

CHAPTER ONE

GIRLS OF GRACE

“Before your dad arrives, I want my fruit trees watered,” Mama insisted when she saw me stirring in bed.

“Okay, I’m getting up,” I mumbled, rolling over in bed and propping myself up on one elbow. As my brain and body woke up, I took another moment to run through my mental calendar. It was Friday, July 4, 1980. Remembering Dad was due to arrive for a weekend visit, my heart did a quick leap. I risked another second of inner glee as I imagined what my life would look like once I started college that fall. But in my early morning enthusiasm, I failed to appreciate Mama’s stern tone, which should have registered as a glaring harbinger for what was to come.

We lived in the basement of our unfinished house on forty-acres in the small farming community of McLouth, Kansas. My stepfather, Kevin, was building it himself in segments. In the spring of 1977, he cleared the land for the foundation and then had the basement poured. By August of the following year, the basement was finished and we moved out of the ‘60’s era trailer Kevin moved us into as a temporary living situation, and into our concrete dwelling. Our bedrooms were situated in the north end of the basement, which was underground. The south end was ground level and comprised of all windows for natural light, with a broad view of Kevin’s newly planted milo fields. Because this was another temporary living situation until the house above was built, living in the basement meant there were no walls or doors in the interior, except for the one bathroom for all five of us. Additionally, there were no bedroom windows or closets. I concluded these weren’t bedrooms, but sleeping quarters.

A lot had changed in two years. Before moving to McLouth, we were living in a quaint little house in the college town of Lawrence, just thirty minutes south. It was a historical town that sprung up in the shadow of the University of Kansas. Both of my parent’s family’s settled in Lawrence nearly a century ago. Rich in history, I found Lawrence delightful and charming.

We would not have been living in Lawrence, if Mama hadn’t suffered a mental health crisis in 1971. My parents were still married and at the time we lived in Ben Lomond, California. Two years before, in the summer of 1969, Daddy’s request for a job transfer as an A & P Mechanic with

Trans World Airlines (TWA) was approved. Our home in Gladstone, Missouri, the one we fondly referred to as the “green house,” sold and we moved west. At first, Mama liked mountain living, but something eventually triggered a dark place within her. Mama’s moods and demeanor changed. She was angry, argumentative and confrontational. Daddy’s first thought was that perhaps she was homesick. It was summer and school was out. He put Mama, Michael, my older brother, and I on a flight to Kansas to visit my maternal grandparents, hoping it would help Mama. At the end of our visit she seemed better and we returned to California. But Mama didn’t stay well. She continued to decline. Once school started in the fall of 1971, I often came home to find her napping in my parent’s bedroom, which was unusual for her. Although Mama’s mental health struggles weren’t discussed with Mike and me, we gathered something wasn’t right, especially when we witnessed my parents openly arguing, something I had not witnessed before living in the green house in Gladstone, Missouri.

None of us were prepared for the storm that was coming for my family, or the devastation it would leave behind. Mama was thirty-two years old when she had a complete nervous breakdown. After years of reflection, hindsight, and the study of the workings of spiritual warfare, a more mature faith has shown me how a mighty undertow of a malevolent nature pulled my family under. There are no words to adequately describe the swiftness and the devastation of our family as a result of a parent with mental illness. Emotional friction, confusion, disorder, and unrest whirlwinded my family into a tumultuous season, a season from which Daddy functioned from a state of desperation to help Mama and stabilize our family.

Immediately Dad flew Mama back to Kansas. She was admitted into the well-known psychiatric hospital, the Menninger Foundation located in Topeka. My maternal grandparents looked after her care. Dad remained behind in order to keep working to pay the medical bills. To help us back home, Aunt Nancy and Uncle Robert, Mama’s brother and his first wife, came to stay with us. Aunt Nancy got us off to school after Daddy left in the early morning hours for work and helped with meals and household chores. Some weeks later Mama returned home.

