

UNTOLD SECRETS

Grandma and Grandpa lived in a two-story white house out in the country on a small farm. They worked hard, yet lived by simple means. They had no phone or communication service in the 1960's. I lived next door and loved to visit my nanna. She was a tiny woman with curly gray hair, and a very tender soft-spoken voice. She had a lot of wrinkles on her sweet face, and loved her family dearly. The kindness was mutual.

They delighted in the surprise element of each visit with friends or relatives. My cousins came unexpectedly to visit one afternoon from several counties away.

While the adults were talking on the front porch, I (being a preschooler) wandered off with the older cousin, Nick, to explore the back area where the stream flowed swiftly. We meandered around to the part where the flat slate-rocks glowed. With the warm water running gently over them, they looked really black and treacherous. I was warned that they could be really slippery when wet. But unfortunately, I darted across without thinking and tripped over the glassy-covered rocks making a big splash in the water. I got up quickly, shook the water off from my face, and shivered momentarily from the surprise. I was dripping wet, but soon realized there was no harm done. We carried on exploring upstream.

The guy told me to come and have a look at one particular rock as it has some carvings on it. I don't know if he had just pulled out his knife and carved a few things on the rocks or if the carvings were there already. He stopped to tell me what it all meant. I listened intently. He said the Indians used to live in this area and would come down to hunt regularly. He told me a big story about how many deer they killed in this area and where they took their skins to make into pelts. He went on to point out the direction on the hills where the Indians used to live and how many were in their tribes. He disclosed the Indian chiefs' names and what tribe they were from. My cousin said they had probably scalped a few of their enemies here as well. He said the

Indians loved deer chili, and they would sell some of their meat to others to help keep themselves alive. The markings on the slate rocks were the number of deer that they had killed that year. He was perhaps making up the whole story, but as a preschooler, I was believing it all as though it were the truth. I had seen the arrowheads my dad had discovered while plowing and tending crops in the field next to this brook. I was totally convinced that they were the remains from his story.

He told me not to tell any of the stories, or he would have to kill me. Being young, I was determined not to disclose this information to anyone. I had no reason not to believe him, so I kept his secret within. That was until one day later on in the year when my sister, Jane and I were playing in the barn loft together. I was feeling weak that particular day, and I decided to confide in her. I trusted her not to tell anyone, so we sat in the barn loft among the square hay bales as I told her my story about the slate rocks and the Indians. I told her not to tell anyone which I'm sure she never did. It was now "our" secret.

A few months later, I was again at Grandma's visiting. She had made her lovely yellow cake with white icing for us, and it was delicious. We had just finished eating when our cousin's dad pulled into the driveway. They got out of their old truck wearing their camouflaged clothing. The dad said nothing as he reached inside for their long rifles.

All of a sudden, I remembered what he had told me. He said that if I repeated the story about the Indians, he would kill me.

"Oh, NO!! They have come to kill me!" I thought.

I ran inside and hid under the table. I was really scared. How did he know that I had told Jane the story that autumn day in the barn? My heart was rapidly beating inside my chest. It was pounding. Life was almost over for me! I clung to the white wooden table leg and held my breath hoping no one would spot me under the long-hanging tablecloth. I did not want them to find me. It was a long wait before my grandmother finally came inside to look for me. Finally, she spied me under the table and asked why I ran off?

I asked, “Are they were gone?”

“Yes.” she stated. She informed me that they had only come to go squirrel hunting on the farm and they would be back later. I felt so relieved. It was not me that they had come to find after all! I could breathe again. I was probably as white as the table leg itself. I was relieved with this great news!

It wasn’t until I was grown, that I realized he was making up a fascinating story while playing and discovering markings in the stream that particular day as only a boy could. He had no idea I was taking him seriously. However, I discovered that keeping my promises would be a good rule to live my life by, and it involves no fear as when told.

A Home For Bella

One cold and confusing day, an old man spotted a puppy shivering beside a box discarded near an alley. Bella felt uncertain when he returned as he fed her and her family hot dogs and lured them into a cage. She hoped the man was kind as his eyes though the cold metal mesh box felt harsh and cramped.

He took the cage and put it into the cab of his old rusty truck. Bella was warmer now, but a little scared. She was trapped in the cage and didn't know where she was going. But at least she still had her family with her.

The old man pulled up to a cinder block building, then lifted the cage and took them inside. There was a big desk with a lady sitting there. She smiled and said, "How can I help you?"

He replied, "I have 4 stray dogs here. Didn't have the heart to leave them in this cold. Can you please find them a good home?"

"Sure, we have just the place for them. Just sign this and you can be on your way." He signed the papers and left without another word. And just like that, they were warm, but soon moved into a bigger cage surrounded by many other caged dogs. It was noisy here.

A few days went by, and one by one her family left in a stranger's arms, and they didn't come back. Bella wondered where they each went and if she would ever leave. The caged kennel seemed colder now that she was alone.

She had arrived nearly a month ago, and didn't want to stay here separated from her family any more. So she planned to escape to find her parents through the same door she saw her family leave. Finally, the day of opportunity came and Bella darted past the workers and through every door.

Once she escaped, she ran around the city, and dodged every person as she looked for her parents until she was exhausted. Never having picked up their scent, she walked down an alley and laid down in a cardboard box similar to the one they used to share. Closing her eyes to imagine where they were, she drifted asleep.

When she woke up, another familiar scent tickled her nose and made her jump to her feet. She smelled pizza! Bella walked down the alley and found a discarded pizza box that still had a half-eaten slice in it. She ate it and feeling energized went on her way.

She looked all around the city streets once more and still seen no sign of her parents. Just a loud hound dog riding with his head outside the window of a different old farm truck leaving town. So Bella decided to follow a car that loaded a box to see where they took it. She hoped this would be the lead she needed to find her family.

