

Introduction

Once Upon a Sacrament

Once upon a time . . .

For most of us, the expression calls to mind the beloved fairy tales of our childhood: Cinderella, Snow White, and Beauty and the Beast. When we hear these words, we know that a beautiful story has begun and our hearts are opened, at least momentarily, to the wonder of true and everlasting love.

Once upon a time . . .

For me, the words trigger memories of someone who transformed my life: my late daughter. Almost thirty years ago, she was born on a snowy Minnesota evening. We named her Sarah, meaning God's princess. Though many years have passed, I remember her arrival like it was yesterday.

At twenty-six years old, I was recovering from labor at St. Joseph's Hospital. As I lay in a hospital bed, I cradled our firstborn. My young husband stood by, wearing a baseball cap and a wide grin.

Like all new parents, we were elated. Young and naive, we didn't see the signs of a disability. "She's so

beautiful," we cooed as we counted her fingers and toes. But then a team of doctors began gathering around my bed. They carried clipboards and wrote notes. "I'm sorry," one doctor said. He shook his head as if he was trying to formulate his thoughts. "We've noticed some symptoms, some tendencies . . ." he trailed off, taking off his glasses. As the room grew quiet and still, he looked us in the eye. "We believe your baby has Down syndrome."

I closed my eyes.

Lord, there must be some mistake.

Up until that moment, my faith had been a formula, a prescription of sacred rules I followed without wavering. Having grown up in a large Catholic family, I had come to believe that if I attended Mass every week and received the sacraments regularly, I would somehow escape the heartaches of life. As a child, I attended catechism classes at Nativity of Mary, our home parish. The nuns, dressed in full habit, had taught us the importance of fasting. Every Lent, along with my eight brothers and sisters, we ate tuna casserole on Friday evenings. For six weeks, we gave up chocolate, pop, and *The Brady Bunch*. To me, these sacrifices were like a deposit that could be drawn upon if we needed something special from God. Faith was a predictable rhythm of holy days and seasons.

My mother and father had a cedar chest in their bedroom. The wooden heirloom was filled with photos and artwork along with certificates from our Baptisms, First Communions, and Confirmations. Those

documents were important to our family history: a spiritual treasury of obligations fulfilled.

The prayers of my childhood were etched in my memory: the Our Father, Hail Mary, and Glory Be. During my pregnancy I had prayed these prayers each day, making the Sign of the Cross over my womb like an invisible fence of protection. *Lord, let your favor rest upon this child.*

At twenty-six years of age, I had never had any reason to question God. I knew the rules and followed them. But now, as I held our first baby, a quiet terror rose up inside of me. My child's disability could not be prayed away. There wasn't a prayer or sacrament to heal Down syndrome. Sacrifices would never alter my child's mental and physical limitations. For the first time in my life, I heard myself ask, "Why God?"

As I wrestled with this question, something unforgettable happened: the light in the room became extraordinarily bright. It was a transfiguration, of sorts, just like in the scriptures. God was present; it was if he was standing right next to my bed. In the brightness, I heard the Lord say, "This child is a gift."

A few days later, we took our baby home. At that time, we didn't know that Sarah was, indeed, a princess. But how could we have possibly known? God, in his mysterious wonder, had disguised her royal spirit in low muscle tone and slanted eyes that sparkled.

Our enlightenment began almost immediately.

As an infant, Sarah smiled *all* the time.

She never went through her terrible twos, or threes, or fours. She was too busy defying her disabilities as

she slowly learned to walk, talk, sing, and dance. As she began learning the alphabet and how to read a few words, she was drawn to fairy tales.

As a little girl, she had bookshelves in her room lined with the classic tales of queens, kings, and castles. I think she identified with the mythical maidens who found true love. All these years later, this makes perfect sense to me. Sarah had a heart full of love and was a princess in every sense of the word. She even had her own crown collection.