To me, as a nine-year-old Mama appeared well. She seemed to be in good spirits. Home life calmed down. And we were all better – for a time. But then Mama did something impulsive. She stopped seeing her psychiatrist and ceased taking her prescribed medication. No amount of pleading or encouragement convinced Mama to stay on course with her treatment plan. Daddy became angst-filled about many things, but mostly he worried about Mama being home alone during the day,

especially in light of the kitchen fire that happened around the time Mama fell into a deep depression. She forgot about a hot skillet on the stove and the grease caught fire. Seeing the smoke filling up the kitchen from my bedroom, I screamed for Daddy. My bedroom was adjacent from the deck where Daddy happened to be. He rushed in and as I stood off to the side, I watched Mama immerse dishtowels in water in the kitchen sink and toss them to Daddy. In a frantic state, he slapped the wet dishtowels against the flames. It horrified me to see the fire crawl up the window curtains, but before it could spread to the ceiling, Daddy put it out. Our home, sitting in the Santa Cruz Mountains was spared, but the kitchen was a mess. And Daddy grew more apprehensive.

After the fire, tension between my parents grew and arguments between them escalated. Mama became more irrational and her behavior more unpredictable. Over time, the stress Daddy was under finally took its toll.

In the early morning hours while driving the curvy mountain highway heading for work at the San Francisco International Airport, Daddy had a near fatal accident. Pre-occupied with Mama's mental health and the state of our family, he failed to slow down on the approach of a sharp curve. His 1970 GTO nearly plunged over the mountainside. Thankfully, the guardrail stopped his car instantly flipping it, landing it upside down. Banged up, but alive, he crawled out from under the shattered windshield that had fallen on top of him. A passerby called an ambulance from a nearby emergency phone on the side of the highway and he was taken to the nearest hospital. Miraculously, he suffered no internal injuries, except for bruises and an extremely sore body, but he would be okay. His car, however, the only one he ever bought new was destroyed.

For Daddy, the car accident was the last straw. He abruptly put our home in Ben Lomond up for sale. He moved us to the sprawling city of Menlo Park, hoping city life would better suit Mama. Michael and I entered new schools again, and for a time, the move was good. But like before, it didn't last. Mama couldn't cope there either. Within six months our family imploded.

Our departure from California was unexpected and sudden. One August day in 1972, Mike and I found ourselves on a flight with Daddy in a frenzied state of mind trying to keep Mama from taking off with his children. Mike, being nearly three years older, was suspicious of our sudden departure, but not me. I didn't fully understand what was really happening. The best I figured was that we were simply returning for another visit with my grandparents. The only part that didn't make sense was seeing Michael in tears as we walked down the aisle of the airplane looking for our seats.

Unbeknownst to me, we were not returning to California, but more importantly, that day was our last as a family.

My maternal grandparents, Oscar and Mildred Ray, met us at the Kansas City International Airport. They gladly made room for the three of us in their modest home with one bedroom and one bathroom on Prairie Street. Grandpa slept on a cot in a corner of the dining room and I slept with Grandma, much to my delight. It was a crowded situation, but we made do. A couple of weeks after our arrival, Mama made another abrupt decision. She enrolled us in new schools for the upcoming 72 - 73' school season.

“Why are we going to school here?” Mike asked, after learning he’d be attending Central Junior High as a seventh-grader.

“I don’t want you two missing too much school,” Mama answered.

This new development may have confirmed Mike’s suspicions of a divorce, but not me. I hadn’t yet connected all the dots. Over the next couple of weeks boxes filled with our personal items began arriving. Then one day, a large box came addressed to me. Inside was my bicycle. I thought it odd that Daddy sent it, but happy to have my bike, I still figured we were just visiting.

