



ILLUSTRATION BY ANITA KUNZ



ALL THAT'S LEFT IS G D

After a childhood beset by adversity, the author fled the Texas Bible Belt to heal in the isolated mountains of Colorado. Through it all, she was discovering who she was—as a daughter, a woman, a partner, and a mother. One woman's journey to faith and family.

BY MICHELLE THEALL

Lucas, our four-year-old son, bucks and arches his back away from the baptismal font at Sacred Heart of Jesus Church in Boulder. My partner, Avery*, and I try to hold him still in his little white suit—he has already kicked off one of his patent leather shoes, which landed on the altar. It's as if Lucas realizes the only reason we are baptizing him in the Roman Catholic Church is because it is so important to my mother, the same woman who toted his special outfit, embroidered with delicate crosses, all the way from San Antonio and threatened him this morning using these exact words: "If you don't put on that baptism suit this minute, Jesus won't love you."

I do not tell my mother that this baptism almost didn't happen, that Father Bill Breslin of Sacred Heart met with me two weeks earlier to discuss our desire to have Lucas baptized and the church's views on homosexuality. I assured Father Bill that while Avery and I were gay, we were quite certain that Lucas wasn't. I told him he could rest easy knowing that he wouldn't be letting another one of "us" in.

Still, it was impossible for me to answer Father Bill's questions without thinking about the recent accusations of the Vatican's role in protecting pedophile priests. Why was I fighting to have my son baptized into a faith that appeared to be putting the welfare of children second to the reputation of the church?

With my son already in preschool at Sacred Heart and preparing for his baptism, I was trapped in a familiar standoff between the church and myself. There were no easy answers. But just like the cul-de-sac I'd grown up on in the Bible Belt, I recognized that I might find my way out if I headed back the way I'd come.

1977 §

HUMBLE, TEXAS

I kneel in the hallway with my mom, dad, and sister, squirming as the shag rug embosses my knees. While most families I know bond over "Monopoly night" or episodes of *Mary Tyler Moore*, mine prays the Our Father wedged two-by-two in front of a crucifix. When my sister and I giggle, Mom glares at us through half-closed eyes and grips her rosary beads

until they leave stigmata-like imprints on her palms. I wonder what Jesus would think about being hung twice—once on the cross and again in our hallway surrounded by framed covers of *Life* magazine. But mostly, I wonder where God went last week—when my friend's father molested me in the den of their home not 100 yards from where I kneel now—and why, at just 11 years old, I don't trust my own mother enough to tell her.

1981 §

DALLAS, TEXAS

All Saints Catholic Church sits in the backyard of our new home on Firelight Lane, so our family will never have an excuse to miss

Mass. Father Rudy Kos—the coolest priest I'll ever know, who sports a mustache and drives a black Mustang—lives in the rectory with his 13-year-old son. Father Kos is short, athletic, handsome, and unconventional. Parishioners gossip that he'd been married, had the marriage annulled, and adopted his son before becoming ordained and being sworn to celibacy. But I don't care about any of that; I like that he talks to teens like they are real people.

When my parents find a fifth of tequila hidden under my bed, I turn to Father Kos for insight and advice. He says he's not concerned about the alcohol, but he wants to know why I've started drinking. Father Kos asks me if I believe in God, and I tell him that I do, that I've never felt com-



RITE OF PASSAGE
The day of the author's first communion, May 4, 1975, in Texas.

*Lucas' and Avery's names have been changed.

pletely alone in the world. Still, this is the same God that I think of when I can't get the things that have happened to me out of my head. Every day, the news reports that some girl has been abused or kidnapped, and every day I am reminded that I am part of a growing club of lost girls who will never be the same.

If God has a reason for everything, what is the reason for this? With his kind, almond-shaped eyes, Father Kos tells me, "You have so many holes in you, you've become porous like a sponge. No wonder you wanted to drink to fill up those empty places. But if you let God, He can fill them up too."

