

## PRAISE FOR *I CAN ONLY IMAGINE*

“In *I Can Only Imagine*, we are reminded that God is able to transform an abusive and monstrous father into a tenderhearted friend and role model. He is able to change a reluctant choir student into a world-renowned vocalist. And he can turn a song written in ten minutes into an anthem about the wonder of eternity.

“God is able to do ‘immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine,’ and Bart’s story is a testament to that truth. What does God have in store next for his music, his family, his career, and his legacy? The answer’s in the title.”

—Pastor Greg Laurie

“Bart is a friend of mine. He’s the same guy on the surface as he is a thousand feet deep. He knows how to play music, but even more important, he knows how to live life. This isn’t a book about Bart; it’s about Jesus. It’s an invitation to grab your knees and do a cannonball into the big life God promised us if we’ll risk being real enough to try.”

—Bob Goff

Author, *New York Times*  
bestseller *Love Does*

“This book is appropriate because not only does Bart have a song to share but he has a story to tell. I have literally watched the pages of this book play out with Bart as he searched for his identity as a worship leader. He temporarily mistook his identity as the lead singer of MercyMe. Now he is writing, singing, and telling his story about his true identity in Jesus Christ. This book can greatly impact people who experience trials and are searching for their identity.”

—Rusty Kennedy

Director, Leavener

“Bart Millard is one of the most powerful voices in Christian music, and his voice is even more impactful as he tells his life story. The vulnerability and honesty shown on each page is a refreshing change from our pseudo-macho male culture. The love, grace, and forgiveness that Bart communicates in his personal life is an amazing reflection of the faith that guides him. *I Can Only Imagine* has deeply inspired me as a father, husband, friend, and follower of Christ.”

—Mike Matheny

Manager, St. Louis Cardinals

“Sometimes God intervenes, if only to remind us of the depths of his love taking place every moment behind the curtain. This wonderful story is about God amazingly showing up for a frightened young man who had lost touch with God’s protection and goodness. Then suddenly God explodes into real time what he’s been doing all along. And when Bart sees it, he is eventually stunned, amazed, and authentically undone at God’s grace. And he has been that way ever since. I’ve had the honor of recently watching it up close. It has changed my faith. Read this book—if only to find your story.”

—John Lynch

Coauthor of *The Cure*

“Bart Millard is one of the most engaging, fun-loving, positive artists I’ve ever met. It’s hard to believe he is the product of such a painful and difficult childhood. I can’t count the number of times I heard Bart say, ‘This song was inspired by my dad,’ and I pictured only one scenario. It wasn’t until I heard him tell his story that I realized how different his upbringing was than what I had imagined, and how remarkable it is that he has gone on to create such incredible beauty throughout his life.”

—Amy Grant

Recording artist

I CAN  
ONLY  
IMAGINE



I CAN  
ONLY  
IMAGINE

*a memoir*

Bart Millard

WITH ROBERT NOLAND



W PUBLISHING GROUP

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*I Can Only Imagine*

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*To Shannon, Sam, Gracie, Charlie, Sophie, and Miles.  
I know what I was, and I know what I am now.*



# CONTENTS

<i>Author's Note: MercyMe! A Movie and Memoir</i>	xi
<i>Introduction: How Great Is Your Love</i>	xiii
<i>One: Dear Younger Me</i>	1
<i>Two: The Hurt and the Healer</i>	15
<i>Three: Hold Fast</i>	35
<i>Four: New Lease on Life</i>	49
<i>Life Lessons from My Movie Dad</i>	69
<i>Five: In the Blink of an Eye</i>	71
<i>Six: Finish What He Started</i>	81
<i>Seven: Bring the Rain</i>	93
<i>Eight: Beautiful</i>	115
<i>Nine: Everything Impossible</i>	127
<i>Small World, Big God</i>	141
<i>Ten: Keep Singing</i>	143
<i>Conclusion: Even If</i>	155
<i>Appendix 1: Your Identity in Christ</i>	175
<i>Appendix 2: MercyMe Career Overview</i>	181
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	191
<i>About the Authors</i>	193



## AUTHOR'S NOTE

### *MercyMe!*

#### A Movie and Memoir

Having your life made into a movie is a surreal experience. When the film *I Can Only Imagine* went into production, I quickly learned what an incredible challenge it is to compress a person's life story into less than two hours of screen time. And because movies are so expensive to produce and market, add to that time crunch an intense pressure to make every minute engaging and entertaining for the audience. As I said, it's an incredible challenge.