Bella ran at a safe distance behind the car, being careful to avoid trucks, cages, and kind looking men. The car slowed to a stop beside a row of spaced fancy colored boxes, each with steps up to a large door. Bella slowed, looked, and listened at all the houses. One had a familiar bark inside!

Bella eagerly dashed toward that house and scratched the door. The screen door bounced open enough to wedge her nose and she ran inside. Leaping and barking when she found her sister, Stella, much to both their surprise. It wasn't her parents, but at least Bella had found the sister the strangers took from that cinder block building's cage.

The sisters laughed and played until Stella's new parents settled them down, uncertain how Bella came and how long she could stay. But what a day they had together as Bella's hopes for reunion seemed underway. That night Stella shared her dog bed with Bella and how happy she'd been with her new family and sense of purpose.

But, seeing Bella didn't have a home and purpose of her own, she agreed she would help her look for their original parents. They immediately snuck out and started to look around the neighborhood together. There were only a few houses left Bella hadn't looked, so they set out determined that the rest of their family would be found nearby.

After a couple hours of searching, there were only two houses left. They checked one, but again no luck. They checked the last house and it was huge. Long abandoned, much like Bella felt, they came up with nothing. Not even a clue.

Bella wondered what had become of her parents and if she would ever find them at all. Somewhat defeated, they went back to Stella's house. After all, Stella's dog bed was better than a cardboard box.

The next day, as Stella and Bella played in the backyard, a little girl who lived next door walked over and fell in love with Bella. As the girl petted her, Bella wagged her tail and felt something she never felt before. She forgot about her parents, and hoped this warm tingling her body had would never feel cold again.

The little girl scooped her up and took her home. Bella moved into that small house next door. It was a nice family with two kids that found Bella's special spot, and Bella found her purpose and also her spot amongst their family. Everything was exactly how it was supposed to be, but even better than Bella could have imagined. Stella and Bella were reunited, and yet each had a home of their own.

The Wild Critter Lurking About
(A True Short Story)

One very dark, early morning around 5:30 a.m., when time to feed my cat, I walked to the storage shed where I kept the cat food bag in a trash can.

When I stepped inside the shed, I noticed the can lid was a bit tilted, but I thought nothing of it. In the dark, I reached my arm into the bin and felt something soft and furry. I innocently started petting the hairy creature and starting talking to it "assuming" it was my cat, Boo. I got very suspicious when the fur ball did not respond to my affections.

I went back to the house, grabbed my flashlight, and I returned to the shed. I slowly lifted the trash can lid and shined the flashlight inside the can. Lo and behold, there was an Opossum on top of the cat food bag! It was still alive but, it was playing "possum" with me. Right then and there, I named it "Opie" like somehow we had bonded and were pals for life!

Still in shock, I rushed back to the house and woke my husband. He immediately got dressed and went out to the shed to see Opie up close and personal. Being a hunter, my husband took care of "Opie" for me right away. Of course, there is no need for me to give you details of what happened for you get the picture, right?

You know, I never realized how soft an opossum's fur can feel. I mean it is not every day that someone gets to pet an opossum! You really need to experience the feeling for yourself, if you dare! On a serious note, I was very lucky that "Opie" did not decide to get a wild hair, take a liking to me and show its affection!

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P. S. In writing this story, I learned that "opossum" and "possum" are not the same. "***Opossums***" are marsupials native to the Americas, with the Virginia opossum being the only species found in the U.S. and Canada. "***Possums***", on the other hand, refer to various arboreal marsupials native to Australia and nearby regions, belonging to a different order. [Source: Wikipedia](#)

Beep.Beep.Beep... the sound of a phone alarm blares throughout the room. It was currently 6 o'clock in the morning, quite early if you ask me, but not for Natalie. She was used to getting up every morning with the same routine. Wake up, hop in the shower, do her makeup, and grab a quick snack to head off to work. "Hmmm, guess I'll just grab something in town to eat for breakfast," Natalie mumbles. It had been a stressful week for her, with prices going up for gas and food her funds were quickly disappearing. Not only that, but work was forcing her into overtime with little extra pay. She had tried venting to her friends about her situation, but they always seemed to push her away or use the quick-easy way of suggesting she quit her job. That wasn't an option for Natalie. Yes her job paid \$14 dollars an hour, but it felt wrong to go somewhere else when she had stayed there for 3 almost 4 years now. It honestly felt like a crime to quit her job. Slipping on her shoes Natalie walked to her car and slid the key into the ignition. Driving off from her small apartment she swiftly put on her seatbelt, "I guess I could get me something from McDonalds". After about 40 minutes of driving she finally arrives at work, jumping out of her car and walking in ready to get her day started.

"Romance, horror, teen-fiction, anime, and gospel," Natalie read the boxes out loud. Grabbing the box closest to her packing it to its designated area. A bookseller, or well... a sales associate for books is what Natalie had been doing for quite some time. She loved it, getting to see the latest and new books along with getting a hefty discount. She practically bought every genre of book in the store, other than the gospel section of course. Natalie didn't have anything against the Bible or that sort of genre, it's just she didn't really have an interest in it. Growing up her parents were strict church goers. Always waking up Sunday morning and forcefully dragging her to church and honestly it was enjoyable the first couple of years, but as she got older her rebellious stage hit and she loathed her parents for making her get up that early. So now at age 21 Natalie didn't bother or show interest in the gospel section at the bookstore.