1982 §

GRAPEVINE, TEXAS

I'm sitting in Sharon's house, drinking White Russians served by her lover—a woman—whose name is Shoe. They are in their 30s. I am 16. I imagine that somehow they've forgotten I am a teenager who cannot vote or join the Army or get into an R-rated movie. I finally have my learner's permit shoved inside the glove compartment of the Plymouth Fury, next to my mother's St. Christopher medal, but I don't have my driver's license yet.

Even though they are twice my age, I do not feel exploited. Instead, I feel seen. I do not have to tell them I've been abused or that a car full of boys keeps driving past my house yelling "Michelle has a dick" before peeling out like cowards. I do not know what I am. But I know Sharon and Shoe are a refuge. They are also the first real people I've met who are gay.

I know what some Christians say about gay men and women. My mom thinks AIDS is God's wrath on them. She's never uttered the words "lesbian" or "homosexual," which would be like saying "goddamn" or "shit" or worse. Those aren't the kind of words spoken by a woman who never wears white after Labor Day. Even my father, the gentlest man I know, once turned to me after passing a pair of effeminate men on the street—one wearing eyeliner, the other a fuchsia boa—and told me that they made him physically sick.

But what I see when I look at Shoe is a baby giraffe, lanky and circus-happy, with arms opened wide enough to give everyone in her path a giant hug. And though Shoe is skinny, she's not frail or dainty. She doesn't hunch her shoulders forward or slump to apologize for being tall. She doesn't pretend to be something she is not, and never will be.

Sharon is the exact opposite of Shoe. Where Shoe is a bold statement, Sharon is an ellipsis, a trailing thought. She doesn't

wear makeup, and doesn't need it. Her nails are short. Her hair is straight and unpretentious. She's not trying to impress anyone, particularly men. And in a city of debutantes, beauty queens, face-lifts, and boob jobs, finding a woman like this impresses me.

Still, armed with anti-gay scripture from the Old Testament, I quote Leviticus 18:22 to them. Because it would dilute my argument, I neglect to tell them that Leviticus also says they must ceremonially sacrifice two doves or pigeons immediately following their menstruation and stop eating shellfish. Shoe looks at

me with a sad smile and questions my relationship with my high school best friend. "I think you have feelings for Lynn," she says. "I think you love her."

"I do," I say. "But not in the way you're talking about."

"With God's love, I suppose."

"Yes."

And Shoe says, "God made me too, you know."

1985 §

ALL SAINTS CATHOLIC CHURCH §
DALLAS, TEXAS

I wait to hear Father Kos enter through the other side of the confessional. I cannot do this face to face, even though he'll know it's me in the booth. "Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. My last confession was Easter. I lied to my parents. Skipped Mass last Sunday. Took the Lord's name in vain. Kissed a woman. Had impure thoughts. Cursed." I take a deep breath. "That's it."

"Let's go back to that fourth one."

"I took the Lord's name in vain?"

"Nope. The one after that."

"I kissed a woman."

"That's the one."

Silence. Uncomfortable silence.

Father Kos clears his throat. "Is this a one-time thing?"

"A one-time thing. Definitely. Yes." Flames of hell lick at my feet. Why doesn't Father Kos go ahead and condemn me?

More silence. I wince, head bowed.

My knees ache atop the threadbare

kneeler, and I can hear my mother's voice telling me to "offer it up," which means pain is part of the sacrifice, even though it's nothing like the death Jesus endured for our sins. I look to my left and right, and can see the whole space without moving my head. The narrow booth

is for skinny sinners only. It needs a weight and height limit sign, like rides at Disneyland.

Jesus hangs on his cross above the screen where Father Kos is dreaming up an unparalleled penance for me. I wonder if he will ask me to tell my parents what I've done or make me serve meals to men dying of AIDS. He clears his throat, ready to denounce me.



"IS THIS A
ONE-TIME
THING?"
"DEFINITELY. YES."
FLAMES OF
HELL LICK
AT MY FEET.

TRUE FAITH
1980, St. Mary's Catholic Church, Humble, Texas: The site of the author's confirmation.

"Your penance is 10 Hail Marys and one Our Father."
 "That's it?"

