WHAT READERS ARE SAYING

It's been a long time since I've read a book that really grabbed my attention. I didn't want to put this one down! I don't think there are many books out there like it.

— KATHY (TEXAS)

I felt both inspired and challenged by what I read and would like to try some of the exercises that Erin shared. There is so much wisdom and insight in every page.

— JANINA (S. KOREA)

This book is so good! There are many pearls of wisdom in it. It is a valuable and inspiring story for anyone who struggles with understanding and trusting God.

— JULIE (TEXAS)

I read this book in two sittings. I would have finished it in one, but it was past my bedtime. I loved it! I think the themes of healing and God's miraculous provision could apply to all Christians, not just singles.

— JULIE (IDAHO)

I loved how Erin dug deep to find real answers for her real struggles. There was never a hint of the typical platitudes. Her story is imperfect and raw—probably why I loved it so much—and she tells it in an engaging, and at times even hilarious, way.

— TABITHA (VIRGINIA)

What an amazing story! God had a plan throughout, even when Erin pushed against it or didn't understand it. So encouraging.

— NANCY (IDAHO)

LOOKING FOR A HUSBAND

"What is impossible with man is possible with God."

LUKE 18:27

ERIN SALMANS

a memoir

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For Husband #2

I'm so glad Husband #1 knew where you were
and when we would be ready for each other.

CONTENTS

Foreword ix
Preface xiii

1. Looking for a Boyfriend 1
2. Basement Therapy 15
3. If Only I Had a Husband 31
4. All I Need Is Love 43
5. Dark Night of the Soul 55
6. Relinquishment 69
7. Unexpected Blessings 87
8. Silent Week 101
9. Putting Myself Out There 115
10. Big Catches 129
11. The Land of Belief 145
12. The Beginning of the End 159
13. Wedding Planning 173
14. Covenant Making 185
15. Honeymoon & Beyond 199
16. The Early Years 213

Acknowledgments 223
Notes 225
Photo Gallery 228
About the Author 236

FOREWORD

For many Christian women, the desire for love and marriage becomes one of the most difficult parts of their walks with God. When singleness stretches on with no clear end in sight, when once-promising relationships turn painful and confusing, it is natural to begin asking hard questions: Why does this seem so easy for everyone else? What is wrong with me? Is God truly involved in this part of my life?

The search for a husband often becomes a journey that exposes our deepest longings, fears, and beliefs about God himself. What begins as a desire for marriage can quickly become a spiritual struggle marked by waiting, questioning, and learning to trust God when his plans seem unclear.

For more than two decades, I have coached singles and helped men and women navigate relationships with wisdom, intention, and faith. My conviction about this work is personal as well as professional.

Years ago, I had the honor of working with Dr. Henry Cloud and became the central story in his book *How to Get a Date Worth Keeping*. Through that experience, I met the man who would become my husband and learned a lesson I have seen confirmed

countless times since: Dating is not simply about finding someone. It is about becoming someone. Healthy, lasting relationships are built on character, emotional health, spiritual maturity, and a willingness to grow.

That is why this book matters.

Erin writes not from theory but from experience. With remarkable vulnerability, she invites readers into her personal struggle and, ultimately, her healing journey. Rather than presenting a polished version of faith, she offers a deeply honest account of her questions and conversations with God during seasons of longing, uncertainty, and disappointment. Her story powerfully demonstrates that growth often begins where honesty does.

Part of Erin's breakthrough came from her decision to humbly embrace the biblical principles of learning from others and living in community. She invited trusted family members, friends, mentors, and me (her dating coach) to help identify blind spots and make healthier choices. She allowed me to press her in uncomfortable ways to become more active and intentional in her approach. In a culture that often encourages independence and secrecy in dating, I believe seeking honest feedback, as Erin did, is one of the most important—and most overlooked—keys to dating well.

This book is not a formula for finding a husband. It is an invitation to all of us to deeper healing, greater self-awareness, better relationship choices, and

a more trusting relationship with God. Within these pages, readers will find practical wisdom grounded in biblical truth, but they will also discover the reassurance that God is present and at work, even in times of waiting, pain, and unanswered questions.

Whether you're new to dating or weary, confused, and frustrated in your search for a mate, you should read this book. It will meet you no matter where you are. But it will not leave you there. Erin's story points beyond the pursuit of marriage to something even greater: the transforming work of God in a surrendered life.

My prayer is that as you read, you will gain not only insight but confidence—confidence in God's wisdom, his timing, and his unfailing love. Whether marriage comes sooner than expected or later than hoped, your story is not on hold. God is using every season to shape your heart and draw you closer to him.

I am honored to recommend this book to you.

— LILLIE NYE CASHION
Dating Coach & Speaker
Integrated Relationships, LLC
Featured in *How to Get a Date Worth Keeping* by Dr. Henry Cloud

PREFACE

Jesus to Teresa of Ávila upon the occurrence of an undesirable event:
This is how I treat my friends.

Teresa's response:
If this is how you treat your friends, it is no wonder you have so few!

I used to like things that explained to me why, if I wanted to follow God, I had to be such an oddball. One was a pamphlet I read just after college while still waiting to have my first boyfriend. It was called "Others May, You Cannot." The gist of it was that God was working differently in some people's lives than others'. Sometimes his plans took more time, more pain, more work to execute. *Oh,* I thought. *That's why I've never had a boyfriend. That's why nice men never seem to notice me. That's why I've never had sex. Because God's doing something "special" with me.*

This line of thinking would carry me for a little while before its elixir would wear off and I'd need more convincing. C. S. Lewis filled a subsequent gap when I read what he wrote to a grieving young man who'd lost his wife, "Perpetual springtime is not allowed."[1]

Ohhhh, I thought again. *That makes sense. I can't be too happy for too long. It's not "allowed."* At least this was corroborated by my experience in singleness, full of ups and downs, questions and more questions, hopes and letdowns.

For most of my life, it felt like everything was going wrong, at least in the romance department. Eventually, however, I began to see new possibilities. God started transforming me and showing me that change and healing were possible.

