

## **Chapter 4: The Knee-Smashers (or, what we jump into)**

The year was 1990. I was in sixth grade. P.E. class was a hormonal mess of polyester gym shorts and high-top sneakers left over from the eighties. Our teacher, Mr. Zook, divided the year into units: the scooter unit, the basketball unit, the Presidential Fitness Award unit, and so on. My two favorites were the gymnastics and the parachute units. During the gymnastics unit, Mr. Zook set up a "Wild Jungle" obstacle course that we would navigate, getting rope burn from the "Enchanted Swinging Vines," jamming our armpits into the parallel bar "Bridge of Danger," and leaping clumsily over "Big Bertha," a foreboding elephant made out of a mounting horse and several red tumbling mats. In broad daylight, we wise sixth graders would have seen this exercise as insultingly immature, but Mr. Zook was no fool and he dimmed the lights, transforming a make-shift obstacle course into a truly wild jungle.

The wild jungle wasn't nearly as enchanting as the parachute unit, however. We glowed with anticipation the day the large silky parachute lay across the gymnasium floor. With Mr. Zook's "okay," we'd circle the parachute, grab two handfuls of silk and listen for his instructions. "On the count of three, let's raise our arms to the sky!" The parachute would rise above our heads and we'd look up at its silky underbelly, giggling at the secrecy we felt by standing under its shadow. Then, "Shake your hands up and down!" The parachute would jiggle and ripple above our heads as we worked together to create sheer magic. Even the most sophisticated sixth graders fell into the enchantment of the jiggling parachute. "Now, on the count of three, pull the edge of the parachute down to the ground. One, two, three!" As the silk slapped against the air, we'd pull our small section down, squatting on the gym floor, admiring the beautiful silky dome we'd just created together. *This was unity. This was beauty.* That year, the temptation was simply too much for me. I gently released my fists-full of fabric, stepped back, and took a running leap into the middle of the billowing dome.

Freeze Frame: Picture sweet little side-pony-tailed Laura in polyester blue gym shorts suspended in mid-air; feet kicked back, arms joyfully raised to the sky, head thrown back in anticipation.

Unfreeze, and hear my sweet little knees smash into the hardwood floor as the parachute implodes under my body. One look at my face would tell you that I had just learned a very valuable lesson: that everything that *looks* like a fluffy billowing pillow, *isn't* a fluffy billowing pillow.



Ten years later, I snapped the flat sheet of a dorm room bed, letting the air billow between the layers. I watched as the white sheet slowly sloped and fell down to the bed. Jack playfully tackled me from behind, turning me around on the bed to look into my eyes. As I stared at his suddenly strange face, I wondered why I was dating a guy who I really didn't even know.

"So do you think you really want to?" he asked, raising his eyebrows and trying to conceal a mischievous smile.

"Yeah, I guess," I answered distractedly. By my junior year in college, I had become so numb and careless about my love life that my sole criterion for dating or kissing a guy was that I had to be 1.) physically attracted to him, or 2.) drunk enough to think I was physically attracted to him. In my mind, the only value of a dating relationship was the thrilling, yet temporary, physical pleasure of messing around. I had been dating Jack for several months now

and figured that because sex was a physical pleasure I had not yet experienced, I might as well do it now. Besides, maybe this was the element that was missing in our relationship; the reason why I felt so disconnected from him. And, quite honestly, I just wanted to feel good. Wasn't this all supposed to feel so good?

But all I remember from the experience was being keenly aware of the Radiohead song that was playing on the stereo... "For a minute there, I lost myself, I lost myself. For a minute there, I lost myself."