"Please say the Act of Contrition."

I do not remind Father Kos that this penance is the exact same one he gave me six months ago when I forged a pass to get out of study hall. After I finish the Act of Contrition, he says the prayer of absolution, which ends with the words: "I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen. Go and sin no more."

And like that my slate is clean. Except that I cannot un-kiss a girl. My body remembers it. And it doesn't feel like an accident or coincidence. Instead, it feels ordained.

1986 §
BUFFALO SPRINGS LAKE §
LUBBOCK, TEXAS

"I will run over you." Coach Jarvis Scott drapes an arm out the window of the Texas Tech track van and nudges our calves with the front bumper. With a square jaw, gold tooth, and a college degree in criminal justice, Coach Scott reminds me of a prison guard. Today, she's announced we'll be doing three to five, which sounds like years of a jail sentence, even though she means miles. We pick up the pace.

Running has been its own kind of education for me. Coach Scott never steps in to defend me from my teammates, who pretend to kiss each other when I step onto the team bus, refuse to room with me, and call me a hypocrite. If life had a rewind button, I would never have told those girls, no matter how drunk we all were on pitchers of beer from Schooner's, that I'd slept with a girl named Nancy. Some of my teammates had already confessed to pregnancies, abortions, shoplifting, and snorting cocaine, so I'm sobered to learn that homosexuality falls on the narrowest end of the Bible Belt. I have a boyfriend, am a member of the Fellowship of Christian Athletes, and have a 4.0 GPA, but they see my past and cannot accept it.

Maybe they are not the only ones. I do not want to be gay, but I love sports, abhor wearing dresses, and prefer sensible shoes to heels. I date guys, but only to earn the respect and approval of women. I am a stereotype, a cliché, and I am furious about it.

It doesn't take long for my track career to derail because of my shame and self-loathing. Coach Scott calls me to her office to find out why I've gone from promising athlete to train wreck in a matter of months. I do not play the woe-is-me card: I would never win that game against the fortress of a woman sitting in the swiveling

chair in front of me. She doesn't speak about her past. I only know what I have read—that she grew up among gangs, violence, poverty, and racism in the projects of South Central Los Angeles. By the time she was a year older than me, she was an Olympian.

She is the one who says to me, "Prejudice is blind. Rich, poor. Black, white. Woman, man. Old, young. Christian, atheist. There will always be someone who says you aren't welcome at the table. Stop apologizing for who you are and using all your energy trying to change their minds. Yes, you will lose friends, maybe even family. But you will gain your self-respect. You will know your worth. Once you have that, nothing can stop you." Coach Scott offers advice but not a refuge. She knows that before I can win any races, I first must learn to stand on my own two feet.

1991 §
DALLAS, TEXAS

A single drop is nothing, but my mother cries and doesn't stop. Water like this will carve a canyon between us. My father lowers his head, rubs his hands together. On their floral upholstered sofa, they digest the news that I was sexually abused when I was 11 and that I am gay. I fire off my disclosures before I lose my courage. If they believe that the abuse caused me to be gay, if this softens the blow in any way, so be it.

I believe my father figured out that I was gay years ago, but to keep his home from becoming a battlefield, he adopted a "don't ask, don't tell" policy. My mother swears she had no idea, even though I wear men's Levi's and own every CD by the Indigo Girls.

Still they have a few surprises of their own. My father—the kindest man I know, who has, at times, been the only evidence I've had that men can be good—

says I must have done something to cause the sexual abuse. I invited it in some inadvertent way. It is my mother who says, "I am so absolutely sorry. I wish you felt you could have told me. I would have done anything to spare you pain like that." I'm undone by their words, but more so by the flash of empathy I see in my mother's eyes, the look that says she knows all too well the demons I fight, and she would have fought with me too. I have waited 14 years for my mother to wrap her arms around me and comfort me. And because I am gay, I've lost that opportunity, and I've also lost her.