Through one failed relationship after another, as well as plenty of dateless years, God led me on a journey toward self-love (healing my self-hatred), God-love (addressing my misperceptions about him), and others-love (not using others for my affirmation). In time, it also led to husband-love.

Besides emotional healing, this book also tracks my spiritual healing. I grew up in church and come from a long line of pastors, including my father and brother. For as long as I can remember, I adopted the Christian faith as my own and sought to grow in it.

But as the years went by, God seemed to be withholding my heart's desire or, worse, giving me a snake when I'd asked for a fish. "If you created marriage and sex as good gifts, why won't you give them to me?" "Why are you making my heart sick with hope deferred?" "Why won't you tell me what's going on?" WHY?

My biggest regret from twenty years of singleness is how I treated God. God, the most *blameless* party

in my singleness journey, I often treated as my enemy. My devoutness, biblical knowledge, and spiritual heritage were not enough to combat the lies taking root in my heart, fueled by what I viewed as my right to marriage and happiness.

Frederick Buechner, in his sermon "The Magnificent Defeat" about Jacob wrestling with God, wrote:

> God is the enemy whom Jacob fought there by the river . . . and whom in one way or another we all of us fight – God, the beloved enemy. Our enemy because, before giving us everything, he demands of us everything; before giving us life, he demands our lives – our selves, our wills, our treasure.[2]

This book is about my fight with God. Or perhaps his with me. It was a fight to give him everything, including, finally, my dreams for a husband. It was a fight for answers to big questions. I had to learn that God knew what he was doing, even when I didn't; he was still good and trustworthy, even when it felt like he was trying to kill me. The whole time, he was working—quickly even—to speed me toward the good plans he had for me.

I adore a nineteenth century allegory called *Expectation Corner*.[3] During a tour of the storehouses of heaven, the main character, Adam Slowman, saw a building with a large, peculiar clock over it and a sundial

in front. Empty wagons were being rapidly driven toward it, and over the gates were written the words "Though It Tarry, Wait!" It was the Delayed Blessings Store Office.

"That clock never goes too fast or too slow,"[4] the tour guide said. When the time of the promise draws near, it sounds an alarm to the messengers to be ready at once for the delivery of the stored blessings. "It's not always that the petitioners' doors are found open; for delayed blessings too often come as a surprise."[5]

For many years, I didn't know if my blessings were delayed or just fictitious. But now that God has unveiled his plans, I can see more clearly what was going on.

First, the blessing I was waiting for was not the blessing I needed most. The blessing I actually needed, and that God most wanted to give me, was himself.

"Oh, I already have God," I would have retorted at almost any point during my singleness. But I didn't. I didn't have a raw and naked trust that was content for him to have his way, whether he ever gave me a family or not. *This* was the work he needed to accomplish in me first and foremost: believing God. Not believing God [for a husband].

But secondarily, he also had a lot of work to do to prepare me for a husband and him for me. It took God decades to shape us in such a way that we could have a harmonious marriage when the time came, rather than a relationship filled with strife, as would

almost certainly have been the case if we'd met any earlier. In fact, to our amazement, my husband and I have concluded that God prepared us for each other as quickly as he possibly could.

My sincere prayer as I write this, dear reader, is that you may be inspired by God's work in my life and emboldened to trust him more in your own, both with singleness and every other area.



CHAPTER 1

LOOKING FOR A BOYFRIEND

I don't think there's anything more exciting, outside of reading the Word of God, than reading Christian biographies and autobiographies to see how God made men.

LEONARD RAVENHILL

I'm not dead. So I don't yet know how my story will end. But I do have a book full of stories to tell you about how God worked in my life through unwanted singleness to transform me, draw me closer to him, and, finally, bring me a husband.

For as long as I can remember, I wanted a boyfriend. All the popular girls had had multiples while I was still waiting in the wings. Wasn't having a boyfriend an automatic part of adolescence? Was something wrong with me?

Probably in college, I reasoned, I'd have my first boyfriend. The pool was bigger. I could have a clean slate. Surely there someone would notice me.

During my freshman year in college at an InterVarsity girls' small group one night, a senior came and spoke to us. She'd never had a boyfriend, she revealed. I was shocked. She'd just blown my theory out of the water. Having a boyfriend wasn't going to be automatic here either?

My (Supposed) Future Husband

I studied abroad my sophomore year and met a guy. Our meeting was, in my mind, supernatural, and his family became like a second family to me. He was also planning to come to my college town the following semester to study abroad. At times he seemed to like me, but he never made it official or took any steps

to commit to me. Still, we had so much in common, and after receiving a prophetic word and experiencing other bizarre events, I believed God was telling me this man would be my husband.

While waiting for God to tell him that, I did have physical encounters with other guys. Not sex, but nothing I was proud of, for sure. At least some guys were finally paying attention to me. If they were willing to be physical with me, that had to mean they liked me, I concluded. Yet why did they never acknowledge me at school or want to hang out with me afterward? I came away feeling dirty and conflicted. "I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do" (Rom. 7:15). Romans 7 and Psalm 51 (David's lament after committing adultery with Bathsheba) became my favorite Bible passages for their ability to express how unclean and confused I felt.

My junior year of college (2001–2002), I had a breakthrough. I was on a prayer walk one afternoon when God showed me a slideshow of sorts. In it, different people and things were pictured: my great-grandfather, a best friend from high school, InterVarsity, and more. "What do all these things have in common?" God asked me. I had no idea!

At some point or another, he revealed, they had all been the most important thing in my life. I could immediately see what he was talking about.

Growing up, we lived next door to my great-grandfather, and he and I had a special bond. He wrote me poems, called me affectionate names, and corresponded with me by letter when we moved away for a few years. When he died at ninety-three, I was shocked and devastated. Who would adore me the way he had? I was thirteen.

In high school, I met a guy two years my senior who was very alluring to me. He was a child prodigy in the arts and would go on to train Broadway singers in New York City after graduation. He gave me voice and piano lessons and let me be a part of his invitation-only Performance Choir that got gigs around the area, impressing all its audiences.