Early the next morning, as the sun was barely lightening the evening sky, I got out of bed after a sleepless night. Jack was snoring, oblivious. I took his keys and drove desperately around town alone, looking for the flicker of a drug store's lights. *Somebody be open!* I pleaded as I braced myself against the pang of a developing urinary tract infection. My mind raced, replaying the night before. *So, that was it? That was sex?* It hadn't made me feel closer to Jack at all: on the contrary, I felt repulsed, disappointed, and lonely. I couldn't believe that *that* was what Shannon had giggled about, what my parents honored, and what all the kids in high school raved about. I couldn't understand why church leaders across the world organized huge True Love Waits rallies to protect *that*. As I hunched over the steering wheel, scanning strip malls for a drug store, I remembered the paper cut-out book with the flowers and the puppies and the people. I remembered how my mom had told me that God had designed sex to enhance the intimacy that already existed between a husband and wife... and not the other way around... and not between two random college students who barely even knew each other. *Why couldn't I have remembered that 24 hours ago?* I fumed with regret. To make matters worse, just as I approached the intersection that would direct me to a Rite-Aid, the car's battery suddenly went dead and I coasted into a grassy bank on the side of the road. I slid down in the seat and pressed my hand against my face and cried, *What have I done? What have I done?*

If I'm honest about the five or six years following the abuse, I have to admit that I was trying anything and everything to escape the heartache and to savor some precious moments of pleasure. Somehow, pleasure tends to be the quickest fix for broken hearts and confused minds. Usually, whenever humans search for pleasure, they are really searching for healing and wholeness. In the span of four years, I starved myself of all worldliness, promising to *never!* kiss another guy until after we were married. I starved myself of food, then ate too much and made myself vomit. Then, I decided to try alcohol and cigarettes. I kissed a lot of guys, experimented with marijuana, bought a fish, got my ear double pierced, became a literature major, underlined beautiful passages with a purple ballpoint pen, cut my hair, grew my nails, became a feminist, considered hating men for my whole life long, became a *Christian* feminist, had sex with my college boyfriend, studied Arctic Biology in Iceland, bought a car, drove around country lanes with the windows rolled down singing with the Indigo Girls at the top of my lungs... but each superficial and temporary pleasure ended in more numb, grey, empty moments. Although some of the choices I made might not seem like they'd be very "pleasurable," in some strange way, they felt "good" because they took my mind off of my deep hurt. But they always ended in disaster.

The worst were the sexual encounters that promised connection and fulfillment but delivered shame and guilt. Somehow, I thought that having sex with Jack would heal my heart from the abuse. Somehow, I thought it would please me. In retrospect, though, it only caused heartache and perpetuated the cycle of sexual sin that caused me to tear my robe, which caused more sexual sin that caused me to tear my robe... It was as if I was leaping into that deceptively buoyant parachute and smashing my knees, time after time.

My condition is described perfectly in Jeremiah 2, where God says, "My people have committed two sins: They have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water." The footnote in my Bible explains

that a cistern is a large well or pool that holds drinking water. A broken cistern has a crack in it, meaning that it can't do its one big job: hold water. In other words, a broken cistern is an empty cistern. In a way, I had been digging my own empty cisterns by relying on all of these other things for healing and satisfaction. At the time, I didn't realize that I was being just as foolish as someone who digs an empty well and expects to pull water out of it, or dives into an empty swimming pool -- head first (or jumps onto a fluffed-up parachute -- knees first).

I think that God calls these broken cisterns "sin" because when we pursue them, we are forsaking the healing that He wants to give us. We're denying that He is God by essentially saying, "You can't help me, God. I'll have to help myself." But He knows that all of our alternatives are like empty cisterns. If we dive into them, we're likely to hit rock bottom and die. God wants to save us from the disaster.

As I began reading about other young women who had been affected by sexual sin, I discovered something startling: we're all the same. Or, similar, at least. Book after book, website after website revealed a startling pattern: for centuries, girls who have been hurt by sexual sin have turned to the *same* broken cisterns for healing: legalism, drugs, depression, eating disorders, and promiscuity or other sexual perversion.

Sometimes I'm amazed at how "text-book" I was: how anyone who knew anything about sexual sin should have been able to look at my life and identify what was wrong. I can't even imagine how different my life would be if someone had dragged me out of the emptiness, shown me how hurt I was, and introduced me to true healing. Needless to say, part of my text-book response was to wear a pretty secure mask that kept people away even when they *did* attempt to help me. I don't want to be "text-book" any more. I've daydreamed about a campaign that pulls the carpet out from under sexual sin, bomb-dropping pamphlets that announce what God says about the empty cisterns so that we can avoid the repetitive disasters. If we could only see that a cistern is empty *before* we rush towards it, we'd know better than to do

a cannonball jump into it. (Check out my pamphlets at the back of the book for an unveiling of some of these deceptive empty cisterns. I dare you to make copies and bombard your community with the good news!)

