changed to protect their identities.

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Foreword

WHAT HAPPENS when a young woman finds herself thrown into a rural Virginia community and then is asked to reopen for them a long-disused local church? With only a few college classes in biblical subjects for preparation, Jeannie Light tells a tale of her years organizing Bible studies and worship, visiting hospitals and planning celebrations in a beautiful but remote corner of rural Virginia. As you read her stories, you learn along with her to care for and love a flock as diverse as the original Twelve. You'll be introduced to a cast of characters few novelists would have the creativity to describe as well, or as lovingly, as Jeannie does.

There are some very profound lessons in this tale. The most important is that when God throws you into the unknown, He can be trusted to guide you through the unforeseen and provide the grace for you to emerge from it a stronger Christian than when you went in. Jeannie had no idea what she was taking on when the good citizens of the hamlet of Graves Mill asked her to “do church” for them. Almost every day brought a surprise or a challenge for which the only thing she could do was lean on God with a desperate “Please help me” prayer.

The second lesson from the book is that preaching the Gospel in a community of ordinary people must be incarnated by living the

Gospel. To her own surprise, Jeannie discovered that opening the Bible among a group of strangers had the effect of opening up a new community: a community of people who laughed, joked, wept, and helped each other out in a sort of mini Kingdom of Heaven. The characters in this book are as funny, flawed, and tragic as any of us. Yet in Jeannie's story, the love of God enfolds them all, revealing how the body of Christ is supposed to function in everyday situations.

Jeannie and I served together as lay Eucharistic ministers in a dynamic church in northern Virginia for a few years in the 1990s. For at least part of this time, Jeannie was still living in the rural community and making the two-hour drive to church every week. I am ashamed to say that I did not know her very well at the time and had no idea what she was doing.

During more recent years of getting to know Jeannie well, I think I have discovered what being a true saint is like. It doesn't have much to do with ecclesiastical clothing, but it has a lot to do with pickup trucks, horse manure, crying children, weeping mothers, guffawing uncles, and ordinary people from every sector of life you could think of. It has a lot to do with praying for grace and wisdom, and with listening to people tell their unique stories. You'll laugh often as you read *Beautiful on the Mountain*, and you'll also weep with joy as you watch the way God works. Enjoy.

David Aikman

DECEMBER 2013

Introduction

AFTER FORTY YEARS of living, how many of us find ourselves where we expected to be when we were twenty? Did Abraham, growing up in the cosmopolitan city of Ur, expect to become a nomadic herdsman? Did Peter and Andrew have so much as a premonition that Jesus would call them from their fishing nets to wander the world's dusty roads? For most of us, life does not unfold according to our plans, but the Scriptures record promises that if we walk with God, He will supply our needs and there will always be enough bread for the day. Sometimes there's even butter on it. *Beautiful on the Mountain* is the record of God's faithfulness and provision for an unexpected journey in the wilderness.

In 1977 I came to Graves Mill, a tiny hamlet in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia. As part of a divorce settlement, I owned a seven-hundred-acre tract of mountain land that was, as the locals said, "so poor a rabbit needed to pack a sack lunch to get through it." The parcel, once part of a mountain plantation, was a combination of rocky cliffs, wooded slopes, and about 125 acres of pasture. I was quite sure that the Lord had called me to raise sheep there, but over time I would come to realize that I had miscounted the legs.

In 1969, almost eight years before I took up residence in the mountains, the Baptist circuit closed the little church in Graves Mill.

The simple building stood empty and silent during those years, but the local residents never stopped dreaming of the day when it would once again reverberate with songs and sermons and shouts of “Amen! Preach it, brother!” I never dreamed that the little church would come to life, nor that I’d be included in the cast of characters in a tale of loggers, poachers, and the last of the mountain people, those who remembered life in the hollows before automobiles and telephones. However, living among them, I learned to care about the poor as people rather than anonymous recipients of my charitable donations. I was forced to learn to live in a community with less—much less—than in my previous life, and to learn that in God’s economy, less is more when He guides the accounting. I confess that I fought the lessons every step of the way.

Many of the conversations in this book are imaginative reconstructions, but I was fortunate to have stacks of personal files, sermons, notes, and old cassette tapes from Bible studies and services, so some of the conversations are exactly as they happened. A few names have been changed to protect people’s privacy. The story proceeds in episodes. There are emergencies, confrontations, visitors, and services. People arrive, play a part, and are never seen again, yet their appearance in our lives changes us and perhaps changes them as well.

It is my story, yes, but it is also the story of God’s care for a little community as we journeyed together. God’s ways are not ours, but for those who love Him, all things work together to bring us finally to that place where we get a glimpse of the Celestial City and see that indeed, it is beautiful on the mountain.