I loved being near him, and while things never turned romantic, I depended on him for happiness, meaning, and excitement. We saw each other every day and were involved in a lot of the same extracurricular activities. But now, as he was preparing to go to Juilliard in New York after his high school graduation, we would be one thousand miles apart. That summer, the popular country song "How Do I Live"[1] came out, aptly describing my sentiments. He represented everything good in my life. How would I live without him?

I somehow survived two more years of high school and went on to college. I immediately got involved in InterVarsity Christian Fellowship and made good friends there. I became so involved that IV became the replacement I needed for my empty "most important"

spot. It was a revolving role I was constantly looking to fill whenever a vacancy was created by death, loss, or a change in circumstances.

Now, on my prayer walk, God was ever so patiently and kindly showing me that *he* wanted to occupy that spot at the top of my loves and priorities. I gladly gave it to him. *Of course he should have it*, a lightbulb went off. *He's the Creator, not the created; he's Eternal, not temporal. Of course! He's much more important than everything else I've prioritized until now.* I immediately stopped struggling with straddling the fence between love for God and love for the world, like I had in high school and early college. God became my main focus and a never-changing source of meaning for me.

Still, I couldn't help but wonder when that first boyfriend would come. Or better yet, when my college friend would get on the same page with God and realize he was my husband. I was still under the illusion that boyfriends, romance, sex, love, and marriage are every human's due, especially mine. A life of unwanted singleness, or even a "late" marriage, never crossed my mind.

Learning to Wait

When I wasn't thinking about finding a boyfriend, which was most of the time, I was wondering what

career path God would lead me down after college. I felt excited by the prospect of starting afresh somewhere new, making money, and getting a move on in life. I was eager for puzzle pieces to start falling into place.

Here, I suppose you could say, is where I came to a crossroad. Would I control my life or would God? Would I prioritize sight, self, and answers? Or faith, God, and obedience? Like Abraham, would I be willing to follow God, not knowing where I was going (see Heb. 11:8)? This is the opposite of our human nature and instincts. But I had begun to read great Christian biographies, the subjects of which chose to surrender control of their lives to God. Which did I want? A natural life or a supernatural life?

I couldn't possibly have answered these questions accurately without my answers first being tested. And here was my first test among many: I sensed that, upon graduating college, God wanted me to wait on him. I was not to look for a job. I was not to work on my resume. I was not to apply or interview for positions. I was to wait.

Aggghhh! All my control was gone in the blink of an eye! How could I answer people's questions about my plans and future? Was this even responsible? How long was the wait going to be? At least, then, I could say, "I'll be waiting for X days, and then I'll be back in the driver's seat."

Silence.

All I knew was that if I *did* pull out my resume or go to a job search website, I felt a pang of disobedience. I didn't know what I was waiting for or how long the wait would be, but I eventually developed some idea of what to do during the wait.

"Fine, God, if you won't let me work for an earthly employer, I'll work for you." I read a book a day (mostly Christian classics or biographies). I memorized Scripture. I went berserk in my practice of the spiritual disciplines, thinking that perhaps I could wrest answers from God's hands.

That wait lasted an intense nine months before the Lord opened the door for me to become a missionary with an organization that focuses on making Bibles and Christian literature available to believers around the world. Not at all the door I was expecting. I knew I was closer to the Lord as a result of this "solitary confinement." But I didn't know that my little nine-month taste of total dependence upon God was not an isolated event. Rather, it was going to become part of my calling and the first of many subsequent waits.

Finally, a Boyfriend

In 2004, I moved to Philadelphia for missionary training. While there, I worked in a Christian bookstore. One day a handsome man in business attire came to peruse. He may have asked for help, or perhaps I

approached him. But I ended up praying with him, after which he asked me out! I was probably in shock. No one had *ever* asked me out before, especially someone handsome. I'm not sure of my exact verbiage, but somehow, I turned him down. I was still convinced I was going to marry that other guy, and I didn't want to be "unfaithful" to him.

Wow. How could I possibly have rejected the thing I had awaited for so long? This would not be the last time my wishful thinking and overspiritualization of love, romance, and marriage would lead to me working against my own best interest, thinking that was somehow pleasing to God.

Eventually, I got an invitation to my "future husband's" wedding. To another woman. I knew he'd had a girlfriend, but I still had faith. I waited until the moment they both said "I do" to stop believing he was actually *my* husband.

Years later, while visiting him and his now-wife, they shared with me some painful news. Their marriage had almost ended years earlier and was still in the rebuilding process. I left stunned. You mean all this time while I was wondering why God hadn't made good on what I thought was his promise, he might have been protecting me from devastation and pain?

My mission work with this organization led me both to Italy and back to Philadelphia, where I had lots of ministry opportunities and got to

experience God's supernatural provision. In keeping with my calling to wait on God, I solicited no one for funds but simply prayed for the support I needed. And God brought it! He was faithfully growing, teaching, and transforming me. Yet still, I wondered, when would I have my first boyfriend?

In 2007, at twenty-six, I ran into the bookstore guy when I was back working in Philadelphia. We exchanged contact information, and I invited him to a banquet I was attending. After that, we began hanging out as friends, and one night after making out, I asked him if we were boyfriend and girlfriend. "What else would we be?" he asked.

Okay.

Slightly anticlimactic, but finally I had my first boyfriend. Now I would be happy.

He told me early on he had no plans to get married, which should have been a red flag. Instead, I confidently rationalized, *Once he gets to know me, he'll change his mind.*

One of the biggest perks of having a boyfriend, or so I thought, was to have someone to hold hands with, get calls from, and go on outings with. But mine did none of these things. He was not physically affectionate. He never called me. He was unemployed and desperately looking for work, so he wasn't interested in taking me out or spending money. Instead, I came to his house every evening after my own work and fixed us dinner.

I hadn't yet learned that one partner who does all the giving and one who does all the receiving are caught in an unhealthy relationship pattern. This was certainly not how Christ modeled love. He expects reciprocity, giving us everything and inspiring us to respond in kind. But I had so many years of pent-up desire to nurture that I was grateful for the opportunity to pour my love out on a man, oblivious to how unhealthy this dynamic really was.

We dated for about nine months. I was often sadder with him than when I had been single. I shed way more tears. Wasn't having a boyfriend supposed to make me happy?

