

The Blue Dress

Loreen Plett Zehr



CHRISTIAN LIGHT
PUBLICATIONS

Dedication

This book is dedicated with love to all those who come from struggling, broken homes. Though not all at the same place in your journey, all of you are supremely precious to your heavenly Father. He welcomes all into His family of perfect love and acceptance.

Contents

Foreword	vii
About This Book	ix
1. A Whispered Prayer	1
2. One Hand	11
3. One Dear Friend	25
4. The Bed	39
5. Am I a Catholic?	55
6. Can I Make It?	69
7. Enter Daniel	77
8. Business Arrangement	89
9. Baby Jackson	103
10. Babies and Control	119
11. Father Wounds	135
12. Move to the North	153
13. The Property	167
14. Smoldering Fires	183

15. Child Protective Services	201
16. A Bible at Last	215
17. The Blue Dress	227
18. The Covering	241
19. Wells of Grace	255
20. Death and Divorce	271
21. Dark Days	289
22. Baptism	303
23. Mapleton Church	317
24. Bigger and Brighter	331
25. A New Culture	343
26. A New House	355
27. Home Sweet Home	369
Acknowledgments	381
About the Author	383

FOREWORD

I have a single aim in telling my story: God helped me, a devastated, unloved woman. I want everyone to know that Jesus helped me, and He has life answers for everyone!

This world is full of frightened, lonely, hungry people, and some of them are right here in America. You have neighbors who live in third-world conditions; people who live with debilitating fear each moment of every day. Sometimes their conditions are evident and other times, as in my case, well hidden. People may be well-dressed but live in a freezing tent; they may live in a palace but are alcoholic, drugged, and wretched. Millions live with broken relationships, without Jesus or hope of Heaven.

They all need Jesus, and He alone has the power to give them hope and a desire to live. Praise the Lord for those who tap into the intense, indescribable, infinite power—the power of the living God! He alone is all-powerful! He cared for me, gave me strength during impossible circumstances, and lifted my life above abuse, control, and hopelessness.

Then, after such a marvelous deliverance, He brought me to His people, the safest place I have ever had. “He that dwelleth in the secret place of the most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty.”¹ Surrounded by those who love Jesus and obey His Word, my fondest wishes in life are fulfilled.

During the most desperate years of my life, Jesus came close in countless ways, drawing me nearer to Himself. The gift of a blue dress embodied His continual call to me as I searched and found the truth. He is the Author and Finisher of my faith. The answers I found are for everyone!

—Leah McGuire with Loreen Plett Zehr

¹ Psalm 91:1

ABOUT THIS BOOK

When there is no place to go but forward, that tiny step forward is what one must take, even when it leads to more suffering.

Throughout this story, Leah took those tiny steps. I wondered, when interviewing her, how she dared to move ahead. Yet she did, again and again, because God was there, and His love was over her. And because God was there, He receives the glory. Leah frequently said, “This book is not about me. It’s about God.”

The reader may wonder at Leah’s choices. I believe that she did the best she could with the light she had, even though at times she became overwhelmed by terrible circumstances.

As a child, she prayed before she knew who God was. Throughout her life, God continued to touch Leah’s heart even though she didn’t always understand how to please Him. By God’s grace, Leah was respectful and even kind to the most unlovely. She taught her children as well as she knew how.

Names, details, and some of the chronology of events have been changed. While Leah did not always remember when events took place, the main events described in this book are based on actual happenings.