As Charles, a valley farmer, observed after I’d talked about heaven, “Ah, Missy, that there place sure must be beautiful, but Missy, ahhhh, th’ gittin’ there! Th’ gittin’ there!”

Jeannie Light

OCTOBER 2013

Prologue

Historical . . . *does not refer only to the bare, plain facts
of an account but to the fact plus its significance.*

RANIERO CANTALAMESSA

“I’M STAYING INDOORS TODAY!” I muttered as I reached for the door-knob. I had barely opened the cottage door when Tallis, my six-year-old Dalmatian, pushed his way past me, frantic to return to his rug in front of the fireplace. Cold winds were blowing down the valley, and we were both chilled after the round of morning chores, tending the chickens and horses. I lost no time following him inside and slammed the door shut against the raw autumn winds. I flopped down in the Boston rocker to pull off my Wellingtons and was still struggling with the first boot when the phone began to jangle.

I looked at my muddy boots. *I don’t want to track muck across the floor to answer the phone.* I decided to let it ring. But as I worked at removing the boots, the green box on the wall continued to ring insistently, so I gave the left boot an energetic yank and padded in my stocking feet around the pine table to grab the receiver. It was the caseworker from the county social services.

“I’m *so* glad to get you!” she exclaimed. “Listen, I know this isn’t exactly your thing, but this child has a bad neck fracture—at least, I think that’s what it is—and she’s in a cast. Auto accident, of course. There were a bunch of kids, probably drinking. Obviously she can’t attend school, so I’ve been sending volunteers to help her

keep up with her classes. I'm not sure how much she's learning, but it does give the mother a break. Besides, the girl is depressed and a new face provides a distraction. You see, her friend was killed in the accident, so I guess it's no wonder she's moody. Today's volunteer has the flu. Could you go down there this morning? You could teach from her composition or literature assignments, couldn't you? After all, you did teach English at the university extension, and since you're in the church business, this would be a very Christian thing to do."

She knew I couldn't refuse a request expressed in those terms.

"I'll see what I can do," I promised. "Lord, have mercy," I whispered to myself.

It was a gray morning. I had noted the low clouds above Jones Mountain, warning that the day ahead would be chilly. I'd already knocked a thin skim of ice out of the chickens' watering fountains. Tallis was huddled close to the ineffective fireplace, still recovering from being outside. The little cottage was poorly insulated, and the fireplace, rebuilt after the original house burned around it, didn't draw properly. Cozy or not, it was more inviting than a trip downriver to whatever mountaintop or hollow social services had in mind. With a sigh of reluctance, I did my best to bank the fire before changing my work jeans for a pair of decent slacks. A suit or dress might have looked more professional, but it wasn't practical.

Tallis nuzzled my knee, begging for attention. I patted the dog's head while he looked up at me mournfully, his one blue eye and one brown reflecting my mood. He had a pedigree long enough to give me an inferiority complex if I thought about it, but because his mismatched eyes made him useless for stud, his breeder had been delighted when my husband and I appeared at the kennel. She happily agreed to let us have him for a very small sum even though he was already housebroken and leash trained. When my husband and I divorced, Tallis was left with me.

Now Tallis whined as if to say, “You will let me come with you, won’t you?”

“No, old pal, I’m sorry but you can’t come on this trip,” I said. “Later, maybe we’ll get up to the mountain. Now, you be a good dog and guard the place, okay?”

Tallis’s head and tail drooped, but he went obediently to his customary corner in the bedroom. I picked up a Bible, prayer book, notepad, and pens, and shrugged into my coat.

I decided against taking my little Chevette hatchback in favor of the four-wheel-drive Chevy pickup. In this backcountry, one couldn’t predict the road conditions. The truck was high enough off the ground that it could clear stones and gullies impossible for the little car. Its springs were stiff, though, so I bounced my way along the river, noting the stubble where the last of the corn had been harvested at the Rhodes’s farm. Behind it, the trees standing tall on German Ridge had lost their earlier blaze of fall color; today the leaves clinging to the trees were as dull as the skies above them.

I carefully rounded a blind curve. You never knew what might startle you on the narrow road. There could be slow-moving farm vehicles around the bend, horseback riders, or even stray steers. Some of the popular breeds, such as Charolais or Herefords, treat fences as if they were spiderwebs so it wasn’t too surprising that their owners had trouble keeping the more adventurous animals inside their pastures.

After several miles I drove even more carefully so I wouldn’t miss the turn I’d noted in the directions. At last I found the road sign and turned left into the foothills of the Blue Ridge. I had not seen this area before, and I was surprised to find so many small houses and trailers huddled in the spaces between small, ragged fields and steep, wooded hillsides.