In September I turned ten-years-old. It was my first birthday without Daddy. Now in Kansas, I limped along in a muddled mindset. Confused, I didn’t know how to ask what was going on. At the time, I didn’t know what “divorce” was. I had never heard of the word, yet the longer we were there I sensed this trip to my grandparents wasn’t like our visit the year before when Daddy thought Mama was just homesick. Still, I hung onto the belief that we were returning to California or Daddy would be joining us, even though his letters didn’t indicate such. When older, I learned why. It wasn’t possible for Dad to move back, not because he didn’t want to be with his children, but that he couldn’t because TWA wouldn’t approve another job transfer request.

Then one day I overheard Mama and Grandpa discussing which car Mama was interested in buying that I began to connect the dots. Now I realized *why* Daddy sent my bike and *why* Mama needed a car. We were in Kansas to stay. I began to connect other dots, too. We were not returning to California and Daddy would not be returning to Kansas either. Once Mama had her car, things

began to move fast. She began to date. We remained another four months in my grandparent's home until spring of '73 when Mama remarried, before the mandatory six-month waiting period California required.

My brother, Mike, and I experienced our parent's divorce when family culture was different. We were less aware of societal issues, the political climate, or cultural shifts. Our world was much smaller. Besides school, we learned much about the world from our parents and maybe the evening news with Walter Cronkite. Unlike today, in which there is more transparency and open family discussions, in the '70's transparency with children largely didn't exist. Parents had tighter control and censorship over family matters. Children were less privy to grownup issues like marital or job troubles, financial stresses, separation, divorce, and certainly mental illness of a parent.

Quietly and in our own way, Mike and I began to process our new reality, but neither of us spoke about the heartache over the demise of our parent's marriage, our family, or what we left behind in California with the other. Sadly, counseling for children of divorce wasn't main-stream then. Even after Mama put Mike and I in school, I have no recollection of ever meeting with any type of counselor. We were expected to accept and adapt to a new life in a new place, with a new stepfather. And unfortunately, parenting plans didn't exist at the time of my parent's divorce, detailing which parent had the children for the holidays on any given year. This was because child custody battles were rare in the '70's. The courts followed what was called the "Tender Years Doctrine," in which mothers were automatically granted full custody of their children, unless it was found that the mother was unfit. It appears that the courts focused more attention to the fate of property and assets than of fair custody agreements, parenting plans, or the rights of good fathers. And in hindsight, it didn't appear any laws were in place or enforced restricting a parent from taking children out of the state, as happened in our case, leaving a loving, stable, non-custodial parent voiceless and disenfranchised. With California's inception of "no-fault" divorce, divorce rates soon soared. But as far as the children of these divorces, the thinking back then tended to be that the less that was explained to children, the better. Our culture in the '70's believed that sparing children pain was being a responsible adult. My parents may have subscribed to this belief, innocently enough; convinced it would be less painful than getting the whole ugly truth at once. There was also the adage, "they're children, they'll adapt." Today, we know this is not a healthy way to handle divorce when children are involved. Parents who take off with children, like in my case, without court

permission to another state is now illegal. Doing so can bring on criminal charges and/or losing custody.

That first year, Mike and I went through emotional changes. My chatty disposition diminished and the nickname “motor mouth” Mike fondly used to tease me with was also gone. Instead, a melancholy mood dominated my spirit. I became quiet and extra sensitive. Mike changed too. He had never been the talker like I was, but he became more private, especially with his thoughts. The sibling teasing and the fun we shared cooled.

During our brief, three-year stay in California, my interest in writing got its start when I began writing letters to my grandparents on both sides. I’m fairly certain that Grandma knew the healing benefits of journaling feelings and that may have been her reason for giving me my first diary for my eleventh birthday. I treasured that diary, writing in it nearly every day. I recorded when I received letters and packages from Daddy, noting how much I missed him or looked forward to his visits, how school was going, my new friends, and of my new life in a “blended family”, a term that was non-existent then. And there’s one more thing my grandmother did. If it wasn’t for her encouragement to reconnect with the little girl across the street, my emotional adjustment may have gone a completely different direction.