"Why do you never call me?" I finally asked him one day.

"Because you always call me. You don't give me a chance."

Boy, I had so much to learn. Here I was longing for pursuit. But all I knew was going after what I wanted. I didn't know how that would backfire on me.

My sister-in-law finally confronted me one day. "You don't seem that happy." She was right. I wasn't. I believed God was asking me to break up with him, but how could I? I had put so much stock in what having a boyfriend would do for me. How could I possibly end the thing I'd waited a decade to receive? It made no sense! Here again, I felt like Abraham, hiking up the mountain to slay his Isaac (see Gen. 22).

The details have long since disappeared from my memory, but I finally broke up with my first boyfriend, resigned from the missionary organization I was serving with, and began traveling around the country awaiting comfort and guidance, starting at a supportive aunt's house in Indiana.

Grief and Growth

Early on in this wilderness wandering, I was drawn to books on grief and suffering. *Why Me?*. *A Grief Observed*. *Won't Let You Go Unless You Bless Me*. I read everything I could get my hands on. I spent a week alone at my extended family's humble lake cottage. I wanted to call my ex-boyfriend so badly. Ordinarily strong, I felt like I'd have to cut my hand off to prevent it from involuntarily dialing his number. How could God do this to me? I'd been serving and following him, and this was how he repaid me?

He stripped me of almost all my faith there at that lake. I've never doubted his existence, but I could no longer assert that God was good, that the Bible was true, or that prayer worked. "God exists" was all I had left.

Yet despite all the sadness and pain, I began to see glimmers of hope as well. I became more introspective, not just assuming that having a boyfriend would make me happy or that if I just waited long

enough, a knight in shining armor would appear. I began to ask different questions and seek deeper answers.

Then came a breakthrough. As I started to think critically about my past and see a pattern on both sides of my family of one domineering and one more passive partner, one who took and one who gave, I asked my aunt—who herself had come through a couple bad marriages—if she knew what this was. Why had I automatically fallen into the same pattern?

"Erin," she answered, "it's called *codependency*."

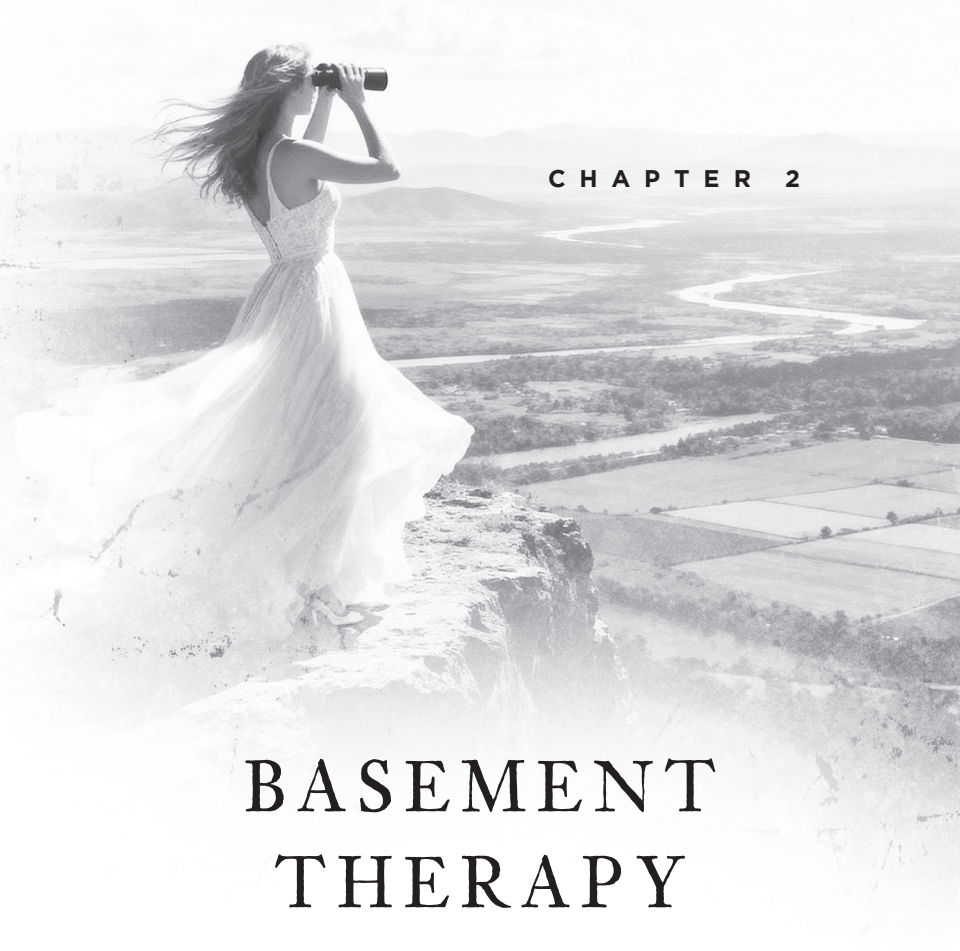
My hand trembled on the mouse as I looked up the word. "A learned behavior that can be passed down from one generation to another . . . also known as 'relationship addiction' because people with codependency often form or maintain relationships that are one-sided, emotionally destructive and/or abusive."[2]

What?! I couldn't believe what I was reading. You mean this was a diagnosable disorder? I thought it was how all relationships inevitably went! One takes, the other gives. One gets upset, the other appeases. One criticizes, the other apologizes. One controls, the other acquiesces. Was that not how relationships had to be? I felt like someone had been a fly on the wall, describing my life without ever knowing me.

The descriptions I read of codependency also described the solutions to it. I was amazed and relieved

to know there were steps I could take to forge a different path. Maybe, if I put in the work as God directed, I *could* have a happy, healthy relationship someday.

Maybe this death I was grieving would ultimately become a resurrection.



CHAPTER 2

BASEMENT THERAPY

Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,
but trust Him for His grace;
behind a frowning providence
He hides a smiling face.