A mile down the road, I spotted the right mailbox and turned into the faint track on one side of a weedy yard. The house appeared to

be one of the resettlement houses that the federal government had built in the 1930s, when Shenandoah National Park was created. At the time, the feds moved the mountain people out of the hollows into these cracker boxes. I was never certain which little bungalows actually belonged to that lot, but I could find out in a matter of minutes at the tiny post office in the hamlet of Graves Mill. All the locals knew exactly when almost every dwelling in the parish had been built and by whom.

Whatever its origin, this little place was no more than a small box with a bit of porch tacked on. I collected my Bible and climbed slowly out of the truck. As I carefully picked my way along the rutted drive, I studied the house. The paint, which may have been white sometime in its history, was peeling, and a rust-coated hand pump stood in the yard. *Probably no indoor plumbing.* Indeed, as I stepped closer, I spotted an outhouse at the end of a well-worn path. I crossed the rickety porch and knocked, praying for wisdom.

The woman who peered at me through the narrow window in the door could have been sixty, but she might have been forty or even younger. Women aged quickly up here; men who had been hard-scrabble farmers in the days before tractors were now day laborers, and their wives were far from pampered. Apparently deciding that I was not a threat, she slowly opened the door, pushing a strand of gray hair behind her ear while staring at me suspiciously.

“The social worker called me,” I explained. “She said your daughter needed help with her schoolwork.”

The woman’s eyes went blank, her face expressionless. “This way,” she said.

I followed her inside, noticing that the pattern was nearly worn away on the cracked kitchen linoleum. The pungent smell of cooked cabbage and smoked pork hung heavy in the hot, steamy room. A wood-burning stove crouched beside a box of kindling. *What would it be like to spend one’s entire life confined within these*

walls? What measure of God's grace would suffice to sustain someone in this place?

What measure of God's grace would suffice to sustain *me* if He called me to continue living and working in these hills? I never had any desire to be a missionary and certainly never imagined myself making this kind of visit. To be perfectly honest, I was scared.

CHAPTER I

HEADWATERS: ROME, JULY 4, 1976

It cannot be stated definitely what the call of God is to, because His call is to be in comradeship with Himself for His own purposes, and the test is to believe that God knows what He is after.

OSWALD CHAMBERS

SOMEONE SAID that obedience is a long walk in the same direction. It is one step at a time, one day at a time. We take wrong turns; we lose our way. There are no maps, but we follow a Voice—the Word—and love propels us onward.

For me, it all began in Rome.

My godparents had advised me to take a trip to Europe in the summer of 1976 because my ten-year marriage into a well-known Midwestern family was in serious trouble. At breakfast several months earlier, my husband, Harvey, had announced that he was very unhappy.

“Perhaps you should see a counselor,” I said, feeling helpless.

“Maybe,” he replied, looking woebegone.

“I can go and stay with Mama-san for a few days,” I suggested, hoping that might help.

Frances Lee Lull, known to all her close friends as Mama-san, had taken me under her wing years before. I was certain she would be a wise counselor and that her kindness would bring some comfort to my fear and hurt.

“Don’t do that!” Harvey exclaimed. “Think of the gossip! I don’t want rumors on the county grapevine that we’re having any trouble!”

“If I am away, you’ll have time to think,” I replied, pushing my breakfast aside. Food was the last thing I wanted at the moment.

I did pack an overnight case and drove to Springhill, Mama-san’s farm, to see her. She took one look at me and showed me to the guest room. Harvey did call a counselor, a man reputed to be the best Charlottesville, Virginia, offered. In a few days he was enrolled in a transactional analysis group. When I told our pastor about the type of counseling my husband was receiving, he wasn’t happy. In fact, he told me that being a part of those groups almost always led to divorce. After talking with Pastor Hall, I returned home and shared his warning with Harvey, then asked him to go with me to see our pastor.

He politely refused. He was delighted with the analysis program and was sure it was exactly what he needed.

“What is it?” I wanted to know.

He rubbed his temple. “Families have ‘hot potatoes,’” he explained carefully. “These are issues they can’t resolve so they pass them on to the next generation. Our marriage is a ‘hot potato.’”

I stared at him in shock and disbelief. “Well, can I join that group?” I refrained from observing that it seemed to me that divorce, rather than marriage, might be the “hot potato.”

“I need to do this alone,” Harvey replied.

I was more than a little afraid of whatever transactional analysis might be and didn’t push the issue, but when I told him my plans to move back home from Mama-san’s, he was not pleased.