"Excuse me ma'am, would you mind helping me find a devotional book for my daughter. It's her birthday and I've already tried the other stores in town," said a voice. Natalie turned around spotting the woman, "Yea sure, follow me". Natalie led the woman to a "Self Help" section. "Here you go, if you need anything else feel free to holler." The woman quickly stopped Natalie in her spot, "I think you misunderstood me. I'm needing a faith type of devotional, as in God, Jesus, that sort of thing," the woman said in a matter of fact tone. "My apologies, that section is over there," Natalie replied smartly. Yea Natalie had rude customers quite often and she always put them in their place, but it always felt different when it was coming from a customer hunting or buying books about the gospel. Wasn't these people supposed to be kind, live in God's image? They always seemed so rude and unapologetic. While in thought the woman from earlier approached her ready to check out. Natalie snatched the book from the counter scanning the QR code and shoving the book into a gray plastic bag. "That'll be \$16.99." The woman looked up from her wallet with a huff, staring down Natalie. "Not only is this place high, but the employee's are rude.." Natalie kept her mouth shut. Silently raging, she watched her walk out of the store.

Natalie was worn out, her job wouldn't be that difficult if they would just hire more people. When she was at work she was constantly pulled out of unpacking boxes of books with customers either needing help or wanting to check out. It was a back and forth situation that left Natalie sore most days. So with self pity and tiredness in her eyes she flopped down on her small couch, flipping through endless channels hoping for something good to watch. "No, no, erm no, definitely not... ughhh I've already seen this show a million times," she said nonchalantly. PING!!! Natalie's attention flew to her phone. Picking it up with curiosity she wondered who could have possibly texted her, no one ever messaged her other than her lousy coworker asking her if she would pick up his hours. Tapping her finger on the text icon she noticed it was from her friends, Rachel and Ashley. "What could they possibly want from me," Natalie whispered. "Heyyy Nat, I hope you're doing well!! Me and Ashley are going to the Pagan Unity Festival!! Wanna join us?". Natalie's eyes scanned over the text multiple times, trying to take in the invitation. "What the heck is a Pagan Unity Festival?" she questioned silently. "Ummm I dont know Rachel, I've got work monday and I don't really have the money," Natalie replied, watching the three little dots indicating that Rachel was about to respond back. "Girl, it's only tomorrow and sunday. The only thing you have to pay for is your gas. Come on! Don't be a party pooper Nat". Natalie put her phone down, brainstorming the possibilities of why her so-called friends would want her to come out of everyone in their huge friend group. Didn't they have other people they could bother? I mean... it would get her out of her cramped apartment, maybe it would help her stress and anxiety. "Fine. Send me the address. I'll be there". After replying back, Natalie drug herself towards her bedroom looking to at least get a little shut eye before her journey.

Beep.Beep.Beep... her phone alarm was going off, just like it always does. "Stupid alarm," Natalie said grumpily, grabbing her phone and hitting the Turn-Off icon. It felt just the same as every other morning, but today was different. She checked her messages looking for the address to the festival. After copying and pasting the address in google maps she swung her legs over the side of her tiny bed and got up to find her bag. "I guess this bag will work, now let's find an outfit".

Natalie finally made it to her car, throwing her bag in the back and setting her phone in her passenger seat so she could glance at her phone for directions. "Alright Natalie, a two hour drive is not bad. You totally got this," she thought. An hour in and Natalie was miserable, " Ugh, stupid radio!". Everything was hurting, her butt, arms, legs. Not only was her body sore from work and now driving, but her radio had lost signal and none of her stations were coming in. She aggressively pushed the button on her steering wheel flipping through channel after channel hearing nothing but static. Natalie threw her hands up grumbling until all of a sudden there was talking on her radio. "What the heck?" Natalie thought. As she kept driving the words of the supposed man on the radio station were coming in more clear. "The promises of God. They're shown through verses and scripture. He gives us hope, faith, and knowledge. Remember, no matter where you are in life God has your back," the man said on the radio. Natalie was intrigued to say the least. She turned the volume up, listening to what the man had to say. "...And coming up we have Wings by CAIN. I hope this song blesses you as much as it does me...". Natalie's thoughts run wild as she listens to the song, taking in the meaningful

lyrics. “ Heavy days, heavy heart, got that heavy burden. Weighing on my shoulders now. Troubled times, troubled mind, got that troubled feeling. Always tries to bring me down,” she listened intently. She couldn’t help but feel a little emotional from the deep meaning of the lyrics as the song blasted in her car.

Natalie was so focused on the music that she nearly didn’t hear her GPS telling her that she was getting close to her destination. She had been in a trance and the winding road didn’t help her situation, so when her GPS did go off it scared her so bad she jerked the wheel to the right, almost going off the tight two lane road. “1 mile. Your destination is on the right,” it said in a monotone voice. “Oh dang, I’m already here?” Natalie said. About a minute or so she finally arrived, looking around for a place to park. Natalie puffed out a deep breath when she pulled into a spot seeing Rachel and Ashley standing a few feet away from her. Natalie loved them both to death... well... to a point. The three had grown up together, but she noticed as they got older she was separated from them. They didn’t like the same books, weren’t into the same type of men, or just didn’t agree with each other’s actions. It didn’t help Natalie either when you could clearly tell both girls were still using daddy’s money. Trying to clear these terrible thoughts from her mind, she stepped out of her car whistling to signal her arrival towards the two girls. Both of them quickly raised their heads that were buried deep in their phones, “Hey Nat, you finally made it!” Ashley said. “Girl, I’ve got a tarot card reading and some type of ritual scheduled. We need to get a move on so we’re not late,” Rachel hollered. “ A tarot card reading? And a ritual? For what?” Natalie questioned. She walked up to the two girls with confusion written all over her face. “ A tarot card reading. You know, where they look at your past, present, and future. OH, and the ritual is supposed to help us get a boyfriend or something like that,” Rachel said whispering the last part. “ Yea you definitely need the ritual Nat, maybe we need to schedule you a cleansing too. Might help with your bad energy you’re putting off,” Ashley said with a pouty tone to her voice. Natalie swiftly wiped the scowl off her face, she was clearly mad at the rude comments her friends were making. “Whatever, let’s just make this quick. I wanna grab something to eat before heading to the motel,” Natalie said.