## Knee-Smashers: Part II

Earlier this summer, Ryan and I went to Hershey Park, home of 6-foot tall Hershey Kisses and Mr. Goodyear Bars that walk around, wave at kids, and hug pretty girls. We mapped out our dream rides and hit that amusement park with serious enthusiasm. First, we waited in line to sit in the front seat of "The Storm Runner," a roller coaster that goes from 0 – 72 mph in two seconds; by the time the riders are twisting and turning in mid-air, they are clocking over 120 mph, screaming at the top of their lungs.

In the past, when standing in a line for roller coasters, I'd launch into my personal confession time: *God, I'm so sorry for everything I've EVER done! Please forgive me! I don't want to DIE on this ride! PLEASE SPARE ME! I know I deserve the worst: for my lap belt to unhitch just when I'm at the highest peak. For my body to spin through the air...my hair flying and my arms flailing... until I land on an unsuspecting ruddy-faced child who is eating cotton cCharlton and attached to his parents by a leash. But I need for you to forgive me and spare me... and spare the little child on the leash.* You get the point. This time around, though, a couple of things were different. First of all, I was married. Being at an amusement park with my husband was far different than being at an amusement park with a group of pubescent friends, worried about our flume-destroyed hair, checking out the boys who walked by, wondering if they were checking us out, too. Oh, the angst of being a teenager at an amusement park! I watched the groups of teenagers in line, climbing on each other, joking around, and buzzing incessantly with hormones. I felt gloriously secure, standing in Ryan's arms: he was mine and I was his, regardless of what the flume did to my hair. Secondly, and perhaps most importantly, I felt like God

was saying something like, "Would you please quit it with the last-minute freak-out confessions? Just enjoy yourself today." Biblical writers would probably have interpreted this Holy Spirit conviction as "Peace, be still."

The gates swung open for us to board the ride. We triple-checked our harnesses. Ryan insisted that we hold hands throughout the entire ride. "Okay..." And then, 72 mph. Instant screams. I clutched Ryan's hand, looking up as we soared through the perfectly blue sky. The sun shone brilliantly and seemed so close. I smiled exuberantly as I absorbed every stomach-dropping thrill. My mind was enjoying itself, soaring through the beautiful August air, but my body was absolutely terrified. Every now and then, through my own blood-curdling shrieking, I'd hear Ryan's "Ouch, Ouch, OWWW!" as I clasped his hand against the metal bar of my harness. As soon as the ride was over, we jumped back in line. I bubbled with excitement in the afterglow and Ryan massaged his knuckles like a boxer who had just survived a brutal fight.

That day was life changing for me because it helped me to think better about pleasure. Having recently emerged from a several-year-long pleasure problem, during which I ran from one empty cistern to another, I was still confused about what differentiated *profitable* pleasure from *harmful* pleasure. I had programmed myself to believe that pleasure was only to be found in men, alcohol, accomplishments, and my body... most of which resulted in emptiness, shame or guilt. Messing with harmful pleasures for far too long had blurred the line between harmful pleasures and profitable pleasures so that now I was legitimately confused.

Besides, I wasn't convinced that profitable pleasures promised as high of a pleasure quotient as harmful pleasures. I had diligently resigned myself to a less pleasurable life in order to follow Christ. *My sacrifice will all pay off in heaven*, I'd tell myself. I was convinced that the world – and not the Church – had the corner-market on pleasure. I'd never admit it out loud, but I was sure that groups of "church friends" couldn't have as much fun together because they



didn't drink, flirt, dress sexy, or swallow every craving that came their way. But here I was at Hershey Park with my husband, and I was sure that I was feeling *pure pleasure*... it filled my lungs and brightened my eyes, giving energy to my personality and passions. The best part was that the next morning, I didn't feel shame; I didn't feel guilt.