Soon, according to neighborhood gossip, he was involved with a

member of the analysis circle, a local girl who also happened to be one of my friends. I knew her well; I trusted my husband's integrity and could not believe there was any substance to the rumors. However, the two were working together on a committee planning the county's celebration for the US Bicentennial, so it was awkward. My godparents thought the trip to Europe would spare me the embarrassment of the occasion, grant me a clearer perspective, and provide my husband space for reflection and a change of heart.

I didn't have any better ideas for what to do about my failing marriage, so I took their advice. And since I'd never visited Italy, I planned to spend two weeks in Rome after visiting old friends in Sweden. The itinerary for the summer also included time at L'Abri (the Christian retreat in Switzerland founded by Francis and Edith Schaeffer), the Salzburg International Arts Festival in Austria, and a few days in Germany with a friend from college days. In all, I would spend just over two months abroad.



Like most tourists in Italy, I tried to take in as much as possible in a short amount of time. I saw Michelangelo's *Pietà*, stood transfixed before Raphael's magnificent works, and trekked through the basilicas of St. Peter's and St. John Lateran. I walked and walked the ancient cobbled streets and city squares. Whenever I found a church, I would stop to pray. The most comfortable and comforting places were the small parish churches where no American tourists ever ventured, where elderly local matrons knelt in silence, heads covered with black veils. I was silent too. I had no specific petitions except a heart's cry for peace and direction. Sometimes despite my best efforts, I'd visualize my three-story Southern plantation house sitting behind its clipped boxwood hedges and Mary Helen, my beloved housekeeper and friend, standing in the doorway, smiling broadly.

On the Fourth of July, Pope Paul VI had promised a 1:00 p.m. audience for Americans abroad. The summer sun was almost directly overhead when I joined the motley lot congregated in St. Peter's Square. There were some turned collars and habits here and there scattered in the crowd, but the majority of those gathered were American tourists or businesspeople who happened to be in Rome that day. Most, like me, wore sandals and bright permanent-press shirts. Some held small American flags.

Although I wasn't a Roman Catholic, I had decided to join the faithful. I admired this pope's efforts to reach multitudes professing no religion at all, as well as those adhering to non-Christian faiths. I'd read of his efforts to internationalize the Roman Curia (the governing body of the Catholic church) and of his untiring work for peace. I recalled his visit to the United Nations in New York in 1965—the first papal visit to the Western Hemisphere—and his often-controversial efforts to implement the work of the Second Vatican Council. The truth was, though, that I was alone in the city, homesick, and scared, and I wanted to do something to celebrate the Bicentennial. An audience with the pope seemed the best available choice. At least I'd be with other Americans on this special day.

I arrived early. To my surprise, several hundred people had already gathered. I worked my way through the crowd until I was fairly close to the balcony where the pope was supposed to address us. I searched the faces of those around me; they showed no trace of the usual Independence Day exuberance. Even the small children seemed subdued. A towheaded boy who looked to be about eight years old carried his little American flag as proudly as if he were leading a regiment. His two sisters, perhaps five and three years of age, giggled and whispered in the parents' shadows, but even they were surprisingly still for such small children.

I wonder what Joe and Mary Temple are doing this morning? Joe and Mary Temple Fray were my godparents and the linchpins of my life

back home in Madison County, Virginia. I was certain they would be celebrating with their family today. Remembering the time difference, I realized it was much too early for festivities yet. Perhaps Joe was just waking up. *No, he's probably outside feeding his chickens or checking his big garden for bugs or late peas. And Mary Temple's in her sunny kitchen preparing breakfast.*

The Frays were prominent members of my church and leaders in the county's social life and politics as well as personal friends. They traced their history back to Madison's original German settlers who built the historic Lutheran church in 1740. Through the centuries, their descendants had been known for honesty and for their contributions to the good of the community.

As a boy, Joe's ambition was to be a dairy farmer, but when the county elected him treasurer, it was the beginning of a lifelong adventure serving the country people he loved. An old-timer once told me Joe was the only honest politician he'd ever seen on two legs, and I believed him. Joe was a young treasurer when the Great Depression devastated the country in the thirties, hard years when Virginia struggled with drought as well as the Depression. Terrible fires roared across the desiccated mountain forestlands. Wells and springs ran dry. Cash was as scarce as hen's teeth, but when a man couldn't find the change to pay his taxes, Joe would travel out to see him and his wife. They'd talk over the situation, and Joe would find some way through the crisis so the family could keep their home. Needless to say, he was well loved and respected in the community, and I was proud to be his and Mary Temple's godchild.