Theresa Wilson and I were five-years-old when we first met around 1966. Short like me, she came from a large family of seven. My family lived in the green house in Gladstone, Missouri at the time and whenever we came to my grandparents’ home on Prairie Street to visit, Grandma encouraged me to invite Theresa over to play. From 1966 to 1969, with each visit to my grandparent’s home, Theresa and I picked up our friendship where we left off. Then, in 1969, our intermittent friendship went on a three-year pause. Daddy’s request for a job transfer with TWA was approved. While the world watched the news coverage of Apollo 11, in July of ’69, our home in Gladstone, Missouri, sold and we left as a family, driving west to a new world of our own in California. It would turn out that our life we left behind in the Midwest would be the final season we’d be a happy and unified family.

When my friend, Theresa learned we had moved in with my grandparents in 1972, she welcomed me back with a modest party of cookies and Kool-Aid. It was at this time I met her friend, Cindy.

Cindy Winger also lived on Prairie Street, and she too was a shorty. Next came Denise. She and I would find ourselves placed in the same fifth-grade class with our teacher, Mrs. Glenn. An old-fashioned friendship quickly formed between the four of us. Even though I was confused about the sudden enrollment into a new school, having friends quelled the new-school jitters, however, Mike was not so fortunate. He started junior high without already having made friends. In August of '72, my three friends and I walked to and from school together. We marked our route and went the same way each day, passing by the corner ice cream store. Sometime after we had settled into our school routines, we casually decided to call ourselves the "Prairie Street Girls."

Theresa's nurturing character fostered her natural ability to highlight the positive side of situations. Cindy was a year younger; she was experiencing adjustments in her own family, and Theresa took her under her wings like a big sister. As for me, my life seemed to be on the fast track of change. With each abrupt transition there had been no closure from the previous one. Privately, I was trying to untie the knots of sadness, loss and confusion. The easy and cheery nature of the Prairie Street girls seemed to help loosen those knots, through outdoor play and sleep-overs. Reflecting on this ready-made group of girlfriends, there was a therapeutic quality about it; they made me laugh, releasing some of the private heartache of missing Daddy and how my family used to be.

In early 1973, Mama and Kevin, my soon-to-be stepfather, purchased an older, modest home on Vermont Street, a few miles from my grandparent's home. Five months had passed since we left California and, although I knew what a wedding was, I hadn't factored in Mama getting remarried, or what additional changes that would bring. I was happy about the new house because I finally had my own bedroom again, but leaving my friends on Prairie Street was another painful loss I wasn't prepared for.

A month after Mama and Kevin bought their first home, they married. I left East Heights Elementary and the Prairie Street girls. Now I would have to finish my fifth-grade year at Broken Arrow Elementary. I couldn't fathom starting over. I became anxious and fearful, especially because I didn't know a soul at the new school. It was near the end of the school year. How would I make friends before school was out for the summer? I spiraled emotionally. The progress I had made stalled. I was sad Daddy wasn't here, sad at leaving the Prairie Street girls, and anxious and fearful about another school. Again, Grandma seemed to pick up on my fears.

Not long after starting school at Broken Arrow Elementary, Grandma stopped by our new home on Vermont Street. She said she had something special for me. Curious, I followed her outside. Standing beside her car, she opened the back driver's side passenger door and reached in to get something. I walked over to see. There in the driveway was an orange and white Tabby kitten. Immediately, my face lit up and I reached down and swooped up the kitten, cuddling him in the crook of my neck. I looked up at Grandma; she was beaming. Thanking her, she said she found him on the side of the road wandering alone. Instantly I fell in love with him. I named him Jody. Jody was gentle and friendly, and we were best buddies, but he did one quirky, ornery side.