Storytelling in film is most certainly an art form. Every second counts—literally. After shooting countless hours of footage on location, the very first cut of the film was around six hours long. The directors began by editing the scenes into chronological order in order to tell the story, but because no one had signed on to produce a lengthy TV series docudrama, more than four hours—about two-thirds—of the footage fell to the cutting room floor, as they say. Years had to be edited down to a five-minute composite. A series of events had to be accurately depicted by a single scene. This,

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

I learned, is why you sometimes hear of a certain actor being cast in a movie and then find out later he or she was edited out or the vast majority of the actor's scenes were deleted.

Given these constraints, the filmmakers did an incredible job of not only producing an amazing movie but also telling my story with authenticity and integrity. Dennis Quaid, the legendary actor who has played a myriad of characters onscreen over the years, played my dad. He really helped me understand why and how to draw the line between the reality of my life and the movie about my life. (I'm forever grateful to Dennis for the time we spent talking about my relationship with my dad between takes.)

So when the opportunity to write my memoir came up in connection with the film, I was really excited to have the opportunity to tell some of the details that couldn't make it into the movie. The filmmakers were locked into an industry time frame, but within these pages, we don't have to be. Now I get to share more about the amazing people who are such a vital part of my story.

I pray you enjoy reading about the roller-coaster ride of my life. But more than anything, I pray that through this book, you will come to know, or know more intimately, the God who offers us a life that is more than we could ever ask for or imagine (Ephesians 3:20).

# INTRODUCTION

## *How Great Is Your Love*

*My heart is steadfast of God,  
And I will sing,  
With all my heart and soul,  
Music for the King.*

—MERCYME, “HOW GREAT IS YOUR LOVE,”  
FROM *ALMOST THERE* (2001)\*

I was standing just offstage at the iconic Ryman Auditorium, Nashville’s “Mother Church of Country Music,” listening to an incredible band play the intro to my song. The grin on my face was quite literally ear to ear. This was, without a doubt, the single greatest moment of my professional life. All the countless nights I had lain awake envisioning better days and a brighter future, and now this reality I was experiencing outdid them all. I was frightened, but ecstatic. Nervous, yet peaceful. Proud, while humbled.

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## INTRODUCTION

For the first time *ever* in my life, reality was outrunning my imagination.

And then, just when I thought it couldn't get any better, the crowned "Queen of Christian Pop," Amy Grant, who had been my absolute hero and guiding light from the seventh grade on, stepped up to the microphone. In her angelic, soothing style, she sang the words:

*I can only imagine what it will be like . . .*

I soaked in the moment, every word and every note. As Amy was finishing the first chorus, it was my cue. Just as we had planned, I stepped out onto the stage, into the spotlight, and into a surreal moment. I walked to the mic, stared out into the sea of faces, drew in the deepest breath I think I've ever taken, and sang,

*I can only imagine when that day comes . . .*

As I ended the verse and went into the chorus, Amy joined me, along with her husband, Vince Gill, the legendary country music superstar. And then some sort of holy convergence occurred. The crowd gathered there at the Ryman seemed to fade away, and I began to sing for an audience of only two. I envisioned my dad watching, smiling, taking in all that he had prayed for and believed for me, while my heavenly Father was also watching, smiling, accepting my offering of giving Him the glory He so richly deserved.

The acoustics in that hall are like nowhere else in the world, but there was something much bigger happening, something sacred. In this historic sanctuary, once called the Union Gospel Tabernacle, the Reverend Sam Jones used to stand Sunday after Sunday to preach about heaven. Now I stood beside Amy Grant on that legendary stage, singing about the day when we will see Jesus face-to-face. It was an amazing and intimate time of worship as I reflected on all God had done and brought me through to lead me to this moment.