When my mother leaves the room, my father follows her. I wait. Fifteen minutes pass. My father appears in the doorway from the hallway that leads to their bedroom. He's tentative, eyes worn like a boxer who's gone 10 rounds. "You need to leave now, sweetie," he says. "For good." » **CONTINUED ON PAGE 122**

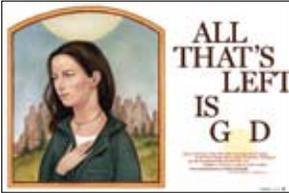
BREAKING AWAY
 Track and field was a proving ground—and a school of sorts—for the author. Here, at age 14, she runs away from the competition at a 1981 meet.



**BEFORE I WIN
 ANY RACES,
 I MUST LEARN
 TO
 STAND
 ON MY OWN
 TWO FEET.**

HOME AT LAST
The author, with
her dog Winston,
at her Boulder County
home, which she
shares with her
partner, Avery, and
her son, Lucas.





There are few things worse than being abandoned by your parents, even when you are 25 and living on your own six hours away. They do not say good-bye or hug me or tell me to have a safe trip back to San Antonio. Instead, they put an asterisk by my name, negating every good thing I've ever done and will do. And because my parents feel that they are somehow responsible for who I have turned out to be, they have put an asterisk by their names, too.

1994 \$

SAN ANTONIO, TEXAS

In my driveway, I load my Nissan Pathfinder with the last of my things. I wrap my hand inside my T-shirt before lowering the branding-iron hot metal tailgate with its Jesus fish on one side, and a bumper sticker that reads, "Love Many, Trust Few, Always Paddle Your Own Canoe" on the

I KNEW THAT COLORADO WASN'T JUST A PLACE FOR RESPITE OR VACATION—IT MIGHT ALSO BE THE PLACE WHERE I BELONGED.

other. I get Bear and Chance—all 200 pounds of wolf hybrid and husky—settled in the back and point the Pathfinder northwest to Colorado.

Though the Lone Star State contains pockets of liberalism, it is largely a place where men and women hunt, buy American, attend right-to-life rallies, and paint their water towers with the name of the local football team. And although it is also the place where I was born and raised, where the rhythm of cicadas and dancing fireflies lulled me at dusk, it has never really been home.

In college, I'd visited a friend who lived

in Eldorado Springs, Colorado, just outside the narrow jaws of a canyon on the shore of South Boulder Creek. She rented a mattress in the attic of a home that cost twice what I paid in rent for my apartment in Lubbock. She accessed her living quarters from a wooden, pull-down ladder in the kitchen, and her bedroom "loft," as she called it, had just three feet of clearance from the ceiling. But at night, without even lifting her head from the pillow, she'd crank open the skylight and fall asleep to the din of creek and owl, cricket and guitar. I stayed a week, skipping class, and for the first time in my life, I knew what peace felt



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like. I knew that Colorado wasn't just a place for respite or vacation—it might also be the place where I belonged.

Now, heading west on I-10, bugs splatter against the windshield. The terrain shifts from scrub oak and cracked earth to rolling hills and serrated peaks. Without my family, I am untethered, but it isn't the same as being free.

The house I buy sits on three acres in the middle of nowhere with views of Longs Peak, a waterfall, and a mix of trails leading off the property that might go all the way to Canada. My first night there, it is so quiet the blood rushing in my head awakens me. I go out on the deck, cocooned in a wool blanket, and stare at stars so dense I cannot identify a single constellation. In the morning, four feet of snow lands atop my house like vanilla frosting. The weight of nature takes power and transportation with it. I cook off the wood stove, use the deck for a refrigerator, and rely on a backup cistern for water. In a man-made world stripped bare, all that's left is God. And though I cannot see Him, in the same way I cannot see the wind, His presence makes me weep.