Heading into the busy streets where the festival was taking place threw Natalie off. She felt smothered, her anxiety was rapidly building with the amount of people that were there walking shoulder to shoulder with each other. She briskly followed her two friends that were leading the way to a tent for their “tarot card” reading. Natalie was also nervous about that too. She felt off, almost like something or someone was pulling and trying to get her not to partake in this weirdness. Was it her nerves, or the music she had listened to while driving here, or maybe... just maybe it was God. Trying to grab her attention to not participate in such demonic and satanic rituals that were masked with lies and fake happiness. Realizing she had been caught up in her thoughts Natalie finally came to her senses as they sat down in chairs. She hadn’t even realized they made it into the tent until she heard her friends being told to sit down. Natalie felt like a zombie now, almost like an outer world experience. Suddenly a woman snapped a finger in front of her face, “... and what is your name?” she said. “Natalie. Natalie Greene,” she replied. The woman’s attention went to the other two girls, asking them questions. As she kept getting deeper and deeper into conversation with the other two girls, Natalie realized this wasn’t for her. Briskly getting up, her chair scraped the ground loudly, alerting her two friends and the

mystery woman in the process. Trying with all her might Natalie finally thought of an excuse as to why she was in such a rush to leave the dark and gloomy tent. "Sorry guys, I really need to use the restroom. That two hour drive really got me," Natalie said speedily, making her escape.

The streets were still packed. She needed a form of relief, with her anxiety still on high she was bound to break soon. She could feel it. Making her way around people, maneuvering around the crowds she had finally found a spot away from everyone. "Why did I agree to come here?" Natalie thought out loud, "ugh! I'm an idiot for thinking this would help". Taking deep breaths, in and out, in and out, she finally felt that rising bile and chest pain go down. She knew deep down this wouldn't help. Crowds were never her thing, not only that but something about the people and the activities that were going on was giving her the heebie-jeebies. She felt like she didn't belong there, like she was in the wrong.

While her thoughts ran wild like usual she was brought back by singing. It was quiet at first, but slowly getting louder. It was like her body was moving on its own, making her way through the crowded streets for the third time now she could hear the voice more clearly. It was soothing, calming, and gentle. It reminded Natalie of the music she had listened to on the way here, the inviting and happiness of the lyrics bringing tears to her blue eyes. She finally connected the dots, the singing had been coming from a woman who looked a little around her age and beside her was a young man. He wasn't singing, but still had a microphone like the girl. "I wonder what he's gonna sing," Natalie thought. Or was he there to do something else? Natalie's thoughts came to life after the woman stopped singing and the man stood up from his spot and started preaching. Yes Natalie had heard preaching before, but this was different. "Faith. That is what we need to have. We also need God's word, because without it faith only has one meaning". Faith? Is that what Natalie needed?

As the man kept on preaching God's word Natalie's eyes burned. It felt as if she was the only one standing there, listening to him. Every word that spilled out of his mouth hit Natalie square in the chest, seeping through every inch of her body and mind. It was an awakening. A harsh awakening, but one that was needed. She still had not broken, she didn't think it was possible. That was until the man stopped talking and turned it back over to the woman, "I hope everyone got something out of our message today! If you did, remember that Jesus is our savior. You can be saved!!!" she yelled into the microphone. "I was drivin' with the windows down, music loud. Lost as anyone could be. Prayin' that an open road could heal my soul, and fill the emptiness in me. I wasn't in a church. I wasn't on my knees in prayer, but I know I heard Your voice right then, right there...". Tears, that's what Natalie felt pouring down her face. As the song continued on she walked over to the young man. He laid his hand upon her shoulder, immediately praying for the young woman. She had broken, but in the best way. Like a rubber band snapping, Natalie finally felt free and wide awake. She could actually breathe. "Thank you," Natalie spoke hoarsely. "Thank you so much for opening my eyes, Lord. I repent of my sins and ask for your forgiveness. I believe that you died on the cross for my sins and rose again, and I know you as my Lord and Savior".

After her tears and snot had dried up, Natalie thanked the man and woman. Talking to them and explaining her story. Never in a million years did Natalie think she would ever get to this point. With a floaty and airy feeling, Natalie made her way back to her car. She was ready to leave this place behind. "Should I message Ashley and Rachel and let them know I'm leaving early?" she thought. That thought quickly left her mind, within the distance she could see Rachel stalking towards her clearly enraged. Natalie even thought she could see steam pouring out of the girl's ears. "What the heck Nat! Where have you been? We paid good money for that tarot card reading, and you just... DISAPPEARED!!!" Rachel screamed, attracting other people's stares in the process. "I'm sorry, this place is not for me. I- I need to leave," Natalie stuttered out. She hastily swung her door open, hopping in. As Natalie backed out of her parking spot, She couldn't help but feel a sense of calmness wash over her. Not only had she gotten saved, but she stood up to her friends.

For the first time, she went home and felt happy about her life. She didn't care about her crappy ex-friends that screamed and yelled at her over the phone after she arrived home from the "festival". She didn't care about the rude customers at work or the terrible pay. All of her problems vanished that day when she asked God into her heart, her stress, anxiety, everything. If she never took the two hour trip, none of this would have happened. "Praise the Lord for music, because without It, I wouldn't be here telling you my story... my testimony," Natalie said to the onlooking crowd that was gathered around her listening and taking in everything she uttered. Within her arrival home, Natalie had found herself a good church. A church that accepted her for who she was.

What Happened to the Bellows?

By Sandy Hamilton

A small town the Midwest was a great place to hide. Most everyone around here knew one another, either through work, church or just being neighbors. Everyone was a least a friend of a friend. Everyone knew the business of everyone; who was getting a divorce, who was pregnant and who was cheating who, that is except for the Bellows.