Something about that day helped me to realize that it is okay to desire and experience pleasure; that it's wonderful to savor the taste of chocolate, the nostalgia of the Hershey's Chocolate theme song, and the thrill of a double 120 mph loop. After all, God gave us the capacity to enjoy a vast array of experiences: the crunch of autumn leaves, the intimate pull of the ocean, the relief of a deep tissue massage, the throb of loving someone.

About that time, I listened to a helpful podcast by Ravi Zacharias that provided three standards by which to evaluate pleasure. These three pointers help me to make wise decision when I'm unsure about a particular pleasure. Here's what he said:

1. Anything that refreshes you without distracting you from, diminishing from, or destroying your ultimate goal is a legitimate pleasure. Of course, we must spend some time with God delineating what our ultimate goal really is, but once we have it defined, we can determine what will rejuvenate us as we pursue that goal.
2. Any pleasure that jeopardizes the sacred right of another is an illicit pleasure.
3. Any pleasure – however good – if not kept in balance will distort reality or destroy appetite. (Check out Proverbs 25:16).

After describing these standards, Zaccharias explained that every pleasure on this earth has a shelf life; even the good and profitable pleasures will dissolve in our hands and leave us wanting more. I knew, first hand, that he was right. Countless times I had chosen empty temporary pleasures over an eternal God. My eyes filled up with tears when Zaccharias concluded with conviction that

the ultimate pleasure that you and I seek is intimacy with Jesus Christ in worship. *That's right!* I sighed with relief as I remembered myself as a little girl, sitting on the edge of the pew in anticipation, walking up the aisle in passion, praying in bed, wondering about the God of the Universe. *How could I have forgotten?* I was finally understanding *why* I had so trustfully believed in Jesus when I was two and a half years old: He filled me up when nothing else could. I was coming full circle, back to the profound truth that I understood as a toddler but had forsaken as a teenager. This was worth a refresher course.

I began by reading one of my favorite books in the Bible: Paul's letter to the Romans. In it, Paul describes our human inclination to turn away from God and turn towards empty cisterns even when we *want* to turn towards God. In Romans 7 Paul admits, "what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do." Then, in frustration, he writes, "What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?" I understand Paul's frustration far too well: several years of double-minded pleasure seeking – desiring healing, but doing everything possible to sabotage myself -- tend to result in an intense level of frustration. Over and over again, I had asked like Paul, *Who will rescue me from this body of death?* In fact, as I was reading Paul's letter, I almost double-checked the copyright of my Bible, wondering if Paul had possibly rigged up some time-travel machine and plagiarized my journal. But, my journals never developed an answer to our desperate question. Paul's did.

Paul says that our human dilemma has been overcome by Jesus Christ, who has won the great victory over our sin and offers to rescue us from our double-minded selfish selves. Amazingly, Jesus Christ died for us even *while* we were running to empty cisterns. Isn't there just something alarmingly relieving about this kind of undeserved unstoppable love? In contrast to the empty cisterns, God describes himself as the "Spring of Living Water," the only *full* cistern in the cosmos. Perhaps it's Him -- His love, pleasure, and healing -- that you and I have been searching for all along.

I came across a Psalm that taught me one way to jump into this Spring of Living Water. King David, who dabbled all along the pleasure continuum -- from sleeping with the next-door neighbor to dancing in his skivvies as He praised God -- concluded that despite the temporary pleasures of sex, adultery, riches, and power, the true source of ultimate pleasure is *God himself*. David wrote, "in Thy presence is fullness of joy; at thy right hand there are pleasures for evermore" (Psalm 16:11). *So it's God who has the corner market on pleasure*, I scribbled in my journal. Because true pleasure is found in God's infinite presence, and because we were created to be pleased by this infinite God, you and I walk around with an almost infinite capacity for pleasure: that's a *lot* of space to fill up with sex, drugs, and rock n' roll. Like trying to fill the Grand Canyon with little pieces of dryer lint, there's just no way *anything* other than God can satisfy us. The desire to worship God is deeply ingrained in our beings -- in our neurons, our breath, our heartbeat, and our spirits. Try as we might, we're simply not privy to recreating ourselves at this deep of a level. Until we choose to experience the purpose we were created to fulfill -- enjoying God -- then, we'll be floundering around, searching for love, as they say, in all the wrong places.