1996 \$
PINEWOOD SPRINGS, COLORADO

Until this January day, all I have received in the mail from my mother are anonymous prayer cards, most featuring the Virgin Mary, along with singles dating-service memberships. Then an e-mail arrives. Halfway through the message, my mother writes:

The path you are continuing to follow is against everything I believe in, and I simply cannot get past that....I believe in the long run, you will suffer the consequences of your lifestyle. The most troubling thing about all this is that I am devastated that you have turned your back on the church. As your mother, I beg you to try and visit a priest in Colorado.... Perhaps he will not sanction your actions, but we are taught to love the sinner and hate the sin....Some congregations are



A QUIET, WELL-LIGHTED PLACE The author's Pinewood Springs home in an April 1997 photo. The isolated house, which sat on three acres, provided a refuge after she told her parents she was gay.

openly trying to find a place for everyone.... Temporal happiness is short-lived, but the salvation of your immortal soul is for eternity. And please don't make excuses about how you can pray anywhere. I know that, but I do know that Christ established the church of which you are fortunate to be a member by your baptism....I will love you



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and pray for you no matter what. I am not your judge, my dear, only your mother, who has tried her best to do what is right for her children. I love you, and God bless you. Mom

Three weeks later, boxes arrive. They are filled with report cards, finger paintings, and spelling bee awards. My mother has sealed up my childhood and sent it to me, paid in full.

1997 \$

PINEWOOD SPRINGS, COLORADO

The headline on the *New York Times* article reads "\$120 Million Damage Award for Sexual Abuse by Priest." Ten former altar boys and the family of an 11th who committed suicide have won a landmark civil suit against the Dallas Roman Catholic Diocese for hiding and protecting Father Rudolph Kos, who was sexually abusing boys. One of the plaintiffs in the case is the boy who Kos claimed was his adopted son. I recall being jealous of my male classmates because Kos spent more time with them than with me. It never occurred to me that they might be hurt in the same way I had been. Because Father

AT AN ALTITUDE OF 8,500 FEET AND LIVING OFF MILES OF RUTTED DIRT ROADS, I FEEL SAFE.

Kos was an employee of All Saints, my parents' years of tithing, along with the monetary offerings of the rest of All Saints' parishioners, paid for Kos' and the diocese's legal defense fund.

1998 \$

NEDERLAND, COLORADO

Summer paints my land with locoweed, larkspur, columbine, asters, and iris. Hummingbirds swarm my feeders; males dive like missiles toward the earth. My new home off Magnolia Drive sits on 10 feral acres of an elk migration pattern, dwarfed by views of 12,000-foot peaks. From June through September, my dogs kick up wild sage and track it into the house on their paws. For an entire season, their fur smells like clover and sap. Together, we navigate

the wilderness adjacent to my acreage using aspens, rock outcroppings, and scats like road signs. I'm aware that I now trust wild animals more than people and can go months without speaking to another human soul.

I believe that I do not need anyone. Even when my quarter horse shatters my right hand, I drive myself to the ER, shifting gears and steering down the hairpin, 20-degree sloping road with my left. In the winter and early spring, elk break the fence line, looking like amateur high jumpers when their back legs catch the smooth wire. I become adept at staking T-bar fence posts into the ground, steeped in sweat and vibrating with the body shock of hard, physical work. At an altitude of 8,500 feet and living off miles of rutted dirt roads,



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I feel safe. I leave the doors to my house unlocked. I don't even own a key.

In this refuge, I allow myself the latitude to realize several things. First, living alone and being celibate does not make me any less gay. Second, I am not gay because I was abused. One in three women worldwide will be abused, and one in three women are not gay. Third, it's not my fault. Any of it. Fourth, I still like men, even though at 32 years old, I've been drugged, assaulted, and carjacked at gunpoint by them. And while these things made me into the kind of person who kept her hackles up—one who would rather see a mountain lion track than a human footprint—they did not make me gay. God made me gay.

But being abused does have residual effects. I have never stayed in any relationship more than three months with a man or woman without bolting. I envy gay and straight women and men who can enjoy uncomplicated and playful intimacy with one another, who can believe that somebody who touches them might do so out of love. This gift has been stolen from me. And, if I cannot be with women or men,

ONE THING IS VERY CLEAR TO ME: IF I LOSE THE ABILITY TO LOVE, I WILL BECOME SOMETHING LESS THAN HUMAN.

where does that leave me besides alone?