A family of four, the newcomers had moved to Hyden, into a small craftsman style home in an established neighborhood and kept mostly to themselves. They didn't attend cookouts, and parties. They were invited but never attended anything. Their children were homeschooled and both parents worked from home. They were seldom seen outside and if they were approached by a neighbor seeking to speak to them and learn more about them, the family ran into the house; being ushered in by the man of the family.

It seemed the family appeared overnight as nobody could put a time stamp on when they arrived and how long they had been there. But John and Debbie Bellow's had secrets. They knew it was a matter of time before they were found out and would have to move on.

If the phone rang it wasn't answered. If the doorbell rang, it went unnoticed. The children couldn't have friends. They sure couldn't have acquaintances over to their house. But this out of the way, hideaway was just what was needed to maintain their persona.

One night, during a thunderstorm, the home was struck by lightening. It caught fire but there were no escapees. The firefighters came, police, ambulance and all of the proper authorities showed up at the residence and still there wasn't anyone exiting. Police

decided to ram the door and gain entrance into the dwelling. There was a lot of smoke, but firefighters were truly amazed at what wasn't there. There wasn't anything in the house; no furniture, nothing at all.

Neighbors gathered at the scene to watch as the fire was put out. They discussed how huge the moving truck was that brought in a massive amount of furniture and personal affects. But nobody had seen a truck there to remove said belongings. People were baffled, including law enforcement.

Speculations were rampant; they were in the witness protection program, said some. They were murders running from the law. While others visited a much more sinister avenue, stating they all must be dead somewhere.

Meanwhile. Out on the interstate about two-hundred miles away, a vehicle overheated and blew the engine. While waiting for roadside service to come and haul in the car, the family of four stood beside the vehicle as a state highway patrolman pulled up. He asked the gentleman if he could help in any way. He replied that they had it covered and soon would be towed in. The officer backed his car behind the stalled vehicle and turned his flashing lights on to alert other drivers on the roadway. The officer, required to do a report, called in the license plate to have it checked out. Soon learning the car was indeed registered to John Bellow's and Debbie Bellows. The name rang a bell, so he called a friend of his to help him remember why. This friend was and FBI agent.

The agent replied that the Bellows family was missing. The mother, and two young children were kidnapped during a home invasion in California and the father was left for dead. He survived and gave a good description of the perpetrators.

The officer called for backup. The tow truck driver showed up at the scene to load the car. He backed his roll-back truck toward the front of the car. As the officer approached on foot to confront the gentleman and get the full story of what was really going on, the man, acting as John Bellows, ran. The officer chased him and just as he was passing the truck cab, the driver threw open the door, knocking the man to the ground! The officer handcuffed and arrested the man.

Debbie Bellows and her children were safe again. She reported to officers that the family was being sold for a large sum of money as soon as they arrived in Miami Florida. They thankfully didn't get that far.

The family was safely returned to California where John Bellows was waiting for their arrival.

The officers were able to break up a human trafficking ring that had sold hundreds of women and children who were sent to other countries as slaves.

A happy reunion and celebration ensued.

"Give Me Back the Joy!"

By Carol Chandler Russ

Every year, it seemed the Christmas season brought altogether too many things for me to do. "No family should have five December birthdays!" I fumed. A second major magnet for time and energy was my husband Bill's intense six-week focus on his December law school exams. The third huge magnet was my service as our church Angel Tree Coordinator. And, of course, there were school parties and special Christmas assignments and projects for our two sons' elementary school classes.

I had slowly come to realize that if I intended to work our church's Angel Tree, I must not wait until November or December to shop for family Christmas gifts. So, I had begun to shop during the summer, particularly if we went somewhere interesting for vacation. Interesting souvenirs made good gifts. But, trying to find time to wrap those gifts was another matter. Fortunately, gift bags were a new product instead of traditional gift wrap, so they made that project go much faster. There was also the matter of arranging for Santa to visit grandparents' homes in Georgia and North Carolina, which meant I had to prepare, wrap, and ship gifts extra early. Any entertaining must be relegated to months other than December.

Another big annual issue was winter illness. With our family's top-of-the-charts allergies, someone always had a cold, cough, even bronchitis, for most of the winter. There had even been little David's serious bout with pneumonia. I contemplated that I could better deal with

this seasonal stress if I could consistently have good, uninterrupted sleep without being kept awake most nights by someone's coughing despite cough medicines.

All these issues had taken their toll. I looked around at my filthy house. There were dishes to wash, laundry to wash and fold, furniture to dust, and the vacuum cleaner to run. Most mothers with children faced these regular tasks all the time. But, with so many other things to do, I had let housework slide. Any time dust began to pile up, however, someone would get sick. Totally frustrated, I decided to tackle my housework before running errands. A clean, orderly home would at least provide more sanity and peace and if someone became sick, I would not feel so guilty that it was my fault for not having cleaned. And I could talk to the Lord while I ran the vacuum cleaner.

"Jesus, we have a problem that we must work on this together! This beautiful season of Your birth is not bringing me any joy. I am frustrated ... *tied up in knots ... angry and miserable*. It's not supposed to be this way! I don't know how to manage all these situations, yet several things were specifically what you directed us to do. We must work this out together. I really need Your help! Everyone in our family is highly allergic and You brought us to one of the worst areas of the country for allergies! It even has a name – Ohio Valley Fever. And ... Bill prayed about going back to law school and You gave specific confirmation that Bill was to do that ... for four long, hard years. University of Louisville has one of the few evening law schools in the country. You gave Bill an excellent day job with a great company so he could support our family with his company paying law school tuition. So, I get to spend four years as a single mother whether I like that or not. You didn't ask me! I don't want to live like a single parent! Yes, I can

drop Angel Tree responsibilities, but I really need something to do outside of our home with other adults in our church, and I do enjoy it. And I'm miserable when all I do is clean the house, day after day. Jesus, calm me and give me Your peace. Dissolve this stress. Please give me back the joy! Just give me back the joy! Give me back the joy!" Over and over, I prayed this while going back and forth vacuuming our den, as if uttering it five or ten times to a rhythm would help.