The way that happened was quite unconventional. I had attended the Episcopal church since college and never expected to be part of a Lutheran church. However, the Episcopal church was planning to issue a new prayer book and I, like many others, disliked the changes. The revisions sounded flat and awkward compared to the old prayer book's melodious King James English. One of my

friends recommended that my husband and I visit Hebron Lutheran Church, situated several miles outside Madison, Virginia, sitting like a small gem in its lush green valley. Harvey liked the hitching rails, the frescoed ceiling, and the friendly congregation, so we continued to attend Sunday services, and eventually we met Joe and Mary Temple.

A few months later my mother was diagnosed with liver cancer, and after a brief struggle with the malignancy, she asked if she could come live with me in Virginia. Harvey was working at the naval hospital in Bethesda, Maryland, and had an apartment in the city. I lived in a rented country cottage with little electric wiring and no telephone. With the owner's permission, I set about making improvements so that the house would be comfortable for my mother and hired Mary Helen to help me care for her. Mary Helen was with me the morning that Mother died, peacefully, just a few days after arriving from Michigan. Joe and Mary Temple heard of Mother's passing and came to comfort me. After that, I was firmly committed to the Lutheran parish, though I missed the liturgy of my former church and still used the 1928 Episcopal *Book of Common Prayer* at home.

I became Joe and Mary Temple's godchild for the simple reason that I never was baptized as a child. My father's rather Victorian reasoning was, "Never mind baptizing the girls. When they get married, they'll just take their husband's denomination anyway." My parents insisted on plenty of religious education—I memorized Scripture, went to Sunday school, and joined the youth group—but baptism wasn't part of the program. Once I began attending Hebron, I became active in the church's life, even teaching catechism to thirteen-year-olds.

That is, I did until Pastor Hall discovered I wasn't baptized. He was horrified. He tried to explain the theology, and though I didn't completely understand what he said, I agreed to have water poured over my head. Joe and Mary Temple were delighted to "present me" for baptism. They proudly took their places beside me and promised

“to bring up this child to lead a godly life.” Ever after, Joe said the one thing wrong with the ceremony was that he couldn’t hold the “baby.” They did, however, take their promises seriously and from that day forward made me part of the family.

As I stood in St. Peter’s Square and thought about them, I was tempted to weep, but I could almost hear Mary Temple’s words of encouragement, “Now you just buck up. Things are never as bad as we think they’re going to be.” She would be looking at me with those kindly eyes behind the spectacles and ever so slightly incline her queenly head of snow-white hair. She was always erect, always a Southern lady. I straightened my shoulders. I wouldn’t let her down, not if I could help it.



The pope hadn’t appeared yet. I turned around slowly, admiring St. Peter’s Square and marveling that I was there. What a long way I’d traveled since my childhood! My father, a third-generation Michigan farmer who had worked the land his family cleared early in the 1800s, died when I was twelve. My mother, a professional violinist, had a nervous breakdown, so my only sibling, a younger sister, and I went to live with an aunt and uncle. That is, I lived with them during the school year; summers, I worked for local families as a live-in housekeeper and mother’s helper.

By strict self-discipline and intense study, I managed to finish high school in three years, doing well enough to earn multiple scholarships that covered my entire tuition to Kalamazoo College. Once there, I worked for room and board, books, and life’s little necessities. I earned a bachelor’s degree in English literature, a Phi Beta Kappa key, and a Woodrow Wilson Fellowship, allowing me to attend the graduate school of my choice.

I chose the University of Virginia not only because it was an

excellent school but because my mother's family had been southern and some of my earliest memories were of the family gathered in my grandmother's parlor on Sunday afternoons, telling stories of the South and the Blue Ridge Mountains. In nine months, I finished my master's degree in nineteenth-century English literature with honors, and one success capping another, I "married well," as my little Victorian grandmother would have put it.

Feet shuffled on the cobblestones. I looked around at the crowd, but the pope still hadn't appeared. I longed for a distraction from the thoughts floating up unbidden. *I'm sure Doctor isn't pleased with the mess his son and I are making of our lives.* I shuddered. I had come to know and love my husband's family while I was a student at Kalamazoo. In fact, the family had endowed the college's scholarships for study abroad and I had received one, spending the summer between my sophomore and junior years in France. The following summer I came to work for the family as a live-in cook. Soon they were my very dear friends, and to my surprise, father, mother, and sons treated me as if I belonged among them. Because I missed my own father and mother and the stability of the old home farm, I snuggled into their kindness like a cat on a warm hearth.

Harvey was the youngest of the four boys. During the time I lived with the family, we met only briefly because he was either traveling or studying at Yale. When I returned to Michigan on my first Christmas break from graduate study in Virginia, the two oldest brothers were married and the third busy with his own life, leaving the "little brother" at a loss for something to do. I was idle, too, so Harvey and I took long walks through the snow and flirted over a desultory chess game. I returned to Virginia and my classes; he went back to Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois, where he'd transferred from Yale. To my surprise, he wrote fairly often. The letters were friendly, and I was flattered with the attention.