## INTRODUCTION

As the crescendo of the last chorus cascaded down over us all and the final chord faded, people applauded and cheered. Amy embraced me as if she were a proud big sister. It was truly a divine hour of blessing rising out of my broken world.

Later that night, alone with my wife, Shannon, I could no longer hold back the tears. God had actually allowed my wildest dreams to come true. But that was just the beginning of the ride of our lives. And it's been one crazy journey, to say the least.

While it has often been a hard road to travel—and, honestly, the success sometimes only made it harder—one thing I know for certain is that the gospel is more alive to me today than ever, thanks to the front-row seat I was given to watch Jesus change my dad.

From a feared monster to a faithful mentor.

From an abusive dad to a loving father.

From a heart of stone to a life of grace.

As Shannon and I continued to share our hearts that night, we thought back to the first time I sat down to visit with Amy about “I Can Only Imagine.” The fact that a song I had written moved her and touched her deeply was, well, more than humbling. After all, she'd been singing to me for years through my headphones, helping me through my own hard times.

Amy had asked me where the song came from. It was a mystery even to me how quickly I'd written the song when so many others had been much more difficult to write. I told her the truth: “It just kind of happened. Lyrics took about ten minutes, I guess. Music took about the same.”

Thoughtfully, graciously, out of a heart of wisdom and life experience, she said, “Bart, you didn't write that song in ten minutes. It took a lifetime.”

Amy was absolutely right. “Imagine” had been coming to me throughout my entire existence—arriving as a divine appointment

## INTRODUCTION

at a spiritual crossroads of life and art. In moments of pain, confusion, and despair, God had been writing the words on my heart, slowly giving them genesis in the chaos of my life. And in every instance when I experienced His peace, love, and joy, the chorus was being shaped and sung into my spirit, the melody intertwining through my days like an unending thread weaving together the patchwork of a cherished family heirloom quilt.

But the fruit on a tree's branches is not grown for the tree but for those who will eat from it. Although this song may have been written *from* my life, it was *for* anyone who would "taste and see that the LORD is good" (Psalm 34:8). King David, one of the most prolific songwriters in history, proclaimed to God, "I'll be the poet who sings your glory—and live what I sing every day" (Psalm 61:8 THE MESSAGE).

So, echoing that same spirit, this is the story behind my song.

One

## DEAR YOUNGER ME

*Of all the painful memories still running through my  
head,  
I wonder how much different things would be,  
Dear younger me.*

—MERCYME, “DEAR YOUNGER ME,” FROM  
*WELCOME TO THE NEW* (2014)\*

My dad was Arthur Millard Jr., son of Arthur Millard Sr. When Dad was around ten years old, and his brother, Mike, was about seven, my grandfather left the family, divorced my grandmother, and quickly remarried. Because of Arthur Sr.’s devastating choices, my dad took on the immense pressure of suddenly being head of the household, a horribly premature responsibility that birthed an anger and bitterness in his heart that would affect him throughout his life.

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## I CAN ONLY IMAGINE

As a young man, my father was a star football player at Greenville High School. Greenville is a small town in Texas, about forty-five miles northeast of Dallas. He became an All-American at the position of center. For you non-sports folks, that is the player in the middle of the offensive line who snaps the football to the quarterback, then blocks the defense away from the man with the ball. Needless to say, guys who play center are big, tough dudes, brutes you do not want to mess with or make angry. My dad was no exception.

He was offered football scholarships to several schools, but by the time Dad graduated from high school in 1961, he chose Southern Methodist University in Dallas so he could stay close to home. Another important factor in this decision was that he was dating a young lady named Adele. Adele, known to her family and friends as Dell, would eventually become my mom. She was the daughter of a pastor who had planted a new church in Greenville.

## When a Dream Dies

By his sophomore year in college, Dad was playing center for the SMU Mustangs and had dreams of going on to play pro football. But with all the time and energy demanded by his sports schedule, coupled with a full slate of classes, he deeply missed his sweetheart, Dell. He also struggled with a strong sense of responsibility to take care of his mom, so Dad made the difficult decision to let go of his dream, leave school, and move back home.