Evidently, Jesus heard. That afternoon, a package arrived in the mail from Bill's sister, Judy, in North Carolina. Upon opening it, I gasped to see a beautiful Christmas green sweatshirt upon which Judy had kindly appliqued three angels playing different musical instruments. The angels were in different positions, spelling out three letters: J O Y J O Y J O Y All the day's stress dissipated as I sat down on the sofa and laughed and laughed. Jesus had indeed given me back the J O Y of the Christmas season! Twenty-five years later, I still have that sweatshirt and will keep it forever as a reminder.

The aging Brother and Sister sit at the table of their Mid-Century Modern home in the heart of South-Central Kentucky. Glasgow to be precise. The kitchen window looks out to the wintry landscape of a typical January. The bare trees offer up a particular beauty with the sun shining on their frozen bare limbs. The limbs resemble hand shadow puppets. The one the Sister happens to rest her eyes on looks a lot like a lamb. The Sister smiles as she recalls the fields of baby lambs that surrounded her family home and were visible from nearly every window of the farmhouse she grew up in. The Sister then frowns as she is reminded of the dilemma facing her and her brother currently. The farm they had grown up on is less than 10 miles away from where they sit now, drinking coffee. But it is worlds away from how they now live, nestled in a clean, tightly packed neighborhood. The lots are all small and easily manageable. So easy, in fact, that the two can afford to have a yard business come once a month and keep it tidy for them!

How very different the farm is. They have a deal worked out with a neighbor to cut the hay twice per summer. The neighbor takes the hay, and they don't have to think about it again. That's the extent of the "help" they get. There are an endless number of other responsibilities involved in maintaining this farm. The 100 year old barn has a giant groundhog living in it that's slowly undermining the foundation. A massive tree, probably nearly as old as the barn, recently started to lean dangerously towards it and needed to be cut. That project alone cost more than the Brother and Sister spend in a year's worth of groceries.

What to do about the farm? The sister does not even want to mention it to her Brother. It has become a sore subject lately, which is unfortunate. The Sister smiles as she recalls the years of happy, healthy living it provided their family. After the Tobacco buyout, her parents used the substantial payment to transition to other means of making the land work for them as much as they worked for it. Her father had loved the pigs, sheep, and cows but her favorite was the garden. What a marvel! The buckets of potatoes and sweet potatoes that covered the floor of the farmhouse kitchen every year were almost unbelievable. She fondly recalls the smell of the Kentucky soil, somehow smelling earthy yet clean as the fine limestone dust covered the bounty. Good soil. Life-giving soil. She recalls the same buckets being filled to the brim with berries every summer. Blackberries, strawberries, raspberries that she and their mother would spend hours canning in anticipation of selling for money that would help to pay for school clothes or patch a roof. The whole neighborhood would wait in anticipation of seeing the wooden table show up at the side of the road at the tail end of summer. Every dollar the mother daughter team would earn would be added to their Dad's meat sales and his outside job as a dairy delivery man.

Because of all the work the sister put in with their mother, (after their Mother and Father pass out of this life), it was decided that the Brother would do the bulk of the upkeep for the farm while they wait for one of their children to take it over. She has a daughter and son. He has one son. All three have great potential to come back to country living, the siblings think. In the beginning it seemed like such a good idea. Surely, one of the three children between them would want to live the adventure of farm life! Sure, living in Louisville and Lexington is fun when you're young, but eventually concrete and light pollution gets tiring and at least one child (with a spouse perhaps?) would see the incredible gift that was patiently lying in wait. Both the Brother and the Sister had been married at different points in their lives and if the same offer had been made to them, they would have been more than happy to oblige!

But time passed and God and humans had their own will. And the well-intentioned plan this pair had left the two siblings cohabitating again. It was hard to believe that it had been almost 10 years. The farmhouse was now not habitable for the aging Brother and Sister. The roof had leaked at the chimney seams, and nobody had noticed for weeks. Parts of the ceiling were coming down around not just one chimney but all three. Some of the challenges could not be helped, there was not the money to do the necessary updates. Not one of the doors had been enlarged for modern living, so new appliances and furniture could not be brought in. The copper pipes had been corroded, and all new plumbing was needed.

The Sister examines her Brother's kind face. She notices the deepening lines on his forehead and the silver hair that frames it. She looks at his hands holding his coffee cup. When had his knuckles become bunched up and gnarled from arthritis? This could not go on much longer.

"Dear Lord", she thinks. "Please put a family in our childhood home. I'll take any family that will love it as much as we have loved it".

At just this moment, the Brother looks to his sister and says painfully, carefully "Sister, I think it's time to sell the farm".

At that same moment across the country in South Central Oregon. Central Point to be exact sits a youngish Husband and Wife drinking coffee in front of a large picture window. They are exhausted from building their "Dream House". At what should be a time for celebration and congratulations on completing a monumental task of sacrifice and hard work, this well-earned joy is shadowed by some harsh truths. The community that they have loved their whole lives has fallen apart while they were busy building. After much soul-searching and bargaining, the truly humbling and soul-crushing reality is that no amount of work, ever, will make these 2 acres an island. The safe home they have built for their three small children is anything but safe because it is surrounded by chaos. Just this morning they learned that the childhood playground the Wife raised money for and helped to construct at the tender age of 8 has been purposefully burned to the ground, in the middle of the night in the middle of January.