During the summers, Jody hid in the bushes below my bedroom window. Crouching low, he remained still, waiting for an unsuspecting person to walk by. Anyone who passed by was fair game. But it always seemed like Mama was Jody's favorite victim. One day, as Mama passed in front of those bushes, carrying a basket of freshly laundered clothes to hang on the outdoor clothesline, Jody sprung from the bushes. Mama dropped the basket of wet laundry as Jody's paws looped around one ankle, his razor-sharp claws piercing her skin. Hearing blood curling screams, I scrambled from my room and rushed outside to find Mama standing frozen with Jody at her feet, glaring at me. Any slight move, Jody sunk his claws deeper. Somehow, I managed to coax Jody to pluck his claws from Mama's ankle. Miffed and now in a vinegary mood, Mama picked up the wet clothes off the grass, giving each one a swift shake. I carried Jody back into the house, snickering softly to myself. Mama always said she hated my cat, but I never took her seriously...not until seven years later on Independence Day 1980, when she finally got even with Jody - and broke my heart.

My new fifth-grade teacher at Broken Arrow Elementary, Mrs. Kohler, placed me in a desk beside Linda Votaw. Looking around at my new classmates, all chattering amongst each other, I thought of my friends back on Prairie Street walking to school without me. Plus, I was fearful of recess and finding myself alone on the playground. Desperate to make a friend, I turned to Linda. From that insecure place, I found my first words to say hello. Linda responded with a kind smile and a soft voice.

Contrary to my long brownish-red and wavy hair, freckled face and fair skin, Linda radiated a healthy glow with her naturally darker skin, long, straight dark hair, and brown eyes. I found Linda gentle and warm. When we broke for lunch, she invited me to eat with her. While eating, I learned Linda lived in the country and she had two older siblings. Afterwards, during recess, we played Four-Square with other girls on the playground.

Walking home, I was elated and relieved I'd made a new friend. Less anxious the next day, Linda and I ate lunch together again, and the next day too, until the end of the school year. Like the Prairie Street girls, the friendship between Linda and I became easy and comfortable, even our personalities were nearly the same. My melancholy disposition didn't suddenly disappear; it lingered, intensifying during the winter holiday season, and on my birthdays and Father's Day. Because Daddy couldn't get time off of work to fly back during the Thanksgiving and Christmas season, our visits were at other times of the year. Still, over the next several years, I found myself reflecting often about the life I once had – before the divorce and before Mama's illness, and living in the green house in Missouri. Years later, after having my own children, I contemplated those difficult years. The melancholy mood I was mired in was really childhood depression.

Eventually, I did adjust. Living in one home for five years, regular visits with Dad, having Grandparents near, good friends, a regular routine, and even my cat, Jody, brought stability and security. And I assumed the same for Michael. He and I flew to California for visits with Dad in the summers. As teenagers, Dad took us abroad where we were exposed to see how other cultures lived. This was important to Dad because much of his childhood was spent living in South America with his parents in the 1940's.

Then, in ninth-grade, I noticed subtle changes in Mama's moods. Minor infractions triggered an impatient, critical nature, snapping at me harshly. I began to worry about having friends over, preferring to go to their homes where I felt at ease with the freedom to be myself and feel less guarded.

In 1976, my first half-brother, Daniel, was born. Thomas came two years later. Kevin, who was skilled in carpentry and masonry, began adding onto our home. But unbeknownst to the rest of us, Mike was making some changes of his own.

In the spring of 1977, in the early morning hours of Michael's eighteenth birthday, he carried his duffle bag to the front door. The day before, he dropped out of his senior year of high school, telling no one. As mothers do, Mama suspected something. She got up early the next morning. Before Michael could get out the door undetected, Mama suddenly appeared. She put herself between the door and Michael. With her arms outstretched on either side and her legs hip-width apart forming a large X with her body, she blocked his exit. From that stance, she quietly grilled Mike with a set of questions about his plans, his goals for his future, and how he would attain those

goals. Mike was prepared. Satisfied with his responses, Mama dropped her arms and stepped aside. Michael picked up his bag, said goodbye, and slipped out the door in the pre-dawn hours. On the other side of the wall I slept, oblivious to it all.