From that day when he drove away from SMU's campus back into Greenville's city limits, Dad never lived anywhere else and rarely ever left town. He and my mom soon married, and, in 1968, they welcomed their first child, Stephen. Once again, Dad had the responsibility of supporting a family.

## DEAR YOUNGER ME

The decision to walk away from his opportunity to play football would haunt my dad for a very long time, and a deep regret festered in him, eventually turning into a cancerous case of the what-ifs. As a result, sports were a constant focus in our family, and soon that near-obsession demanded that my brother and I get involved too. Whenever Stephen and I were playing sports, things were always a little better at home.

Several years after leaving SMU, Dad got together with some of his old teammates. They told him that the Green Bay Packers and the Baltimore Colts had been considering him in the draft, but when he quit college ball, he fell off both teams' radars. Evidently, he had never known that possibility was forming behind the scenes. That kind of information can be hard for any man to take, especially when disappointment is already a constant companion. This was one of many little slices of life that caused my dad to become a realist, always insisting that people have to give up their dreams to have any sort of family stability.

So many people have told me over the years how in that season of his life, when he had just come home from college, Dad was a "big ol' teddy bear." Everybody liked Arthur and wanted to be his friend. In the Greenville area, he was the local sports hero, popular everywhere he went. Dad was the proverbial "big fish in a small pond," which can be a blessing but also a curse, because fish live in glass houses.

My mom tells me that back then, he was the greatest guy you could ever know. But that was before I was born.

## Waking Up in a Different World

In order to make a dependable living for his new family, Dad got a job with the Texas Highway Department. The Lone Star State

## I CAN ONLY IMAGINE

has long been fiscally solid, so stability, pay, and benefits were all available for their workers, from new hires straight up the steps of the organizational ladder to retirement. When he first started, Dad was a flagman, directing traffic in construction zones. While this job may look like a boring one, it is actually quite dangerous because of the necessity of being in such close proximity to the traffic.

One particular day in 1969, as he was flagging cars, a driver in a diesel truck struck Dad, launching him at least fifty feet into the air and knocking him unconscious. After the ambulance took him to the hospital and the doctors had run a gamut of tests, they told Mom that, miraculously, he had no broken bones, but he was in a coma and the prognosis was uncertain.

There were many days when Mom prepared herself that he would not make it through. But to say my father was tough would be an understatement. He was always a fighter.

It's likely that he had some sort of brain trauma, possibly a major frontal lobe injury. No one has ever been completely certain. And, of course, he'd played at a high level of football for years, likely suffering repeated concussions, way before these issues were ever on the radar of coaches and trainers. This was also before the invention of MRIs and the sophisticated equipment available today, so the exact details and state of Dad's medical issues went undetected and untreated.

To everyone's surprise, Dad regained consciousness eight weeks after the accident. But he woke up in a different world and in a different life, with a new personality, an altered state of thinking. He was not the same man who'd been Greenville's favorite son.

Family members and a few friends told me that when my dad woke from the coma, he was a monster. The teddy bear of days past had become a grizzly. He had to be restrained in the hospital bed. It took several orderlies to hold him down. He was incredibly strong,

## DEAR YOUNGER ME

which gave his anger so much more to work with. A guy who could manhandle college varsity linebackers had no problem overpowering a few nurses, regardless of their gender or size. Even his attitude and mouth were affected. He was crude and rude with the nurses, something he would never have done before.

Mom said my dad never showed any temper before the accident, except for occasionally on the football field. He never even raised his voice. The family doctor who delivered me was the physician treating him, and to this day he tells me how different Dad was before the accident.

But the new Arthur Millard Jr. was the only one I would know for the first fifteen years of my life.

The husband my mom took home from the hospital was not the one who had left for work on that fateful morning just two months prior, and the day he was discharged began the countdown to Mom leaving him. Anger and rage moved into their home and became permanent residents. But, oddly, when Dad was out in public, he managed to keep it all in check and hide it from everyone who loved the local football hero. Who knows? Maybe people *did* see the change in him but just looked the other way to not get involved. After all, that's the small-town way—mind your own business while staying in everyone else's.