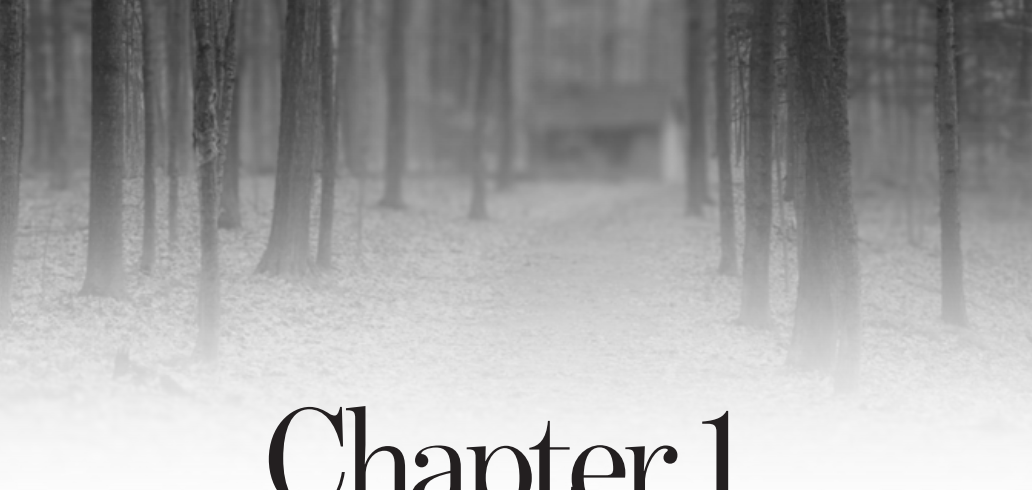
As you read, take time to pray for struggling souls who live all around us, especially the suffering and lonely children. God knows where they are, and He says, “Suffer little children . . . to come unto me: for of such is the kingdom of heaven.”¹ God hears every prayer of faith. We each need the prayers of others to help us stay faithful.

¹ Matthew 19:14

God never forgets His children, showing Himself strong on their behalf. I pray that you will be inspired by Leah's story as much as I have been.

—Loreen Plett Zehr

Croghan, New York



Chapter 1

A Whispered Prayer

Leah lifted the clumsy wooden chair, ready to carry it across the upstairs bedroom. Then she tensed, hearing a creak on the bottom stairstep, the step that muttered protests. The sixth step did too, even more ominously. Mom didn't avoid the first and the sixth step. How many times, when Leah thought she was safe in her room, had those steps warned her?

Her heart hammered in her skinny chest as she listened. No creak from someone stepping on the sixth step. Perhaps she had imagined the earlier sound. She hoped Mom would stay in the basement with Grandma Dorothy. She had to!

Leah's chest ached with desire and fear, but desire took the lead, along with curiosity. She looked up at the wall plaque and placed her chair underneath. She must read those words. They

meant something. At school today, her teacher had smiled and announced, “You first graders are doing so well with your reading. You can read five words!” Would that be enough? Anyway, she knew more than five words.

She climbed up gingerly, hoping the chair wouldn’t squeak, and tilted her head to see the picture. She traced the outline of the boy’s face. He was wearing pajamas that buttoned at the waist on the back. The boy’s hands were folded, and his eyes were closed. He was kneeling beside a window, his mouth slightly open as though talking to someone. But who? Why? She had never considered asking Mom to read the words below the picture. Using her own little head, she had determined that once she learned to read, she would discover the mystery of the picture.

She focused on the letters. N-n-ow, now! I. L-l-ay? Lay! Now I lay m-e. Me! D-d-own. Down. *The pajama boy is ready for bed!* Down to sleep! Eagerly her fingers traced the next line. I p-r-pray. Was the boy praying? When Mom and Grandma prayed, they fingered their rosaries and counted the beads. The boy didn’t have a rosary, so maybe “pray” meant the words he was saying. Th-e-e. Oh, *the*, but why were there two *e*’s? Thee. She shrugged and went on to L-or-d. Lord! That must be who he was talking to! Rubbing her neck, Leah sat down on the chair, her legs dangling. The boy was talking to the Lord.

I wonder if I could talk to the Lord. Where is He? Must be He is up there somewhere. The boy was looking up. Climbing off her perch, she knelt by her window like the boy in the picture. Then she whispered, “Lord? Is that Your name? Lord, who are You? Can You help me?”

Cozy warmth flowed around her. Leaning her head on the windowsill, she fell asleep. Several minutes later, she

woke up with a sense that the room was warm and bright, even though Mom and PopPop were shouting downstairs in the living room.

Leah hugged herself and smiled. She had talked to the Lord, and He had heard her! Mom's angry voice got louder as she came up the stairs. Leah slipped behind her bedroom door, her refuge. But her heart was calm, not thudding like usual.