I pray several times a day beneath a sky that opens up to me like an apse in a cathedral. As much as I am comfortable with my isolation, one thing is very clear to me: If I lose the ability to love, I will become something less than human. So this is the bargain I make with God: If you can heal me and teach me to trust again, I will leave this mountain.

2000 §
NEDERLAND, COLORADO

I sleep in a Marmot sleeping bag on the hardwood floor. For six years, I've measured time by the ending of seasons; now, as the late-summer flowers lose their color

with the first frost, I too am moving on.

Two years ago, I spoke on the phone with a woman named Avery—a friend of a friend from college—who invited me to a party in Denver on a Friday night. I couldn't think of anything worse than leaving my utopia to battle rush-hour traffic to spend time with a bunch of people I didn't even know—people who had chosen a life in the city over one in the mountains. I told her I'd pass. Never having met me, Avery said, "Oh come on, who are you, Nell? Even the Unabomber left his cabin to send out mail." So much captivated me about those two sentences that I said *yes*—and kept saying it until we both sold our homes to purchase one



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All That's Left Is God

together in Boulder. Perhaps mirroring us, the new place splits the line of mountain and city, half wild and half tame, with open space at the front door and civilization out the back.

With the moving truck loaded and gone, I spend my last night in my empty mountain home. I watch the peaks flash white against a full moon, like trout bellies in a river, and pray for a send-off, a blessing from this place that has made me whole again. But I do not expect or demand it. Instead, I call it to me.

At 3 a.m., I hear knocking. I slip out from my sleeping bag and tiptoe to the doors and windows. Elk, a herd of 80 or so, have formed a ring around my home, antlers tapping on the wood siding. They remain like that until sunrise, hugging my house. They are so close that their snorts of breath fog the windows.

2003 §

BOULDER, COLORADO

There's a story that's passed down through my family that says when my mother was two years old and visiting her grandparents' farm, she begged them to let her hold a baby chick. She was careful at first, but when they asked her to put it down, she couldn't fathom giving it up, so she crushed it in her hands.

Six decades ago, my mother had no idea what she'd done to that chick except love it, but she knew emphatically what it had done to her. As her grip closed on the little ball of feathers, it defecated in her palm, at which point she screamed and dropped it.

Now, at 64 years old, my mother sits on our deck, her fingers cradling a cup of coffee, staring at the Flatirons and the foothills slouching like thugs against them. I study her, and though I look more like my father, I have my mother's Italian nose, olive skin, petite build, and yes, hands—a fact she once pointed out to me during a piano lesson when I was five. "Poor thing, you got my hands," she said. "They're so ugly."

I raise the umbrella to try to give my mom some shade, and we watch a herd of deer scale the hillside. "You shouldn't have run this morning. It's too hot," my mother says. She raises her hand to block out the sun with her fingertips. "Tell her, Avery."

"Don't get me involved in this," Avery says and heads back inside our home where it is safe. I ignore my mother. I want to ease her worry, but shouldn't she be comforting me? I'm the one who's just been diagnosed with multiple sclerosis.

I sense the incoming verbal grenade just

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All That's Left Is God

before it hits. I brace myself as she says, "You stopped going to Mass. That's why this happened."

"Unbelievable." I chew on my thumb, but cannot stop myself from saying, "So regular Sunday Catholics don't get diseases, and everyone else does?" My cuticles are raw, close to bleeding.

"God works in mysterious ways, Michelle."

I do not know, and will never know, who my mother would have become if she had a mother of her own. As it was, my grandmother took ill when my mom was six years old, and never quite recovered. Because my grandfather, an Italian immigrant with a seventh-grade education, worked long shifts on American Oil tanks,

AS I SPEND MY LAST NIGHT IN MY EMPTY MOUNTAIN HOME, I PRAY FOR A SEND-OFF.

the nuns at St. Dominic's helped raise my mother, hammering home a Catholic education that was as black and white and rigid as the habits they wore.