Our house had that classic 1960s front sitting room, the place you kept immaculate and never touched, just in case the pastor or some other local VIP dropped by. It was the one room that looked like June Cleaver's or Aunt Bea's entire house, and Mom would do everything in her power to keep visitors there so as to *not* see that the rest of our home was a wreck. That space was a metaphor for my family's life: the immaculate and perfect setting we allowed everyone to see, while the rest of the house was kept private and isolated from view. Where we actually lived became a mess that

none of us knew how to clean up. So no one ever did, and then it was too late.

For example, Mom said that one day she came home from shopping alone and Dad asked her who she had been with. She told him no one. But possessive paranoia got the best of him, and he launched into a rant and berated her, accusing her of lying and cheating.

Now, my mom was what I would call a lady's lady. She always looked her absolute best and enjoyed nice dresses and jewelry. In moments like this, while Dad wouldn't touch her, he would go get one of her best necklaces—anything he knew she enjoyed or was precious to Mom—and rip it apart right in front of her as a form of punishment. Then he'd leave the pieces on the floor and walk away in a huff.

Jealous rage became a regular event at our house. My mom stayed afraid for her life until the day she left—and even some days afterward. It was definitely a Jekyll-and-Hyde story. Was Dad's behavior due to a brain injury or chemical imbalance caused by the accident, or was he just a tortured soul because of his own family's broken past? We'll never know.

By the way, just to be clear, he never drank alcohol. No drugs. The fire of Dad's anger never needed any such fuel. Who knows what may have happened if he had resorted to any of those vices?

Those closest to Mom would have understood if she had left Dad much sooner, though back in that day such a decision was not at all common. I think she stuck around as long as she did and endured all she could because she truly believed the man she fell in love with and married was still in there . . . somewhere.

Years ago I saw the movie *Regarding Henry*, starring Harrison Ford. It's the fictional tale of a narcissistic, wealthy surgeon who gets shot in the head during a robbery and, due to the injury, becomes very childlike and loving—the opposite of who he had

## DEAR YOUNGER ME

been before. The point of the movie was that the tragedy actually saved his personal life. I remember thinking how the truck that hit Dad was like that movie gunshot, except the plot was flipped. Dad's tragedy devastated his life.

But my father's script was still being written, and there was much more plot in God's pen.

## Ready or Not, Here I Come!

In the midst of all this madness, Mom became pregnant with me. On December 1, 1972, I came into the world: Bart Marshall Millard, named after the legendary Packers quarterback, Bart Starr. (So why isn't my middle name Starr?) Likely my dad was hoping I would be the football savior of the family, so he decided to kick this kid off right with a proper namesake.

In spite of my name, Dad decided he already had the sports-buddy son in Stephen, and he didn't need another one. Plus, it didn't help that I was a mama's boy who often cried when she wasn't around. As I became a mischievous toddler, my spankings slowly escalated from normal discipline to verbal and physical abuse. I would eventually become his only target.

One day, in a single conversation, everything changed for my family. Not in any sort of heated argument at all, out of nowhere Dad popped off with, "Dell, why don't you just get the hell out?" Mom saw that backhanded question as his permission for her to leave. So she told him she would do just that. And she followed through with Dad's hateful suggestion.

I often wonder how many times she had decided to leave, only to break down and give him another shot. All too often, you hear of women in these circumstances being horribly hurt or even dying

because of the just-one-more-chance syndrome. Regardless, this time she told my dad that she was leaving and taking Stephen and me with her. I was three years old.

One of the first vivid childhood memories I have is of the day we moved out. Not at all understanding the depth of what was actually happening, I helped Mom carry whatever I could manage at my young age out to the car. Dad just sat in his living room chair the entire time, staring forward, prideful, acting stoic, appearing to ignore that his life was coming apart at the seams. It's so strange how arrogance can convince people not to lift a finger to try to stop the reality that they are losing everything.