I was never told Michael had left home; it was another one of those “censored subjects” for me to discover on my own. Why couldn’t Mama have an honest discussion? Why the secrecy? Didn’t I deserve to know what became of my brother? Meanwhile, life at home carried on as usual. Mama’s silence only added to my feelings of distrust and alienation. Michael’s absence hurt; I struggled with not getting to say goodbye. Growing up, I looked up to him. He was my big brother and we went through a lot together. Now a part of me felt left behind. As the days and weeks passed, I wondered where Michael was or when I’d see him again. At dinner, I felt his absence at the table. In passing his room, I stood at his door, looking for any sign he was back, but there was no sign of him. Where had he gone? Who was he with? Was he safe? I missed him at school, too. For the first time, we were attending high school together. When the class bell rang signaling a change in classes, I looked for him in the crowded halls. Spotting each other in the distance, he smiled and waved at me. I excitedly waved back. Even worse, Mama didn’t talk about him; it seemed to be a taboo subject. I sensed the tension around this subject and given Mama’s rising mood and behavior changes, I stayed quiet.

Internally, Michael was struggling. At eighteen, he lacked direction. In the five years since our parent’s divorce, Mike needed his own father’s guidance and influence. As an adult now, he was on a personal quest to sort out his life – to find his way, yet dropping out of high school seemed like a step backwards.

Dad learned of Michael dropping out of school and moving out, not through Mama, as she never shared that news with Dad, in spite, to keep him at a disadvantage. I’d like to believe our grandfather, Oscar, stepped in and informed Dad. From the time we moved in with our grandparents, Grandpa invested himself in Mike, establishing a healthy bond, in the same way Grandma did with me. Immediately, Dad flew back, found Mike right where he was told, along with a few shady squatters, living in the empty home of our paternal grandmother, Daisy. Falling ill, she moved to Pennsylvania to live with her daughter, my aunt, Audrey. Dad was still in the throes of getting her house ready to sell. Dad kicked everyone out, closed up the house, and he and Mike were on a flight to California, where Mike earned his high school GED. Relieved he was with Dad, a part

of me wished I was going with them. Not long later, he enlisted in the U.S. Army. He was finding his way; I was happy for him, but I knew it would be a long time before I'd see him again.

Now the oldest child at home, my stepfather and I had an unspoken understanding. We arrived at this amicable relationship while working together on various home improvement projects. I respected him as head of the household and he recognized I already had a dad and didn't come off trying to take my father's place. I appreciated that Kevin never criticized my dad in my presence, nor did he ever raise his voice at me. He was a decent man and I grew to appreciate him.

Long before Michael's departure, I began attending church during my junior high school years. I loved learning and right from the start, I took to it. I felt like I belonged there. Theresa and Cindy later attended with me. My church involvement led to weekend camping retreats and Bible camp in the summers, which rooted my budding faith. Then, around the age of thirteen I became a Christian, a decision that would prove pivotal to the dark years that were yet to come.

A year after Mike left for California, Thomas was born, triggering another move—this time to the small farming community of McLouth. The news of our move was a shock. It horrified me to be changing high schools going into my junior year. For the first time since fifth-grade, all my friends, the Prairie Street girls and Linda and I were in the same high school. The timing couldn't have been worse.

Now living amongst fields and cows, I hadn't forgotten that Mama didn't do well in remote areas. I wondered how she'd manage in McLouth with nothing but rolling hills, pasture lands, and distant neighbors. Then too, are the harsh winters where leaves of green disappear leaving behind barren skeletons against a stark landscape and rural roads closed due to excessive snow, shutting us off from the outside world. But like I did for all our previous moves, I accepted it, and moved along in quiet compliance.