WILLIAM COWPER

In 2009, after spending time with relatives and loved ones in Indiana, California, North Carolina, and Kentucky, my next step became apparent. My aging grandmother was going downhill in her South Bend, Indiana, nursing home with no one to visit or encourage her. Since I didn't have anything else going on, I volunteered to fill that need, as long as the Lord would provide for me financially, as he had during prior waiting seasons. My "fleece" was a request for free housing. And God answered! One of my grandmother's old friends, Dori, offered to let me live in her basement for free, despite an offer to pay. I moved in with a stack of self-help books, ready to study up on my "disease."

Healing with Grandma Lovejoy

I spent every morning working on myself and every evening visiting my eighty-nine-year-old grandmother. She went from a slumped-over, wheelchair-bound, nonresponsive figure to a bright and witty lady, albeit with dementia.

"Can I write you a recommendation letter?" she asked one day, thinking I was one of her aides. The staff had given me great leeway to feed, change, toilet, and care for her, so I was often doing aide-type work.

"No, Grandma," I answered. "I don't need a recommendation. I wouldn't do this for anyone but you."

"Why not?" she asked.

"Because you're my grandmother."

The nurses told me that she asked to be wheeled over to the elevators every afternoon around my arrival time, anticipating my visits. What a transformation she experienced! We read books, the Bible, and old courtship letters she had received from my grandfather; played the piano; sang; corresponded with family members; played double solitaire; and became one another's companions. Oddly enough, though I was the one who came to minister to her, she ended up ministering to me.

"Oh, you're just so bee-you-tee-ful," she would spontaneously effuse, elongating the word.

I wasn't often told I was beautiful. Most of my life, I'd struggled with thinking I was ugly and unlovable. She admired me as she caressed my cheeks with her withered hands.

Healing Lessons

Grandma's loving treatment of me dovetailed nicely with the work God was doing in me in the mornings. I was starting to glimpse my own value, as God helped me love myself for the first time and to expect others to do the same. I conducted interviews of family members. I did extensive workbooks, inventorying my history, identifying lies and painful emotions, and

replacing them with truths. I wrote letters to people from my past, including little Erin. I even went to the library to check out kids' books on my body and emotions and things I didn't learn about in preadolescence. Most importantly, I began to practice what I was learning.

For example, for the first time, I learned that I am not responsible for others' negative behavior or emotions. My ex-boyfriend had been a virgin when I met him in 2004, but by the time we reconnected in 2007, he had caved. He wanted to have sex with me, but I said no. The importance of not having sex before marriage was emblazoned on my conscience, though I don't remember being explicitly taught not to, and I doubt I adequately understood the basis for the rule. Still, it's the one and only boundary I was able to uphold with men.

At one point, he told me, "See! If you hadn't turned me down when we first met, I'd still be a virgin." And even more ridiculous, I believed him! I felt guilty for my "mistake" and for causing him to lose his virginity. Now, however, I was learning how faulty that notion was. No one but he is responsible for his actions. I couldn't make him do anything. I am only responsible for myself.

I also learned I am not responsible for keeping others happy. If others mistreat me, the loving and honest thing to do—both to them and myself—is to let them know that that behavior is not acceptable, rather than going away, shedding private tears, and plotting how

not to trigger their displeasure in the future. I had taken complete responsibility for upsetting my boyfriend and keeping him happy.

In one of my exercises, I listed all the negative emotions I felt with him and the beliefs behind each one:

Self-conscious	If I mess up, he'll get mad at me. I hate it when things aren't peaceful between us. Let me study him so I know how not to upset him.
Scared	I hope he answers his phone. I hope he'll open the door. I hope I can please him. What am I doing wrong?
Unfulfilled	Am I being too demanding? Let me practice being content.
Angry	Why is he so unpredictable? Why does he isolate? He's only doing himself harm!
Hurt	I guess I expected too much. At least he's willing to be seen with me.
Inferior	I should keep quiet. He has a lot to deal with. It's easier than risking upsetting him.
Incompetent	Why do I never get it right? I tried to pick movies he'd like but struck out. I thought it was okay to mention what I want but was obviously wrong. I stressed him out and became a "time-monopolizer." I won't do that again.

Not worth loving	I don't have anything to contribute. He has stronger needs, feelings, and opinions than me. I don't mind sacrificing to meet his needs.
Doomed	All this is strangely familiar. He'll get frustrated with me, storm away, and stonewall me. I know how this ends.
Desperate	If I can say it right, maybe he won't get upset. Should I say it this way or that? Help me! I don't know what to do!

I also made a list of all my doubts. For example, I doubted God loved me or wanted me to be happy. He certainly didn't want to bless me! Perhaps he was withholding from me on purpose, being stingy with his gifts. Or he enjoyed holding me over the flames of testing. Maybe I was called to a life of struggling and unfulfilled hopes. God's promises sounded nice, but what if they were not meant to be fulfilled this side of heaven?

This painted an alarming picture of what I was actually believing about God. No wonder I struggled to trust him. Now, I easily found Scriptures to combat each lie, and I also jotted down a personalized truth to replace each one. I filled a thick binder with these types of exercises, printed single spaced and double sided.

Another activity was to think through what a healthy, happy relationship should look like. I then

compared my own experience to this dreamed-of treatment and saw how far apart they were. For example, a healthy man would:

- never refuse to speak to me
- not withhold love and affection as punishment
- be able to express his feelings and love for me
- know what makes me happy and do it joyfully and willingly
- encourage me, build me up, and make me better
- not be unreasonable when I make a suggestion or express a desire
- be interested to learn more about me
- not instill fear in me but foster love, respect, and admiration
- welcome my honesty, not intimidate me into silence
- not be unpredictable but have control over his emotions
- delight in, cherish, and respect me
- be honorable in his intentions, not using but serving me selflessly

The truth is, I didn't expect good treatment. I didn't even know it was possible! "Love hurts" was probably more in line with my expectations. My job, as I saw it, was to do him good, not harm, all the days of my life (see Prov. 31:12). That meant being supportive

and kind, only telling him positive things about himself. If he hurt me, I should turn the other cheek and bless him, just like the Bible taught (see Matt. 5:39; Rom. 12:14). Isn't that how Jesus loved?