I remember him asking me in a sarcastic tone, "Where are you going with my stuff, boy?" That's a confusing question for a toddler, especially when you're just carrying your toys to the car.

## Broken Home, Broken Hearts

Very few people knew how much my dad had changed after his accident, because our family kept this intense and volatile fact a secret. So when Mom left my dad, she became the one at whom everyone would point the finger. Everyone loved Arthur Millard Jr., and this was small-town USA. Public opinion was that my mom was the problem. People assumed she had done something wrong or had chosen to leave for no good reason, which of course was not true. Everyone thought if Arthur had been at fault, then he would have been the one to go. But he was staying in the house, and she was apparently moving out on her own accord. Folks said, "How bad can it be, Dell? Why don't you just grin and bear it? Just stick it out."

Often when private problems become public knowledge, people

## DEAR YOUNGER ME

make a lot of poor assumptions and ask all the wrong questions. The age-old clichés and social lessons that we all must be reminded of, even today, is to never judge a book by its cover and also not to speak ill against others until you have walked a mile in their shoes. My mom didn't speak up to defend herself because she felt no one would believe her.

At some point in all this drama, Mom filed for divorce. When we left Dad and moved into a rental house, a deep depression overcame her. She may have escaped the fear, but she walked right into a hopeless life. She still loved Dad and wanted so badly for her marriage to work. Mom just wanted back the man she'd married, the husband she'd had before the accident.

Struggling with her new life, Mom often wouldn't get out of bed when she didn't have to be at work. My brother and I had to fend for and feed ourselves, as well as take care of each other the best we could. We would even tuck her in at night and then be on our own. She rarely cooked, so she would bring home fast food. I have distinct memories of sitting in the living room, eating Taco Bell, and watching the evening sitcoms on TV.

While that may sound awesome for an occasional binge, believe me, it's not that great on a regular basis. But it was the best Mom could do under the circumstances. Stephen and I ate a *lot* of toast, one of the only "meals" a little kid can fix. We also figured out that if we could get canned food open, we could eat it as is.

This was our new reality: a single mom who felt forced out into life with two young boys, struggling to survive. Life was tough for us all.

Sometimes when Mom was gone to work, out running errands, or still in bed, Stephen and I would get hungry with no food in the house, and we would call our grandmothers, who lived nearby. One of them would either bring us a meal or come get us and take us to

## I CAN ONLY IMAGINE

her house. During this season we spent a lot of nights at one of their homes. Both were strong Christian women who provided stability for us when we needed it most.

When I was just beginning to talk, I started calling both of my grandmothers by the name of Mammaw. I wasn't yet able to distinguish them by different names, so, as is often the case with grandkids and their grandparents, their new names were at the mercy of the strange pronunciation of a toddler. So there was Mammaw Lindsey, Mom's mom, who was the godliest woman I ever knew, and then Mammaw Millard, Dad's mom, who was the funniest woman I ever knew. (She was godly, too, but super comical.) Thank the Lord for the prayers and provision of grandmas! I'm not sure what would have happened to Stephen and me without those two sweet saints being the constants in our lives.

Even though we saw my dad and he had custody of us every other weekend, he would sometimes drive by Mom's house, yell out, and ridicule her for leaving him. He would call our home phone and do the same. This only increased the fear.

Anytime Dad would upset or scare me, I would cry and ask for Mom, especially when we were with him for the entire weekend. One time when I was in third grade, I started bawling and calling for her. Dad would normally just yell at me and tell me to stop. But on this one occasion, he started crying and told me that he missed her too. In later years, I would see this was much more of the deep truth in Dad's heart than any of us ever realized.

Eventually, Mom started dating again. I have an early memory of the explosive level of my dad's violent temper from around the time when she was just starting to date Gary, her first boyfriend after the divorce. Gary had spanked me once, and when Dad found out, he filed that little detail away for when he saw him again.