Then came the telephone call from his mother. I don't remember

the words, but the news shook my world to its very core. She and Doctor, as we called him, had separated and were getting a divorce. After I hung up the phone, I began sobbing so loudly that a friend across the hall rushed to see what had happened. Somehow the divorce was worse than a death in the family. The safe harbor I had cherished against the unknowns of the years ahead was utterly demolished.

June came and my graduation was only days away. My family was proud of my accomplishments, but none of them planned to celebrate the occasion with me. I understood; it was summer and harvesttime at the farm, and Virginia was a long way from Michigan, but I was deeply disappointed. Then I received a letter from Harvey. *He was coming!* I was nearly overwhelmed with gratitude and excitement.

Once I had my diploma in hand, he asked if we could spend a day or two hiking the Appalachian Trail in the Blue Ridge Mountains just west of Charlottesville. I hesitated. A little voice in the back of my mind whispered that this wasn't wise, but after all, this was my "brother," so I finally said yes. I knew parts of the trail in that section quite well since it was my usual escape from study and the fevers of the academic world, and I was happy to share my familiar haunts with "family." Besides, he had come from Michigan to Virginia for my graduation.

Harvey came well prepared with camping gear; I had quilts. He slept in his sleeping bag. I slept in my quilts. However, when he kissed me good-night I realized that this relationship wasn't likely to remain exactly fraternal, though it did remain chaste during those days in the wilderness. We both loved the out-of-doors and the adventure of exploring wild places, but I suspect that during those two days on the trail we paid more attention to one another than to the flora and fauna around us. I know that was true of me. I remember his blond hair blowing in the wind more vividly than I recall the campsite.

When Harvey left for summer school in Oregon, absence made our hearts grow fonder and the friendship became a whirlwind courtship. I had a summer job as a hostess in one of the mountain lodges in Shenandoah National Park, but at the last minute the oldest brother in the family asked me to work with him as a reporter and writer for the Kalamazoo city magazine he owned and edited. I loved the family, I loved writing, and if the truth were known, I was a little homesick. After some debate and several telephone calls from the family, I agreed to come.



Most of that summer Harvey was in Oregon, but just before the fall semester began at Northwestern, he returned to Michigan for a few days. He had ridden his motorcycle back from the coast, and I first saw him when he roared up to the magazine office, found me, and took me for a ride. He had kept a diary of his adventures and let me read some of it. We talked about his trip. We spent some days with Doctor at his big Christmas tree farm in the country, walking the trails and watching the ducks on the pond there. We also spent time with Harvey's mother at her lake house, and we clung to one another like two shipwrecked sailors. We were both heartbroken and disoriented in the aftermath of the family's disintegration.

I went back to Virginia with a rock on my ring finger big enough to dazzle my fellow scholars at the university. I don't even recall when Harvey proposed or exactly how it came about, but the engagement seemed somehow inevitable.

While we were excellent friends, in many ways we were ill matched. I was working on a PhD in eighteenth-century English literature; he was just beginning his junior year at Northwestern and thought he'd like to be a biology major. I had earned my way through life; he came from old-family money. He'd grown up with servants;

I had been one. Neither of us really knew much about the other or about what we wanted to become. I had been so busy climbing the academic ladder that I hadn't taken time to learn much about living. I knew I enjoyed writing and expected to become an English professor so I could afford to write poetry, something I had wanted to do since age six. My fiancé wasn't at all certain what he wanted to do or be. He loved being outdoors riding his motorcycle or his bicycle—one summer he had ridden a bicycle from Oregon to Michigan. He also enjoyed astronomy. His father had built an observatory for him on the highest point of their farm, and when Harvey was home he spent a lot of time there gazing at the stars.

Back in Virginia, I had more time to think. Distanced from the grief and uncertainty of the family breakdown, I decided that marriage was not wise for either of us. For several weeks I didn't sleep well and had trouble concentrating on my studies. Finally I gathered all the courage I had and called him to break off the engagement. It was a simple, matter-of-fact conversation, and I thought that was the end of it. It wasn't.

In the dead of winter, Harvey got on his motorcycle, leaving exams, term papers, and his academic future behind him and headed for Charlottesville through the mountains of West Virginia. His mother was frantic with worry. I was equally alarmed. He called me collect from the road almost every day, detailing his difficulties with ice and snow. By the time he arrived, my roommate was thoroughly sick of the whole drama, and I was willing to do anything to end the tensions. At least if we were married, there would be a common future and we'd find our way together.