One rainy afternoon, I was reading her the story of Snow White along with her two younger sisters. At that time she was about six years old, and our family had grown. As the four of us cuddled together on the couch, Sarah sat next to me, wearing pink glasses that glittered and a little tiara on her head.

When we turned to an illustration of a princess dressed in a beautiful gown, Sarah leaned in and pointed to the princess. "Mom, that's-that's me."

She got up and started dancing around the family room. "I'm loved!" she proclaimed in a happy voice.

As she curtsied and twirled, her sisters and I joined in the dance. An ordinary moment on an ordinary day, but the kingdom of God, with all its beautiful simplicity, was in our midst. Sarah had brought it to us.

Over time, I began to see more and more the power and presence of God at work in the ordinariness of my life. Like Sarah, our two younger daughters arrived with graces to share. Through the three of them, I came to a whole new understanding of what the

word “sacrament” means: an outward and visible sign of inward and spiritual divine grace.

As Sarah grew into her teenage years, she became more pensive and started penning her thoughts on the back covers of her fairy tale books. Every afternoon, when she would come home from her special education class, she would dress up in one of the gowns I had picked up for her at Goodwill. Then, with a crown on her head, she would sit at her desk and write misspelled quotes about her life, things like “My nme is Princess Sarah. God lives in my hart. Someday my Prince will come.” One day, as I was rushing past her room with a laundry basket, I stopped to take a peek at her work. She had written “I have a pिरfect life.”

During her twenty-three years on earth, Sarah never once lamented what she couldn’t do. Instead, she read love stories. She wrote beautiful messages. She dressed up on ordinary afternoons. She danced. She smiled. She recognized and celebrated the “pिरfect” life that God had given her.

Were there times when her disability was hard on me? Did I have moments when I wished everything was different? Of course. But now that Sarah is safe in God’s arms, I can’t seem to recall the hard days. Maybe that’s because I know so much more now than I did as a young mother. Sarah’s life, in essence, was a sacrament, a visible sign of God’s grace. Through her, God transfigured me, my family, and all those who knew her.

Though my faith was once rooted in a series of certificates and sacrifices, Sarah introduced me to the God who companions with his people, Emmanuel, God with

us. The tender God who knows each of our hearts—every hidden fear and failing—and loves us anyway. The God who says, “you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you” (Is 43:4).

Part of Sarah’s mission, I believe, was to draw me into the seven sacraments and to help me uncover our loving God in tangible things such as light, oil, and sparkling water. My personal shepherdess, she guided me to pastures of insight, leading me to the quiet mercies of the confessional and the still waters of forgiveness. She taught me to cherish wedding dresses and chasubles and to rest in God’s promises. She invited me to taste bread and wine as slowly as she did and to see goodness and mercy in this gift.

Sarah recognized her Lord in the seven sacraments but knew that his glory could not be confined to a sacred rite or liturgy. As I watched her grow, and learned from her, I came to understand that life, all of it, is sacrament. In brokenness that turns to blessing, in laughter that eases our pain, and in the silence of hope, God’s touch is felt. In all these things, we are sanctified.

It is my hope that this book will speak to all seekers of grace; parents and priests, sinners and saints, old and young, divorced, single, or widowed. Your story, whatever it might be, is inscribed with grace. This is your once upon a time, your moment to discover the dazzle of God.

As you turn these pages, perhaps you will see yourself in these words, in the struggle, joy, and transformation. And perhaps, in the reading, a transfiguration will come.

Chapter 1

Baptism

Diving into the Waters of Life

The truth, even though I cannot feel it right now, is that I am the chosen child of God, precious in God's eyes, called the beloved from all eternity, and held safe in an everlasting belief.

—Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Life of the Beloved*

It's mid-April in Minneapolis. Spring has arrived, and the sun feels warm on my back. I'm sitting on the shoreline of Lake Harriet, a scenic beach just a mile from my home. Surrounded by rose gardens and turn-of-the-nineteenth-century houses, the lake feels a little bit like paradise. Lined with towering oaks, memories of the past linger in these waters. On warm summer mornings when I was a little girl, my mother would pack all of us kids into our station wagon and drive to the lake. We splashed in the water, built sand castles, and listened

to the top ten hits playing from a transistor radio. The sailboats anchored by the shore, clinked in a bay.