So, I decided to conduct a bit of an experiment and take God up on His offer of "fullness of joy." Sure, I expect fullness of joy in Heaven, but could it be that I could actually experience fullness of joy on earth? I stood in the middle of our living room, looking out of our large front windows... waiting. I didn't know the scientific way to *get into* God's presence necessarily, but I decided that He could probably hear me if I talked to Him, so I asked Him to teach me about these verses from Scripture. We talked about my pleasure dilemma and I reminded Him about King David's big claim concerning "pleasures forevermore." I told Him that I was willing to do whatever it took to experience this type of pleasure because otherwise, I'd always be running to empty cisterns. "*Dance for me*," I heard Him say as a powerful voice to my spirit. Here? I asked, disbelievingly. On my faux oriental rug in front of very

large windows in the middle of the afternoon? I hesitated, trying to convince myself that I was crazy and had concocted the idea in my imagination. But I couldn't get beyond the thought that maybe the Holy Spirit was graciously answering my mostly-selfish prayer. He reminded me that dancing for God is a form of worship and is consistent with how Scripture portrays some people worshiping God, so I decided to give it a try.

My muscles tensed in anxiety. I swayed a little bit to the left and to the right, awkwardly lifting my arms halfway into the air. *Okay God, this just feels silly. I feel so insecure... so caught up with myself... But YOU, you are free and generous and you probably dance openly...* As I thought about how different God is than me, I naturally raised my arms higher and higher. I imagined what He looks like: enthroned, glorious. I thought about the promises that He speaks in Scripture: faithful, hopeful, true. I admired what He does: heals, transforms, leads. Gratitude became the rhythm that moved my feet. My physical movements reflected my spirit's wonder. The more I saw of God, the more freely I danced. The more freely I danced, the more I wanted to see Him. I thought about Revelation 4:11 that says all things have been created for God's pleasure. I paused in the realization that as I was receiving pleasure from God, I was created to be pleasing Him, too.

"You are so great, God! There is no one like you!" poured out of my mouth. What a relief to focus on God and not myself for once! Sure, a small part of the pleasure was due to the rush of energy that comes whenever I dance, but there was something more... something mysteriously divine about how I felt. The best way I can describe it is both an inner peace and a burning glow that covered my face and arms and hands. It didn't radiate *from* me; it radiated *onto* me. I danced and danced, savoring the truth about God: who He is and what He does. *Maybe I'm actually in His presence* I whispered in awe. I couldn't deny it: *This is true pleasure: worshipping my Creator. Now, He -- He -- is worth landing on my knees for*, I thought. My knees reverently bent towards the ground and I joined King David in saying, "God, in Your presence is fullness

of joy. At your right hand are pleasures forevermore.”

I’m giving you this vulnerable peak into my personal life simply to say that my vast desire for pleasure is truly satisfied when I simply worship God. Even though I continue to dance and sing for God regularly, most of my worship happens during daily living: cleaning the floor under Vivienne’s booster seat fifteen times a day, welcoming Ryan home from work with a smile, reading and believing Scripture even when I don’t feel it, or making a meal for a neighbor who is completely overwhelmed by kids and phone calls and insurance companies. I talk to God silently as often as possible; I listen for His voice throughout the day; I try to obey His commands in Scripture; and I run to him when I sin, asking for His forgiveness and gratefully receiving His love. If I don’t enjoy God during these daily experiences, my life will dry out and I *will* look for pleasure elsewhere: food, novels, affairs, friends, or addicting television shows about people lost on an island, in an office, or at a bank. But when I do enjoy God, my deep questions are answered, my heartaches are soothed, and my life is *alive*. It’s one of those things that I can’t explain well or prove entirely; but it’s *so good* that I come back for more and more and more. In the light of God’s Word and presence, my old hurts and the empty cisterns lose their allure; I no longer want to run to them. All I want is Him.

✪ Get your hands on ✪

Kirk Franklin’s “Looking for You”

Sarah McLaughlin’s “Answer”

Leeland’s “Reaching” and “Too Much”

Donald Miller’s *Searching for God Knows What*