The Wife recalls the beauty and majesty that lead her to stay here, in this valley, years after she could have left. She looks out the window and admires the soft orange bark of the Madrone trees, their sage colored leaves growing through the winter when all the other trees are asleep. The hot, hot summers with rafting and swimming. The cool winters spent on the slopes skiing or snowboarding on mountains that easily rival the Alps of Europe. Incredibly dramatic and providing endless entertainment, year-round.

She looks over at her handsome husband. He is starting to get some salt and pepper variegation in his otherwise dark hair. She looks at his hands holding his coffee cup and notices small cuts from the finish carpentry he's been doing on their house. Her mind then wanders to their 3 darling children. Two boys who look like their Dad and their cherished daughter who is a spitting image of her Mom. They are asleep still, snug and safe on this wintery morning.

How will she tell them that their favorite playground (her favorite playground) is gone? Years of horrible local and statewide policies and decisions have led to this. First there was the legalization of marijuana, years before other states adopted it. This started the "Green Rush". Bringing in speculators on a new market of "medicine". Some of these businesses were legitimate attempts to move society forward in a positive way. Why take a pill if you can find relief in a plant?

But many of these new people were not coming with good intentions. And what they had learned was that voting indeed did matter. The decision to legalize marijuana, as they had predicted, led to an influx of transplants from across the country; people seeking a consequence-free environment in which to partake in their drug use. So, when it was proposed to decriminalize Methamphetamines and Heroin, it was easy for that new legislation to pass, given the mindset of the new population. The cascade of maleficence did not take long. After only a year, the landscape of the youngish couples' community had been forever changed.

Her mind returns to her children. They've already lost so much in their short lives. No more school. The schools were forced to become more like maximum security prisons than joyful sanctuaries of learning in order to keep the kids safe. No more going to the libraries because homeless junkies now use them as their homebase, using the running water, protection from the elements and internet connectivity. No parent could have foreseen that the worst part of the whole debacle was that the librarians seemed to enjoy the company of these new (residents?) more than the families who depended on weekly visits to discover new books. No public pool, because there was no money in the city budgets left after "caring" for these new residents. And now, no park either.

This had been the last park where parents were somewhat confident their children wouldn't prick themselves on one of the thousands of used needles that had been provided by city employees. It made the woman tired just thinking about it.

"Dear Lord", she pleads. "Please find us a home where our children will be safe. I love them so much and I know you do, too. Please help us to come up with a solution to this mess." Just as she finishes her prayer, the Husband looks up at his wife and says, "Wife, it's time for us to move".

God (it turns out) Does have a plan. Three months later, to be precise. Somehow, there is a white farmhouse with 20 acres that the Husband has discovered on his computer, and he just can't get it out of his head. It's crazy and makes no logical sense. He does not even know how it showed up there. Nevertheless, it piques his interest and he keeps the listing on his computer and references it multiple times a day. He does research on Barren County, which seems anything but barren. He discovers multiple lakes, caves, and culture. For two weeks he does a deep dive into SoKy, as they seem to call it. He is pleasantly surprised and builds up the confidence to approach his Wife.

The building of their home had been so many years in the making. His wife had been pregnant with their daughter in the middle of it and she had only taken three days off after the birth before bundling up the baby and getting back to work. They had envisioned giving this property to their children. They had sincerely intended to live on and work with this land, for the rest of their lives. His Wife is generally the creative, whimsical one. Impulsive would not be an accurate word to describe her, but if it were a choice to call one of them impulsive, it would certainly go to the Wife and not him!

When he shows her the listing and proposes a trip across the country, the Wife is somewhat shocked but pleasantly surprised by this unexpected suggestion. She recalls her prayer to God and her promise to herself to let go of any expectations and to trust utterly and completely her Faith that God had a plan for their family. They took two weeks to organize, then packed up their children in their minivan and embarked on a journey across the country.

One week later, the two couples meet on a dewey spring day. The apple orchard is full of pink blossoms. The rolling hills of green are so different from the rocky, dry, high desert that they have come from. The abundant life surrounding them is breathtaking. As they come up the quarter mile long driveway the kids begin to get visibly excited. "We can roll down the hills!", exclaimed their middle child. Millions of bees are buzzing around, intoxicated by the millions of flowers encircling the farmhouse. The Husband and Wife park the van and look at each other, they both give slight nods.

The Brother and Sister have already arrived and are waiting next to a big old red Ford truck. The family gets out of the van but their Sheep-A-doodle puppy bounds out first and makes it to the couple for attention. He has broken any nervousness felt by either party at this meeting. The aging Sister steps forward and with moist eyes as she envelopes the young woman in a hug and says, "Welcome home".

Daddy

As a 16-year-old teenager I sat on the swing with my Daddy in our front yard in rural Allen County. Our home sat on a small farm that was both my parents and my paternal grandparent that lived across the road. There was a path wore from our front door, down the hill and to my grandparents' house. The path was used daily, sometimes multiple times a day by myself, my brother and my two sisters and then of course, my grandparents as they would be in and out of our home frequently.

As I sat with my dad on the swing, He asked in casual conversation, "if you could live anywhere when you become an adult where would it be?" I thought for a few moments and being a lover of Kentucky Basketball stated, "Lexington and go to school at the University of Kentucky." I could sense his disappointment and was confused, after all I had inherited his love for all things UK from a very early age. That was one of our favorite things to do each fall and winter. We would watch the games or listen to the play by play on the radio as Caywood would announce. We would discuss the newest class of incoming freshman and read all about the happenings in the CATS Pause. Seeing the disappointment on his face brought much concern to my mind.