My mother's faith saved her by giving certainty and structure amid chaos. But it couldn't tell her she was beautiful, or brush the tangles from her hair, or sing her to sleep. Because of this, my mother was determined to love me with a ferocity and devotion she had never known. So when her 36-year-old baby was diagnosed with MS, my mother fell apart. She lived too far away to fix me, so Avery's gender no longer mattered to her—or, one might argue, mattered to her less. My mother learned she could not turn away a person who loved me, her child, enough to stand beside me through a spinal tap, weekly injections, and the rarely discussed possibility that I might be wheelchair-bound one day. Avery became a part of the family.

It took me getting MS, but my mother finally realized she didn't have to choose between being a good Catholic and loving her gay daughter. She could find a way to

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All That's Left Is God

do both. Still, I do not confuse my mother's acceptance for approval. The words are not synonymous. We agree to disagree and to let God be the judge. It is the only way to move forward. My mother believes I have left a mess inside her open palms, and I alternately accuse her of holding on so tight I cannot breathe and of dropping me. We struggle to find even ground. Sometimes, it seems, all we have in common are our hideous hands and a bone-crushing love.

2006 \$

WRANGELL-ST. ELIAS

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At 40 years old, I have had plenty of time to fear what kind of mother I will be. While most of our friends are celebrating their children's high school and college graduations, Avery and I are just deciding to become parents. At first, we look at international adoptions, but all of them ban same-sex partners. Only a handful allow single-parent adoptions, and most of those make the adopting parent sign papers avowing that he or she is not homosexual. Worldwide there are 133 million orphans, and 114,550 children languish in foster care in the United States. With a single phone call, Avery and I learn that Boulder County does not care about our sexual orientation. Instead, Boulder sees two women with a stable relationship and the financial, emotional, and physical capacity to care for a child in need of a family.

To get certified as foster-adopt parents, we turn over our tax returns and medical records to the county for scrutiny. The FBI scans our fingerprints for a background check, and a home-study worker interviews us about every detail of our past. Fifty-plus hours of mandatory training later, we are wait-listed for a match. The social worker encourages us to take a vacation before we begin our life as parents, and so we head to Alaska.

In Wrangell-St. Elias, I fly in a bush plane to the top of an unnamed peak while Avery catches salmon in the river below. I stand on the summit, and though I did not witness this mountain's birth, I know how mountains are made, how they become something solid from cracked earth and shifting soil. God will bring us a child who needs us. And though our son's beginning might be shaky, he will change the landscape to a grand and beautiful thing. Already, this child is my hero.

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All That's Left Is God

2007 §

BOULDER COUNTY COURTHOUSE §
BOULDER, COLORADO

At 14 months old, Lucas has been placed in foster care twice. His biological mother and father were homeless and young. Dad had mental illness; Mom was developmentally delayed. Lucas was malnourished, left unsupervised in a bathtub, and hospitalized twice before he came to live with us.

Now, two-year-old Lucas runs across the courtroom and into my arms. "Mama!" he says, dragging his Lamby and nestling against me with his buttery skin. Today, he will become our son. Because there is a judge present for the adoption hearing, and we are allowed to say something to the court, Avery and I take this opportunity—

AVERY AND I TAKE THIS OPPORTUNITY TO EXCHANGE THE EQUIVALENT OF VOWS.

after nine years together—to exchange the equivalent of vows, along with our promises as parents to Lucas. We cannot marry in Colorado, but with family from both sides here and in a court of law, we make our commitment official. My parents and sister cry. They sweep up our son, in his sport coat and tie, and cover him in kisses. On Lucas' new birth certificate, he has two mommies.

2009 §

SACRED HEART OF JESUS CHURCH §
BOULDER, COLORADO

Father Bill Breslin shifts in his seat. We are supposed to be talking about Lucas' pending baptism, but Father Bill tells me that he is thinking about banning the children of gay parents from Sacred Heart of Jesus School, where Lucas is a preschooler. He mentions he has even asked Archbishop Charles Chaput in Denver to weigh in on the issue. He asks me, "What should we tell our students and parents when they question a child having same-sex parents?"