Sometimes. It's how he loved his enemies. But if my significant other is acting like my enemy or an evildoer, that's a problem! Paul said that marriage is to be a model of Christ's relationship with the church, not Christ's relationship with his murderers. With us, his Bride, Jesus tells us both things that are encouraging *and* things that are hard to hear. He does it because he loves us. I was using the wrong model for my relationships!

Some of the work I did involved my parents. I still felt like such a child whenever I went home, even though I was twenty-eight. My siblings were both married by my age, on their way to having five children each. They were grown-ups; I was a little girl. At least that's how I felt emotionally.

I had read that saying goodbye to parents is necessary for codependents to become emotional adults. Often, even when they've said goodbye in every other context—financially, spiritually, physically—they fail to say goodbye emotionally, regardless of whether their parents are still living! Codependents continue to place inordinate weight on pleasing parents and looking to them for value and identity, just as I had instinctively done in my first romantic relationship.

So I decided to practice. I set two chairs in front of me, one for each of my parents, and rehearsed the things I wanted to tell them. Then I got up my nerve, called them up, and said it.

"Please don't call me 'Eroo' [my childhood nickname] anymore," I requested. "Please don't send me money. Please don't call me every day. I need to say goodbye to you and become an adult."

I doubt they understood. But I lay on the floor and wept after that call, feeling like an orphan. I didn't know how to be an emotional adult. What would my life look like now? But I also felt a tinge of hope. I had just taken an important step toward healing.

It was tax season, and usually I'd call my dad to ask him my questions. But now, I wanted to figure out another solution. *Who do adults call when they have tax questions?* I contemplated. *At least the poor ones like me? Probably the IRS!* So that's what I did. Slowly but surely, as I interacted with my family, I began to feel more and more grown up.

Besides growing up emotionally, I also needed healing where my parents were concerned. They did a good job of providing for us despite being poor. They took us to church and sheltered us from the world, which I'm grateful for. But they got married young and had emotional deficits from their own childhoods, which negatively impacted ours.

I don't remember much of my childhood. I'm sure there were moments of happiness and fun. But the

thing that stands out to me most is my dad's anger. While it was generally directed at my mom, it was redirected at me if I tried to speak up on her behalf.

I don't remember us ever talking about these conflicts growing up or resolving them. I just remember my mom defending my dad by saying, "He really does love you, Erin." That was confusing. Is love being yelled at and walked out on? It wasn't until adulthood when I was back in North Carolina visiting my parents that I heard my dad acknowledge the unhealthy dynamic between us. Thanks to some healing and introspection on his part, he said in a sermon that his primary emotion toward me growing up was anger. I hadn't known he knew that!

While I had the vague sense in my teens and early twenties that something was wrong and I needed outside help, it took years to understand the impact my relationship with my parents had on me, especially in romantic relationships. I tried to appease. I wasn't honest about the way I felt. I feared displeasure and believed it was only a matter of time before I was abandoned. I desperately tried to get men to like me, yet I was scared of them at the same time. Scared of the hurt I expected.

I had no idea my self-hatred, insecurities, low standards, idolatrous search for love, and even the lens through which I viewed God stemmed from my dysfunctional family relationships.

Fathers, I have since learned, are the most important factor impacting our well-being both in childhood and adulthood. They are designed to teach us who we are and to build up, not tear down. To protect, not harm.

My father's anger and the words he spoke in times of displeasure were not God's view of me. I needed re-fathering. I needed to know who God said I was and whether *he* thought I was valuable.

In that basement apartment, I began to look at the deep-seated pain within me for the first time—scared of facing it head on but also excited about the possibility of being liberated from it. God led me to ask *him* for affirmation of my worth. He wanted to help me receive his love. He wanted my father gap to be filled by *him,* not a man.

Once I began to see what I missed in childhood, I learned to stop viewing myself as a victim. I'd been unable to shake the deep grief of unlove I felt. I couldn't imagine not feeling the pain of it. A breakthrough came, however, when I read that adults are responsible for dealing with their baggage, even if it was passed down to them as innocent children.

I suddenly saw the logic behind that. Of course I couldn't make other people pay for harming me. Of course I couldn't change the past or make the bad things disappear. But one thing I *could* do was to inventory the harm in as much detail as possible, bringing it all to the surface. Then, after evaluating

my role, if any, and recognizing that I shouldn't have been harmed but also that it couldn't be undone, there was nothing left but to write the debt off as CANCELED.

The past is in the past. I was an adult now, and it was time for me to take responsibility for the hand I was dealt rather than allowing it to continue to plague me. I experienced great freedom by canceling the debts I perceived others as owing me, validating that they shouldn't have occurred but also recognizing that I didn't have to let them continue to have power over me.

Another lesson I learned came from a book called *The Pleasers* by Kevin Leman.[1] I didn't think I was a people pleaser, but I did have trouble saying no. My false identity (the person I tried to be out of ulterior motives rather than actual self-knowledge) was agreeable, helpful, and tried not to upset people.

One day, Dori—the lady I was living with—knocked on my door, saying that she was going to leave me a couple of her favorite books at the top of the stairs for light reading. The old me, not wanting to upset Dori, would have smiled, thanked her, and received the books, all the while knowing I'd never read them. Then they would become like millstones around my neck as I waited to tell her I hadn't had time and returned them, relieved of my unwanted responsibility.

But *The Pleasers* pointed out this is deceptive. When we make other people think we're interested, we're lying to them. We haven't been vulnerable and let them know who we truly are. I thought telling people what they wanted to hear was a kindness!

Here was a low-stakes opportunity to practice saying no. So, on my way out later, I handed her the books. "Thank you, Dori. But I already have a lot of books to read. I don't think I'll have time for these."

"Oh, that's fine," she said.

I was shocked. She wasn't upset in the slightest! I did a little happy dance in my heart. What a victory that minor exchange was for me.

God's Smile

While my reading often left me overwhelmed, wondering if there was any health within me, these small victories began to give me hope. Maybe I wasn't doomed to always draw unhealthy men. Maybe, one day, I could experience actual love without fear.