The look on my Daddy's face was one that I will never forget. He looked around our small farm and then at me and then back around the farm. He pointed to the pond and asked, "do you have any memories of you and her siblings at the pond?" I answered with a laugh, "I am almost afraid to answer, there is some you probably don't want to know about." My mind was reminiscing the time my brother and I hung a large catfish and went in the pond and lost one of my brother's shoes. Then a memory of my sister riding her bike into the pond came to mind. The four of us kids had to fish the bike from the pond, so our parents didn't find out. Then the memories of afternoons with my grandfather fishing until the late hours of the evening came to mind. My father could tell I was thinking about good times that had came and went. He then asked, "do you remember learning to ride your bicycle out back?" I recalled very vividly the day I realized that I wasn't using the training wheels and that I had been riding around for some time with the wheels up. I asked my Daddy, "why are you asking these things?" Daddy answered in a stern but soft voice, "this is home, this is where you are from, this is where your roots run deep, Jen, you have always been a Daddy's girl, don't leave. If you do leave our family changes. But if you do leave promise me you will always come back home."

That conversation was over 32 years ago, and I had not put much thought into the conversation until January of 2024 when I sat at the graveside of my father's funeral. Afterall, I stayed close. I attended college in the next town over and was home every weekend. I had taken a job in my hometown and married someone local. I recalled the words from the conversation that played out many years ago. I recalled how he wanted me to stay. I recalled how he wanted this family together. Then my mind went through all the times Daddy, and I had over the years. Then it hit me he left me, he didn't say goodbye, he just left me. What now? How does this Daddy's girl recover?

A feeling of selfishness was overtaking my body. How could I want someone to stay somewhere so badly and yet have no control of the outcome. I remembered all the times I wanted to leave my parents' home as a teenager only to find myself coming back as a young adult for meals, to help around the farm, to help with the garden, to bring my daughter almost daily so she could experience the life that I had grown up in. How could all this be ending? How could I have not had a warning? How could God just take my person? And why now was that one conversation coming to mind, especially at the graveside service for my dad?

I began to think about the simplicity of my father. He had been born in 1952 in a two-bedroom home at the end of the road that our family farm was on. He had gone to school in the Allen County Schools and had the same job for 35 plus years. He worked a public job but farmed on the side. He did not travel often and did not like fancy items. He was so upset when the flip phones began to be a thing of the past. But oh, how quickly he learned the new iPhone and how to text. And did he love to text. Outside of his iPhone there was not much technology to my dad, yet he was educated. He was one of the smartest people I have ever known regarding mathematics. Mechanical task came easy to him, in my eyes there was nothing he could not fix. Yet, his life was simple. He never wanted more than what was right in front of him with his family, home, and farm, other than maybe UK basketball to win championships.

I could not appreciate his simplicity until I was standing at his services and greeting the people visiting our family during the viewing of my dad at the funeral home. In a 24-hour period over 700 people came through the doors of the funeral services for my dad. There were people from every walk of life and all for my dad. He had led a good life and remained true to himself. My dad was the person he said he was and nothing more. He did not desire more, only to be himself and love his family, neighbors, and friends. In my deepest sorrow I was overwhelmed at the outpouring of love that friends, family, and neighbors were showing to our family because they loved my dad and respected the man he had been. The line for the viewing was a 3-hour wait in January where it was cold with temperatures near freezing. However, because my dad was the man he was, people stayed in line and people wanted to tell his family the stories of his life and the impact my dad on them.

Our family heard story after story about my dad during the funeral services. There were stories about my dad bringing garden vegetables to a struggling family. There were other stories about my dad seeing someone on the side of the road broken down and staying with them until help arrived or taking them into town to get something for their vehicle. There were stories about someone being in line at the grocery store and my dad just paying for their groceries for no reason. There were stories about my dad calling people and saying, "you crossed my mind today, how can I pray for you?" Then there were stories about my dad taking someone enough money to get through the week because that person was going through a hard time. However, my favorite story about my dad is the story I get to tell about him being my dad.

My dad was more than a dad. He was my best friend. I talked with him daily, most days multiple times a day. I loved him with a deep love. He was my advice giver, the fixer of my problems and

often that was a huge chore for him. I was with him quite often working on projects for church or the community. We worked in the garden together and then we would prepare and can the vegetables. The last summer he lived on this Earth we canned more vegetables than we had ever done before. At the time I did not realize that would be my last summer with him and I am even more thankful looking back at the time God allowed me to spend with him that summer.

Many days I play the memory of my dad and I sitting on that front porch swing in my mind. I did not realize at the time he was telling me, "Don't leave, stay here with me, stay." I wanted to scream those words the day he left us, the day of his funeral I wanted to shout it as loud as I could. I was not ready for him to leave me. Who was going to fix me? Who was going to take care of my problems? Who would fix the garden? Who would call me every day? If only he could stay and stay here. Stay on this farm. That would fix my heart.

Most days I struggle with my dad being gone. It has not been an easy year. What gets me through is knowing that whatever my dad was seeing in his minutes was worth leaving us. My dad never went anywhere without asking me, my mom or one of my siblings if we wanted to ride with him. For him to leave us there had to be something he seen that was worth leaving. Afterall, he never wanted any of us leaving. We belonged here, here on this farm. This was where are memories were made. This is what made me the person I am today. But he did leave and there was no bringing him back.

We said our last goodbyes on January 11, 2024, and my life changed. Part of my heart left that day too. But his words, his legacy, and his memory live on. His simplicity is deeply embedded in my everyday life. His words that he said so many years ago have played over and over in my head many days and at nights in my dreams. I dream he is walking through my back door and telling me this is where I am meant to be, this is where I belong.

I am deeply rooted on this small farm that my husband and I live on now. My dad was proud of what we were building. With everything I plant, grow, or farm on this plot of land I will forever honor my dad. In his simplicity he taught me to be self-sustaining and how to survive. In his simplicity he taught me to love my family, friends, and neighbors. In his simplicity he taught me to love those that have nothing to give back to me and to do for those that cannot do for themselves. In my dad's simplicity he taught me to make all the memories you can with your family. And for now, I am going to go forward and love with a big love like my dad did until his last breath and always cheer for the Kentucky Wildcats like he did.