I say to Father Bill, "You probably know, but the director of your school has a child in my son's class. Just the other day, in

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-David Cortz, *Time Out NY*

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All That's Left Is God

front of the other preschoolers and a teacher, this child asked me, 'Why does Lucas have two mommies?' I explained to her that there are all different kinds of families. Some kids are raised by a grandmother or just a dad or sometimes both a mom and dad, and sometimes two mommies or two daddies. The little girl looked up at me and said, 'My daddy



THE SIMPLE LIFE

After moving to Colorado, the author lived first in Pinewood Springs, and then in Nederland. In this 1999 photo, she rides "Brownie" on her land in Nederland.

doesn't live with us anymore.' And I told her, 'I'm sure he loves you very much.'

"Lucas didn't choose his parents. None of us do. To deny the existence of blended families is to lie. We adopted a two-year-old, mixed-race, traumatized child, and we want him to be raised in a faith and to know God. I don't see how that can be a bad thing. How can we punish or exclude a child because of who his parents are?"

I expect Father Bill to argue, but instead he asks, "Will you be re-enrolling Lucas at Sacred Heart next year?"

"No, primarily because of this conversation," I say. My mouth moves, but I am thinking of Lucas—who has made friends and loves his teachers, the administrators, and staff who have been nothing but kind to him and to us.

"I'm glad we had this talk," he says. "I'm just trying to figure out where I stand on it." He ushers me to the door.

I remember Father Kos and my classmates. The boy who committed suicide. I say, "Maybe the church needs to prove itself worthy of my son and me rather than the other way around." Father Bill scratches his

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beard. He seems to be thinking about this.

Lucas' baptism goes on as planned, though not at Mass with the congregation in attendance. Instead, Sacred Heart holds a baptism for our child on a Sunday at 4 p.m., with empty pews and a service performed by a Naropa University priest, whose credentials I check online, just to make sure Father Bill hasn't pulled a fast one.

2010 §

BOULDER, COLORADO

I watch Lucas run serpentine after a fox

and her kits before the animals disappear beneath the white clapboard porch of Mapleton Montessori School. Kids on swings and slides chant my son's name. It's a welcome that never gets old. I head to the Laughing Goat Coffeehouse and grab a cup of coffee and a newspaper. After six months, I've all but forgotten about Sacred Heart and Father Bill, until I read the headline in the *Denver Post*: "Boulder Catholic School Denies Preschooler with Lesbian Parents." It is not Lucas. But it could have been.

According to the Denver Archdiocese, parents who enroll their kids at Sacred Heart of Jesus School are expected to follow the Catholic Church's beliefs. As a private school, Sacred Heart is within its rights to accept or deny any student for any reason. But surely gay parents can't be the only ones who aren't following the Catholic Church's beliefs. After all, Sacred Heart allows Lutherans, Buddhists, and atheists to enroll their children at the school.

I e-mail Father Bill and ask him if he is willing to "turn away the kids" of parents who practice birth control, or are undergoing fertility treatments, or don't attend Mass regularly. He writes back, "I don't want to simply jot off an answer to you that isn't as thoughtful as your question. So, please give

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me time on a less busy day to get back to you. And will you remind me if a week goes by and you haven't heard from me?"

I decide not to write back, and I never hear from him.

When I tell my mother about this latest development, I expect her to side with the Catholic Church. Instead, she says, "Suffer the little children come unto me," and, "If they think being gay is wrong, they should want you to be in the church every time the doors are open." For once, we agree, and I'm reminded that God is in the people, but the people are not God. Knee-high in lupine as spring edges toward summer, I stand beneath the Flatirons and teach my son to pray. And when the wind ruffles his hair, I tell him to listen close: The God who loves him, who loves all of us, has something to say.

Michelle Theall is currently at work on *Teaching the Cat to Sit*, a memoir. The founder of *Women's Adventure* magazine, she teaches writing and photography at the Creative Conferences (creativeconferences.com). Her blog can be found at michelletheall.com/blog. E-mail her at letters@5280.com.