Until my breakup, I had no idea how messed up my thinking was about men. I couldn't believe God asked me to sacrifice that relationship I'd waited so long for, yet he began to teach me so many lessons as a result! He didn't want me stuck in bad relationships. He had more and better for me. Behind his frowning providence, there really was a smiling face.

Someone once told me I was doing work in my twenties that most people don't do until their fifties or sixties. I can understand their reluctance. It's hard to turn around and look at the past, digging up pain you hoped was buried forever. A mere song lyric, movie scene, or anecdote that touched any of my core pains could immediately reduce me to sobbing. But by not digging into my pain, it wouldn't have been healed. It would have just continued and created more collateral damage.

I am so grateful for my basement therapy that winter in South Bend. I didn't have the money to hire a counselor. Certainly not the famous kinds who wrote the books I used. But my Wonderful Counselor led me from one resource to the next, giving me the strength to dig at my pain, expose it, and be healed.

After three months of visiting my grandmother every day, I sensed it was time to move back to Philadelphia. I had read Catherine Marshall's book, *Adventures in Prayer*, where she says, when looking for a job, to ask, "What job would give me the most joy?"[2] For me, the answer was teaching foreign languages.

So I planned to get my master's in education to become a Spanish teacher. But before I did, I wanted Grandma to be somewhere she could continue to receive regular visits. I loaded her up in my car—a big step for my dad and his siblings to allow—and drove her the two-and-a-half hours to another facility near my aunt, who would continue to visit her after I was gone.

We had a kind of distracted goodbye, as her roommate in the next bed was having a procedure done behind the curtain. I leaned over to kiss her and asked if she knew who I was. For the first time in our months together, she responded, "You're my granddaughter." I drove away warmed, grateful that I wasn't leaving her alone, grateful for her love and for all God had done for me.

I didn't see Grandma alive again. She died three months later. But she had been visited by a relative every day for the last six months of her life.



CHAPTER 3

IF ONLY I HAD A HUSBAND

Some time later God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham! . . .
Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love,
and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt
offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about."

GENESIS 22:1–2

I was excited to return to Philadelphia in the spring of 2009, having previously spent almost four years there. I had an aunt and uncle there who loved me and welcomed me like a daughter. I was familiar with the city and already had friendships established. It was a good place to continue my healing journey, surrounded by love and support. All I needed was a job and a place to live while I went to school at night.

I ended up working at an immigration law firm, which was right up my alley. There were no other Christians there, but that was okay with me. I prefer to be a minority in that regard because it's all the easier to shine light on those around me. I had countless opportunities.

I'd go to my car on my lunch break every afternoon to pray, and my colleagues would crack jokes. "Say hi to him for me," a young attorney said one day as he saw me leaving.

"Hey, Lovejoy," whispered one of the receptionists, who called me after I left, "I need you to pray for me about something."

One of the partners told a client whose case was especially difficult, "Erin has a pipeline to God," promising that I would pray for its successful resolution.

When I stopped driving to work because I moved to an apartment within walking distance, some of the girls argued over whose car I would sit in to have my prayer time. They all wanted a chance to have their cars "blessed."

Beauty Treatments

Of course, the benefits were not all one sided. My coworkers had a lot to offer me as well. The front desk ladies, mostly single, were pretty worldly—even promiscuous—but they knew a lot about outer beauty.

Beauty was not a value in my house growing up. I had thick, wavy hair but never knew how to care for it until a roommate taught me in college. When I brushed or blow-dried it, it looked like I'd stuck my finger in a light socket. I needed glasses early on, and the lenses were thick with equally ugly frames. My older brother would call me "cow eyes" and make fun of my drooping lip, which showed up when I cried (which, around him, was often).

For a long time, I didn't think beauty was that important. After all, "your beauty should not come from your outward adornment. . . . Instead, it should be that of your inner self" (1 Peter 3:3–4). The right man would be blown away by my gorgeous insides.

But I was starting to suspect I might have room to grow in this area. After all, God created beauty. And he likes making things beautiful. So I let my coworkers teach me.

I learned about colors. Don't wear two neutrals together (black, white, brown, grey). Try putting a color with a neutral or at least having a pop to your outfit, like silver or gold. Accessorize! Use belts, necklaces, scarves, and hats. Get those nails done. Always

wear makeup and always do your hair. You never know who you might run into!

They made me their pet project, and I became a very serious student. One of the partners even got involved. When I was ready to start my student teaching at a local high school, she went on a shopping spree, buying me fashionable clothes so I wouldn't embarrass myself on the first day of school. "Teenagers will respect you more if they like the way you dress," she counseled in her typical Jewish New Yorker style.

After a couple years, I thought I was finally ready for a husband. Thanks to my healing journey, I was already getting pretty on the inside. And now I was pretty on the outside too. I knew a boyfriend would not satisfy me. I didn't want to experience that heartache again. Now, it was marriage I needed. "If only I had a husband, then I'd be happy," I said to myself.

I decided to try out eHarmony. I didn't *really* want to meet my husband online, but where else would I find a man, especially quickly? I was already thirty, and the clock was beginning to tick more loudly.

The girls at the law firm put their best feet forward in designing pretty outfits for me, doing my hair, teaching me how to pose, and taking attractive pictures for my online profile. They turned out well, though I have to admit they didn't really look like everyday Erin.

I didn't get many dates from that first online stint. There was one guy who came down from MIT

in Boston to see me. We'd spent months corresponding but had never talked on the phone. I was excited, but when he called me from the train station to say he'd arrived, my heart sank. I could tell, just by how he said "Hi, Erin" that our harmony was running on E. We spent the day together and made the most of it, but we were probably both eager for the day to end.

Next, I got excited about a guy from Texas. (I figured I had to cast the net wide.) He was a firefighter, ten years older than me, and never married. We, too, started corresponding, and I requested a phone conversation early on to avoid repeating my last mistake. I was getting better at being assertive and stating my needs and wants! He decided to come for a visit.

When he saw me at the airport, I could tell he was disappointed. I soon found out he had dated an Olympic athlete at one point. I don't even like to sweat. I brushed it off, but as our time together continued, he indicated that I might be a match for him if I could just lose a few pounds and tone up.