With reservations, I started my junior year of high school at McLouth High, however, I wasn't able to secure friends in my own grade. Instead, I befriended several girls from the sophomore class, but I never fully bonded to that high school. By this time, Grandma Nixon, my

dad's mother, passed away, and I became the recipient of her car. It was a timely gift. As long as I paid for my own gas and insurance, I drove to Lawrence to see my friends, Grandma and Grandpa Ray, my part-time job, and church. The 67' Chrysler, a large, tank of a car, became my life-line. I didn't care how unhip it was; it kept me linked to my past life in Lawrence.

By now, Mama was in disputes with everyone in the family. This added to the tension to Mama and Kevin's marriage. At first I thought Mama wasn't adapting to country living, but I soon realized there was more to it than that. She wasn't depressed like she had been when we lived in the Santa Cruz Mountains; she was angry. Additionally, my stepdad's family had rejected Mama and she was struggling with this. From a place of hurt, she demanded Kevin stand up for her and insist she be treated with respect. In classic passive mode, Kevin avoided conflict and as far as I knew, never approached his family. But there was something else. Mama had a particular brand of hostility towards her own mother. I was confused. After all, I never witnessed trouble of this magnitude between them when we lived with them. This dark turn in Mama's character and conduct was alarming and set me on edge. Up until my parent's divorce in 1973, I had no recollection of Mama being verbally abusive, threatening, or combative, except what transpired between her and my dad during the last year of their marriage. Mama's anger was so acid-like, there was an unwillingness about her for self-control or understand the wounding her words caused.

Short-tempered, whenever I fell short of her mark, or even when I made an honest mistake, I encountered her scorn, undeserved criticism, a slap across the face, and even a threat to my life, planting the seed that I wasn't good enough. I dreaded each new morning, fearing the mistakes I'd make, her temper, and her ability to humiliate. But what confused me the most was her uncanny ability to use my weaknesses and vulnerabilities against me. Fear quickly dominated my heart.

In high school, I transitioned to "Campus Life." It was a large and active group comprised mostly of Christian high school students. This group had a profound effect on me. The relationships I built in Campus Life reinforced my faith. I began to see my faith and trust in God as my anchor. Admittedly, Campus Life became a place of escape too – an emotional break from the constant tension and the internal struggle with how to cope with Mama. Because her moods and behavior were often unpredictable, I didn't know when or what would trigger her to flip emotionally. When Mama spoke disparaging words over me, they conveyed disapproval and plunged me into a world of "nots." I was not assertive. I was not confident. And I was not self-assured. I placed other "nots" on myself. With a face full of freckles, I was not particularly pretty. I was not brave. I was not even

average height. In fact, I was obsessed about my short stature, comparing myself to other girls. But for a few hours each week, church and Campus Life became my lifeline - instrumental at cultivating hope and trust in a God who cared for me and my circumstances. I left those meetings feeling hopeful that things between Mama and I would somehow improve, so I continued to do my best for her, in hopes of gaining her approval. And I prayed that God would help me bear up under a difficult mother. Mama had become a Goliath to me. Yet, as I prayed, Mama's heart didn't change, nor did my circumstances. In my own private war, I kept doing what I thought was right – what my faith was teaching me about how to persevere and how to remain respectful towards Mama, even though I was in enormous inner distress. I didn't feel she deserved my respect, but in 1979, disrespect would have put me on the street. Regrettably, I should have done what Michael did – get in my car, drive myself to the airport, use my dependent's airline identification card to write myself my own airline ticket (minors could do that in the 1970's) and put myself on a flight to California.

Meanwhile, in his quiet enthusiasm, Kevin continued to build up his small farm. I was thankful that my bedroom space was in the far corner of the basement. Kevin cleverly placed the wooded staircase to the future house above between my bedroom area and the bedroom spaces of the others. We each hung our clothes on dowel rods placed on the underside of each step of the staircase, adding a layer of privacy between us. But without walls or doors, I could hear Mama and Kevin talking quietly in bed, as well as the happy chatter of Daniel and Thomas.