We were married in early June 1965 in my aunt's living room. It was a simple ceremony; I wore a long white dress and my aunt and uncle were proud and happy. I was twenty-four years old and my husband was about two years younger. I left the academic world behind me and began a new life as a married woman.

After an adventurous honeymoon driving across the United States to Oregon and back in a Rambler, we arrived at Northwestern. Because money was not a problem, we found a pleasant apartment in Evanston, bought fairly good furniture, unpacked the wedding china, and settled into life together. Harvey was on academic probation, probably because of too many fraternity parties topped off with his madcap ride to Virginia to stop me from breaking the engagement. I worked with him on his studies, trying to keep him focused, and he did well. When his biology class had field trips, I traveled with him. I enjoyed these times together, and I was glad to help with the academic work.

I was lonely, though. I no longer knew who I was or what kind of woman I wanted to become. I found a job in Northwestern's rare book department assisting the acquisitions staff, the sort of position offered to women whose husbands were studying at the university. I was bored. I missed the challenges of the academic world. I attended a local Episcopal church by myself on Sunday mornings. Harvey used that time to sleep, study, or catch up with fraternity friends. I don't think I ever stayed for a coffee hour after a service. I was too unsure of myself to venture out on my own, and besides, I did not like big-city living. I was accustomed to smaller cities, country roads, and fresh air. Even a trip or two to hear the Chicago Symphony didn't fill the void.

I tried hard to be a good wife, though. I kept the apartment meticulously clean. I cooked gourmet meals, and Harvey often invited one of his close friends to come for dinner. As the months passed, I gained weight. One day my husband surprised me by coming home early. I was embroidering a pillowcase, and when I looked up from my embroidery hoop, Harvey exclaimed, "I plucked a Virginia wildflower and it's wilting before my eyes."

I didn't know how to respond, and he did not continue the conversation.



When Harvey graduated the following year, we moved to Maine. On the basis of his senior year's grades, my husband had been accepted into the University of Maine's graduate program in ecology. I was very proud of him. As for me, I was hired to teach freshman English for the university's extension program. I breathed a sigh of relief. We bought a house in the country, and I was back in the academic world. Together, we attended the local Episcopal church.

That year was merely a short interlude. The United States was mired in the Vietnam War at the time, and although Harvey was exempt from military service because he was in school, he feared that the academic exemption policy might be discontinued, leaving him vulnerable to the draft. So, rather than taking a chance on a military "invitation," he joined the navy in the spring of 1967. When Harvey went off to boot camp in June, I didn't know what to do with myself, although I knew I did not want to endure another Maine winter, this time alone.

We talked it over and decided to sell the house in Maine. I packed our belongings and headed back to Virginia. I resumed my interrupted studies and taught English at the University of Virginia Extension in Madison County, about thirty miles north of Charlottesville in the Virginia piedmont. The next year, I moved from my apartment near the university to a small rented cottage in the country, outside historic Madison and about a hundred miles south of Washington, DC.

After basic training, my husband was sent to Indonesia, where he assisted with biological research on animal-borne infectious diseases in Vietnam. It was never clear exactly why the navy was doing this research, but it offered a fine position for a neophyte ecologist and allowed him to finish his master's degree thesis long distance. Harvey liked Madison County, so eventually we bought some land and a historic house about five miles from town.

We called it Luxmont, Light's hill—*lux* (Latin for “light”) and *mont* (Latin for “mountain” or “hill”). The seven-room pre-Civil War house commanded a magnificent view of the Blue Ridge Mountains. With the help of a Charlottesville company specializing in early American houses, I renovated and restored the mansion, adding a third floor, which accommodated two more guest rooms and baths.

I think I was hoping that working together on the house in Madison County would help heal our marriage. But Harvey had more tours to complete in the navy, first in Indonesia and later in Bethesda, Maryland. After my mother's death I moved to Luxmont, repairing the additional buildings and managing the farm. When Harvey was in the States, he'd come to Luxmont on the weekends.

With my husband's blessing and Joe Fray's help and guidance, I began a breeding program to establish a good herd of Hereford cattle. I planned to live the Virginia dream. I'd scrambled up the hard way during the first decades of my life, but I was sure the rest of the journey would be smooth climbing. It was a long way from the life I'd planned—writing poetry and teaching literature—but I was convinced I could conquer any challenge with a combination of sheer intelligence, will, and discipline.