After visiting each other a few more times, we decided to move forward. I had a great life in Philly, but he was seeking a promotion at work where seniority was paramount. If we were going to live closer, I needed to come to him. I packed up what I could fit in my hatchback and drove myself to Texas. After all, I was thirty-one, he was a Christian, and he was willing to be my boyfriend.

The Proposal(s)

It was a better relationship than my first. He did pursue me and speak kindly to me, moving toward me in conflict rather than away. He was even teachable and willing to grow. I spoke up more, pursued less, and practiced what I'd spent the past three years learning. I could see that our relationship was slightly healthier than my first one, which felt very gratifying. I was headed in the right direction.

Still, after a while, things didn't seem to be going anywhere. He couldn't figure out if he was interested in me or not. And he was afraid of marriage so didn't want to commit. But he also felt lonely without me. I definitely thought we had potential. But I didn't have years to waste on a guy who wasn't ready to get married. I'd already tried that. So, in the end, I made up my mind and broke up with him.

Professional firefighters usually work twenty-four-hour shifts. They sleep at the fire station and go everywhere together in their fire truck to be ready at the drop of a hat. The night after I broke up with him, he showed up on my doorstep. It was Halloween. He was supposed to be at work. But he got down on one knee and asked me to marry him.

I was so confused. How had he gotten off work? This was surreal. I'd seen proposals in movies, and I had *plenty* of ideas about how mine would look. First, he would tell me all the things he loved about me.

Then, he'd declare his undying love and say he couldn't live without me. Finally, he'd pull out a gorgeous ring, perfect for me, which he'd picked out himself, and put it on my finger while gazing adoringly into my eyes.

[Insert record scratch sound effect here.] This was *not* that proposal.

He didn't have a ring. He didn't say anything about me. He just couldn't lose me. I told him I needed time to think about it, and he went back to work.

The next day, I was busy journaling, analyzing, and analyzing some more. I wanted to know God's will. There was promise. But this wasn't exceedingly abundantly above all I could ask or imagine (see Eph. 3:20 NKJV). A couple key people had concerns. Our relationship was a little unstable, characterized by highs and lows. Yet this was marriage we were talking about! How long I had waited! And now I was being picky? I'd be thirty-two soon!

My mind started racing ahead into married life, things I'd barely allowed myself to think about before. Sex whenever we wanted? All my girlfriends throwing me a lingerie shower? I could decorate his house. I could move all my personal belongings there from storage. A honeymoon! Where? Save-the-date cards! Oh, how exciting to announce a wedding to all my family and friends! When could we set the date? Was Valentine's Day too soon?

I decided to set a few parameters of things I wanted us to work on beforehand, and then I'd say yes. He agreed

to my terms and reluctantly took me ring shopping. But he balked when he saw the prices. The one I fell in love with cost just over $1,000. He begrudgingly bought it but would joke afterward by trying to "steal" it from my hand so he could return it.

Now that we had a ring, he said he would redo his proposal. One afternoon before small group, we stopped at some nature center where he fished it out of his pocket. But before giving it to me, he repeated his concerns about my body.

I couldn't believe the words my ears were hearing. An absence of sweet nothings would be one thing. But criticism instead? And especially about my appearance? I pushed it away and got out of the car, crying. He apologized and said he would try again at small group that night. He did, and I went through the motions of saying yes. Everyone seemed happy for us, but my heart was still writhing.

My desire for marriage was so strong. Dreams were at last becoming a reality. I just couldn't let this opportunity go.

Wedding Planning

I was one of those bridezillas. There were so many details to attend to and about six months lead time before The Big Day. Neither of us was well off, so I'm sure money was a major factor in all my decisions.

I picked the venue, got the dress, created the invitations, found the musicians, and organized the wedding party. People began to buy their plane tickets, and everything was set in motion for July 28.

Amidst the flurry of activity, there were a couple wet blankets. A mutual friend who would have made an excellent MC declined. He wasn't even sure he'd be able to attend, he was so concerned about us.

The other was Kathy, my close friend and the lady I lived with. She rushed into my room one morning trembling. "Oh, Erin, I'm so sorry! Can you ever forgive me?" I had no idea what she was talking about. "Have you looked at your phone?" I hadn't.

She'd been sending a text to a friend about her concerns over my engagement. But she accidentally sent it to a group text including all my family and many friends. She was beside herself. I smiled and told her I was sure it was fine.

But it did alert my inner circle that the relationship might not be all it seemed. She was concerned about his treatment of me. And my brother saw God's hand in the accident, bringing the red flags out into the open.

After a handful of such experiences, I began to get more honest with myself. It all came down to one question: "Do I want to be miserable for the rest of my life, or am I willing to cancel?"

I *was* thirty-two. But still, I could have as many as another sixty years in front of me. That would be a long time to be miserable! All to say I was married? Deep down, I knew I couldn't go through with it. So I pulled the plug.

A month before the wedding, I told him I couldn't marry him. I notified the guests, prioritizing the ones who'd bought plane tickets. I felt so guilty for costing people so much time and trouble, and I was worried that, if I ever did get married, no one would want to come. But I compensated them as best I could by reimbursing their ticket-change fees.

In the Lord's kindness, he had another plan for that original wedding weekend. My Indiana aunt liked listening to a Christian talk show called *New Life Live*, where they promote their weekend healing conferences around the country. The next one happened to be in Dallas, not far from me. *And* it was on the wedding weekend! She decided to use her ticket, as did another friend, to attend the conference with me. We stayed in the same hotel I had booked for my bridal party. So instead of being alone on what would have been my honeymoon night, I was with loved ones.

Meanwhile, my poor ex-fiancé continued to pursue me, but a male friend finally told him that it was unwelcome. We needed to go our separate ways.

I couldn't believe God had asked me to give up my "Isaac" yet again. How many of these could one

girl survive? Later on, I would realize it wasn't the man I grieved losing so much as the dream of marriage. Really, my love for him had been selfish. I didn't love him for who he was but for what I could get from him—a wedding ring. I couldn't see any of this at the time, however. All I knew was that my heart was breaking, and I wasn't sure how much more disappointment I could take.