For hours we'd swim, all nine of us, jumping off the dock and searching for colorful rocks under the water. "I found agates!" my brother Timmy would call out as he rose from the lake, his hands brimming with stones that were swirled with pink and yellow quartz lines. Under this sea, there was a world of wonder: minnows, shells, and pebbly sand that massaged our feet. I, too, would dive under, holding my breath. Paddling downward, there was only a short window of time to retrieve the glistening agates that lay on the bottom. When I could no longer breathe, I shot up for air like a rocket, my treasures in tow.

After swimming, my mother would unpack nine peanut butter sandwiches from a cooler, all wrapped in baggies. She would spread them out on the picnic table, one for each. With a scarf tied around her hair, Mom poured Kool-Aid into Dixie cups before the summer breeze tried to whisk them away. The fragrance of roses and pine trees filled the air. The sound of the waves lapping against the shore was a hymn that echoed through the church of summer.

The lake was a sign of God's presence in our lives, a glimpse of heaven's glory, even though we wouldn't have called it that then. The sand and sea were ours to embrace. Like the psalmist once wrote, the voice of the Lord was "over the waters" (Ps 29:3). At the lake, the sacredness of life was everywhere. And we were part of it.

When September came, I grieved the loss of swimming and rock hunting. Right about the time school started, Lake Harriet began dying a slow but breathtakingly beautiful death. The leaves, once lush and green, crumpled like parchment, and the cold winds commanded the lake waters to turn to ice. Then the season of hockey and hot chocolate began.

After the first snowfall, my father began construction of an ice skating rink in our backyard. Under his watchful eye, he made my siblings and I shovel snow from the center of our yard toward the pine trees that hedged our property line. Wearing mittens and puffy jackets, we took turns holding a running hose, the water crystalizing on its way to the frigid ground. A prism of colored water would often flicker from the hose. "It's a rainbow," I called out one day, my breath freezing into a white mist.

We skated through the winter on that bumpy, makeshift rink. Sometimes we played hockey in near-blinding snowstorms. Other times we etched figure eights with our skates. Under the moonlight, we skittered as fast as we could across the ice and pummeled free-falling into the snowbanks. The frozen ice was our playground and saved us from months of indoor imprisonment.

But the waters, too, held dangers. I remember hearing about the kids who drowned in the lakes of Minnesota when I was young—*Had they not had swimming lessons? What had gone wrong?* I wondered.

One winter day when I was ten, the air was getting warmer, and the ice rink in our backyard was beginning

to melt. That Saturday afternoon, my siblings were hanging out in the rec room in our basement, watching monster movies. "It's too warm to skate," they told me.

Not wanting to surrender the last days of winter, I laced up my skates and clicked across the street to a pond I thought was frozen. When I stepped onto the ice, I heard a sickening crack.

Oh no . . . I called out for help, but no one heard me. The ice gave way before I could get to the edge, and I sank through. The pond swallowed me up and covered me with icy water.

I knew I had just a short window of time to retrieve my breath. I tried paddling upward, but the blades of my skates weighed me down and the unbroken ice encased me above, darkening the view and leaving only one way out. *If I die, no one will find me*, I panicked.

There were no treasures under these waters. No warmth. No light. Thrashing about, I gasped for absent air. *Please help me, God!*

As I called out to heaven, I sensed that someone or something was hoisting me up, pushing me to a safe edge where I could ease myself out without the ice breaking some more. When my whole body was up on the flat ice, I worked to catch my breath and slither to stronger ice until finally I was standing at the edge of the pond, looking over at the hole I had broken in the ice.

"I've been saved," I whispered, my hair frozen into icy strands.

For years, I never spoke about my brush with death to anyone. I just couldn't find the right words to explain