"Leah, why are you still up here? Now, get to work, you good-for-nothing baby. You'll never amount to anything!" Although Mom's tirade was nothing new, still it frightened Leah, and the warmth in the room faded. Leah looked warily at Mom. She couldn't think of any chores she had missed, but she certainly wouldn't ask. She would find some work to do, though; that always pleased Mom.

When she had arrived home from school, she had emptied her lunch pail and pushed her soaked jelly sandwich deep into the trash can. She had fed and walked the dog, Cleo, and swept the kitchen floor. Only then, hearing Mom arguing with Grandma in the basement, had she slipped upstairs. Remembering the plaque and her prayer, warmth swept over her again.

Mom noticed. "You're happy? Shame on you, stupid girl. Now get downstairs and take dinner to Grandma. I'm not setting my eyes on that woman again."

Mom's muttering continued as Leah followed her down the stairs. After Mom and Grandma had big fights, Grandma was confined to the basement, sometimes for days. But if it was meant to be a punishment, it didn't make sense, Leah reasoned. Mom just followed Grandma down the stairs, and they continued fighting.

Mom handed Leah a TV dinner, hot from the oven. Steak, mashed potatoes, and kernel corn. It smelled good,

but Leah hoped her dinner would be pizza, not dry, tasteless steak out of a box. She knew better than to ask and tried to peek into the oven instead.

Carrying the TV dinner, she trudged down the dark carpeted stairway. A small electric lamp lit the cold windowless room where Grandma sat. Smoke curled from the ever-present cigarette in her hand, and Leah coughed.

“Dinner at last.” Grandma’s quarrelsome voice froze Leah’s throat, and she didn’t answer. Sitting on the red brocade rocker across from Grandma’s chair, she tucked her legs under herself for warmth and toyed with a fringe on a throw. She kept her eyes down till Grandma announced, “This is disgusting food. Take it upstairs and tell your mom I want something decent.”

Slowly Leah went to pick up the plate, her hands shaking. *I’m not telling Mom that!*

Grandma glared at her with bloodshot eyes. “Oh, never mind. Just throw it in the trash and I’ll ask her for a snack later.” She shrugged and picked up her cigarette from the ashtray on the scarred end table. “Tell her I wasn’t hungry.”

Grandma is lying, but it’s not my lie. I can’t tell Mom what she said. Grandma is lying, is lying, is lying . . . The refrain repeated itself as she trudged up the stairs. She opened the door to the kitchen, and noting that Mom’s back was turned, she flipped the food into the trash can. She carried the plate to the sink and stood on tiptoe to rinse it off. Mom hadn’t noticed, and Leah’s heart soared with relief. Was this part of the answer to her prayer? Did the Lord care about the tongue-lashing she would have received had she repeated Grandma’s lie? A small circle of warmth enfolded her heart. “Mom, what’s for my dinner?” she asked quietly.

Mom turned to glare at Leah. “Dinner? Who said you’re getting any? You didn’t even walk the dog yet!”

She had, of course. She had walked him four blocks—down two blocks to the hardware store and back again. It was dark now, and even though the houses on their street were familiar and homey, she cringed at the idea of going out on a frigid winter night. But she wouldn’t remind Mom that she had already walked the dog. Instead, she bundled up, called Cleo, fastened the leash to his collar, and set out bravely.

She was barely out the short driveway when her fingers tingled with cold. “I forgot my mitts,” she told Cleo. “You stay,” she commanded before slipping into the house.

PopPop was hollering at Mom, “Now, Judith, Leah was walking that dog when I got home. He doesn’t need to be walked again tonight! What ails your soft head?”



Any reminder of her head condition sent Judith Klein into a frenzy. She touched the soft part of her skull just above her left ear. Her mood blackened even more, and she plopped into the horsehair rocker across from Albert. “You old meanie, you know I can’t help my soft head any more than you can help that you’re bald and ugly and stupid!”

Albert grunted and turned the television volume up so he couldn’t hear her. She shouted louder and reached for the knob herself, but Albert outsmarted her by throwing a blanket over her head. Cursing, she fell back into the chair, her dark thoughts reliving, reliving, reliving . . .

Judith had been only five years old that day in 1925. Her mother often walked to school with her, but that day she had other plans, and Judith had to walk the half mile alone.