Dad came to pick Stephen and me up from Mom's house, and

## DEAR YOUNGER ME

Gary arrived around the same time. As Mom's new guy came up the stairs to her house, Dad grabbed him, threw him onto the hood of Gary's own car, and said, "If you ever lay a hand on either of my boys again, I will rip your throat out." I remember the shock of watching that happen. As we drove away, Gary just lay there on the hood. I didn't think he was dead, but I never saw him move either.

Fairly soon after, Mom married Gary. He had children from a previous marriage, and when his kids came to stay with them, Stephen and I went to our dad's. But it turned out that Gary was an alcoholic, and when he was drunk, he beat my mom. One time Mom came to pick us up from my dad's with her arm in a cast. She told Dad that she had slipped on the sidewalk during the recent ice storm and broken it, but he knew that wasn't true. I guess you could say that Mom had jumped from Arthur's frying pan into Gary's fire. She most definitely was getting burned everywhere.

Mom quickly realized she had made a huge mistake and couldn't risk another violent relationship, so she and Gary divorced just a few months into the marriage. So now she was alone once again.

I really think that Mom was just looking for someone to take care of her, and she thought that being with the wrong guy was better than being by herself. She so wanted the knight in shining armor on the white horse to come and save her, but she just kept getting the end of the sword.

Following what was now her second divorce in a short time, Mom's depression grew worse. Easily irritated by all the typical questions and demands of children, she developed a short fuse with Stephen and me. Through all the chaos, my brother and I just kept taking care of each other, under the watchful eye of our grandmothers.

## The One Left Behind

When I was eight years old, Mom married her third husband, Lawrence. He was a good man; Mom really loved him, and he loved her. But his company told him he had to transfer from Dallas to San Antonio, and there was considerable pressure on Mom for my brother and me to stay in Greenville. Everyone seemed to think that Stephen and I needed to have the “stability” of staying in the same town, same school, and same home, with extended family close by for help. Dad told Mom, “Not that long ago, you were getting beat up by your husband, and now you want to take off with the boys and this new guy I don’t even know. I think they need to stay right here with me.”

For Stephen, this wasn’t such a bad deal. He was fine to stay in Greenville and live with Dad, because now that he was in his teens, more independent, and really into sports, they got along well. For me, well, that was a very different story. With Dad’s temper focused on me, I felt much safer with my mom. But she had to leave with her new husband, and Dad convinced her that my brother and I had to stay.

Everyone in the family knew what had been decided—except me.

Mom packed all of Stephen’s and my stuff into her car. She told me we were going to Dad’s house. When we arrived, she and Dad took all our things into the house. I started asking what was going on. Stephen, of course, was old enough to understand and was already aware of what was about to take place.

Outside the back door of Dad’s house, my mom knelt down and explained to me that she had to go away and I had to stay behind. Crying, she hugged me, told me she loved me, and then got in the car to drive away.

DEAR YOUNGER ME

*Devastated* is not a big enough word to describe what it felt like to be eight years old and watch your mom leave you. In that moment, my world crashed down around me. I felt as though the ground had reached up and swallowed me.

I tried running after the car, crying out for her not to leave, but I eventually gave up and stopped on the road. I still recall seeing the glimmering metal on the bumper through the blur of my tears as she drove away. The heat waves from the blazing Texas sun danced off the access road in front of our house, distorting the image of her car as it disappeared into the distance.

She was gone. I felt so alone.

As my mom drove out of my life, rejection moved into my heart.

For what seemed like forever, I stood at the back door of our house, crying hysterically, repeating “I’m sorry” over and over for whatever I had done to give Mom a reason to make this horrible decision. I didn’t know about how family pressure had forced her to accept this outcome, or that she was just as heartbroken as I was. I couldn’t have possibly comprehended all that adult drama.

They say leaving those you love is the hardest thing you can ever do, but I would contest that it’s much harder if you’re the child who is the one left behind. When parents leave, kids can’t understand anything other than the thought that *Mom or Dad must have left because of me*. I know that. Firsthand.

Dad and Stephen sat in the house just listening to me wail. My mom hadn’t actually abandoned me forever, but it didn’t matter. I *felt* abandoned. Whatever the truth was, all I knew was that my heart was ripped apart that day.