Except, it seemed, my marriage. For some strange reason, informed intelligence doesn't always fix relationships. What my “informed intelligence” didn't grasp was that during our ten years of marriage, Harvey and I had spent relatively little time together—he'd gone into the military before we had actually forged a common identity. People need to stay in the same room long enough to accomplish that. We had been together in Evanston, Illinois, and in Maine, but after that, he had been in Vietnam, Indonesia, or Bethesda, Maryland, while I had roamed the Virginia byways. We were almost strangers when he returned to civilian life at Luxmont. Harvey tried to become a farmer, taking over the land, herd, and crop management. He enjoyed the exercise, but otherwise he was not a happy man. I was left to manage

the house, and without the challenges of farm management, I was bored and unhappy too. We were trying to live the plantation dream, and it wasn't enough. We didn't have a serious common goal. We didn't even know how to pray together to find one.



We really don't know how to be married, I thought sadly, remembering.

The crowd awaiting the pope was moving restlessly, but no one left the square. I shuffled my feet and shrugged my tense shoulders. *What will Mary Helen and Dan be doing today?* I wondered. *Will they go to Madison for the inevitable parade? Will Mary Helen make potato salad and have a big watermelon?* My whole body ached, longing to see her, to be enfolded in one of her mama-hugs. Mary Helen had been the constant in my life through my mother's last days, my husband's various naval assignments, and my early and lonely years at Luxmont. I wanted to be home, wanted to see the broad pastures stretching toward the horizon, wanted to ride my horse, wanted to walk outside with Dan, who had become my farm manager, to look over the Herefords. I longed to look out my kitchen window to see the Blue Ridge Mountains, hazy in the distance. Was the world I'd known irrevocably shattered?

The gentle murmur of the expectant crowd lapped against the venerable walls surrounding the square. The pope! The small, white-robed figure standing on the balcony about ten feet above us seemed very close, surprisingly vulnerable. In the brilliant summer sunlight, he appeared to glow with a supernatural radiance. Palpable waves of reverence, awe, and wonder filled St. Peter's Square. Even the noisy Roman traffic seemed to recede into quietness.

Then the pope began to speak. Even now, thirty years later, I remember the quality of his voice, though I don't remember whether he spoke in English or Italian because Something was happening.

Something I cannot explain and can hardly describe, except to say that like Paul on the Damascus Road, I knew: *God is real.*

The sunlight was very bright, yes, but the light around me seemed to flash to a blinding intensity. Unlike Paul, I heard no voice, but I was devastatingly aware of my pride, my self-indulgence, and my faithlessness. I heard myself whispering, “Lord Jesus, please take my life and use it according to Your purposes. Please. It’s not much and it’s a mess, but it’s all I have to give You.”

I have no idea how long I stood there, but when I could see again, the pope’s hands were raised in blessing and dismissal. I looked down at my feet, surprised to see that the stones were wet. *What?* It hadn’t rained . . . With a start, I realized the cobbles were shining with my tears.

I left Rome a week later, traveling to northern Italy, Austria, Switzerland, and Germany. I was like a child learning to walk. My travel plans hadn’t changed, but the whole world looked different. Where I had seen problems, I now saw Providence. I was still confused and fearful, but now I had a deep sense of God’s faithful presence. During my flight from Frankfurt to West Berlin, a nasty storm tossed the plane like a toy. The passengers clung to their seats, faces as white as their knuckles. Even the flight attendants were terrified. I was frightened, too, yet in the midst of the storm I knew a peace I’d never guessed possible. Those few moments in St. Peter’s Square taught me that God is real, but I wanted to know more. I wanted to know *Him* the way I had known Him as a child.

When I was eight years old, I gave my life to Christ during a country revival service, and through my early years, I never doubted the Bible or that Jesus heard my prayers. I felt secure through all the trials and changes of my childhood, and I trusted that all those hymns and Sunday school lessons and sermons were the gospel truth. When a young Methodist preacher came to our small town just out of seminary and proclaimed that the Virgin Birth was a myth, I

simply dismissed him as an unbeliever. It wasn't until my college years and exposure to scientific cynicism that I questioned the Bible's authority. I wanted to be an "intellectual," and gradually my confidence in God's guidance faded, though at the time I didn't even notice what had happened. But in St. Peter's Square I had tasted Something that promised I could be whole, could set my feet on solid ground—a Living Truth.

When I returned to the plantation, Harvey promptly moved out, informing me that he would file for a divorce as soon as the Virginia laws allowed. No-fault divorce had just been legalized; after a year's separation, he could file and I could do nothing to stop it. With Mary Helen and Dan's help, I was left to manage the cattle, the fifteen hundred acres of Virginia piedmont and mountain farmland, and the division and dissolution of a southern dream.

I had no idea that the Lord would answer my prayers for His nearer presence by sending me into the wilderness, just as He did with the Israelites. He brought His people out of Egypt in about four months, but it took forty years of testing and teaching to get Egypt out of them. Although faith comes by hearing the Word, it's on the pilgrims' way that we finally learn to trust.