

Preface

It is Mother's Day when I carry my second baby into church for the first time. In honor of the holiday, the preteen girls sing a song about motherhood during the worship service. The songwriter says that there is laundry in her hall, toys everywhere she looks, and peanut butter on her kitchen curtains. Sometimes it feels like all she lives for is changing diapers, but when she kneels before the Lord, she remembers that whatever she does to the least of one of these, she does to Him.

The lyrics make me wonder if I have missed something. They make motherhood sound—negative. I have not yet been a mother for two years; perhaps that is why I do not connect with the song. All I know is joy unspeakable and full of cuteness. A few tally sheets of missed sleep, a little nausea. A lot of selfishness. These are small prices to pay for what I hold in my arms.

As the girls take their seats, a new idea gains foothold in my mind. I try to dislodge it by inhaling Trevor's sweet baby scent, but I can't. Instead, my joy in being a young mother of two tiny sons cringes under this looming thought: *One day I will be a real mom. All that work and chaos will overwhelm me too.*

I wait for this moment to come. I dread it, duck around potential moments for it, avert my face when it seems like life is fixing to roll me under. Ten years pass while I wait. I do encounter plenty of times when my carnality and intense external pressures combine to make life tough, but it is somehow different than what I envisioned.

This is what motherhood looks like for me.

I write hurriedly, seeking to record the past before my memory disintegrates or rose-tints it unrealistically. The first ten years of my motherhood were not necessarily better than the season I am in now. But they were wonderful and so soon gone. I hope to capture a glimpse of their essence on paper, and to do so while my small ones keep me current on what life with toddlers is like.

Ephesians 2 is one of my favorite passages. Verses 8 and 9 feel like they speak directly to me: “For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast.”

This truth threads my days together like one pearl bead after another. Knowing that I did not choose my life keeps me humble, ever turning my joy into a winging breath of thanks. My health, my husband, my children—all that I have is a gift from God.

This is my story. It is a story of grace, of struggle and charm, lessons and love. It starts ten years ago, back when I knew nothing about being a mother except that it was the expected end of a married woman. Actually, it might begin in the first years of our marriage when we had two miscarriages instead of the sweet, snugly babies I dreamed of. I had—I still have—layers to learn about God’s tender will for my life.

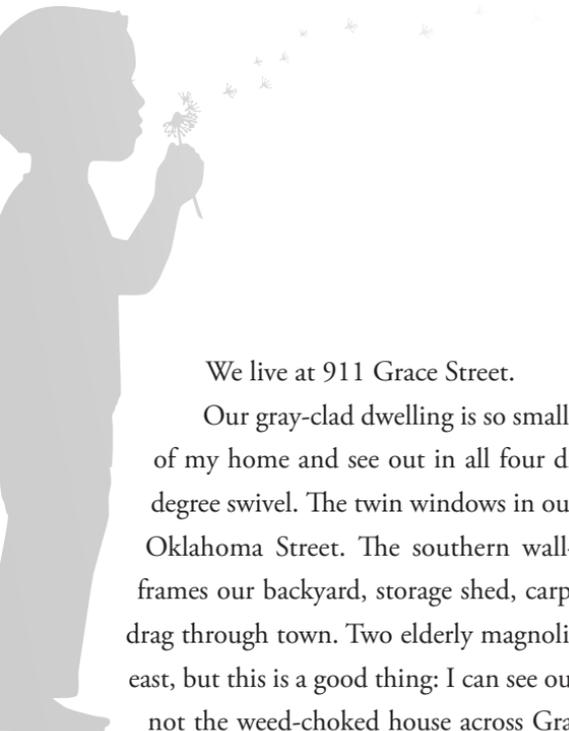
C. S. Lewis said, “Friendship is born at that moment when one person says to another: ‘What! You too? I thought I was the only one.’”

Perhaps this book will reach someone out there who will read it and say, *What! You too?* Perhaps one ordinary day you will look up, and dust motes will dance in the morning light illuminating the row of uncombed heads on the bench at your breakfast table, and you, too, will be caught—captured by the goodness surrounding you, anchoring you down, lifting you to Heaven.

We will be friends, even if we never meet.

Some of you who read this book may desperately wish to be a mother. You might have twins, or triplets, or five children under seven years of age; you may be the breadwinner for your family or be forced to carry on through debilitating illness. You might even be mourning the receipt of a child whose physicality is different than what you ever dreamed of. I recognize this, and I acknowledge you: some of you are my dear friends, and here, in this moment before you plunge into my own story, I want to say *I see you*. Christ sees you. I hope you find His joy in your own common, unsuspecting moments, however different they may look from mine.

Anna L. Martin



Chapter 1

We live at 911 Grace Street.

Our gray-clad dwelling is so small that I can stand in the center of my home and see out in all four directions with one swift 360-degree swivel. The twin windows in our living room look north over Oklahoma Street. The southern wall-sized dining room window frames our backyard, storage shed, carport, and Broadway, the main drag through town. Two elderly magnolia trees hinder the view to the east, but this is a good thing: I can see our pocket-sized front yard, but not the weed-choked house across Grace Street. And the bathroom window to the west gives me just enough glass to see down the street to the end of the block, with a bit of our side yard visible for good measure.

Grace seems oddly paired with our lot number—or maybe appropriately, given the image that 9/11 suggests.

We own the corner lot at the edge of a disintegrating development. Neighbors surround us, trudging past at the most random moments. When they find the road too inconvenient to use, they cut through our yard.

My neighbors have serendipitous names. The Wolfs live on one side of us; the Lambs live on the other. Between the two of them, catty-corner to us, live the Skinners.

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Poteau counts 9,000 people in its record for 2012. There are soon to be 9,001.

My neighbor to the north, Mrs. Wolf, knows this, and checks our house for lights on at unearthly hours each night. Maybe it will be tonight, she thinks, but she is disappointed to find no lights on across the road. I know this because she tells me.

Mrs. Skinner knows it was not last night because she sees me walking, walking, walking, shoving my belly ahead of me. It bulges through my partially zipped ski coat like a sleeping bag that doesn't fit in its original case. "Maybe tonight," she calls encouragingly as I trudge past their drive.

I think it will be very soon. Soon enough, the stuffing in my belly will pop out, never to return. It is high time; I cannot bear to step on the scales one more time. The numbers scare me. Everyone had said, *You're eating for two. Let the pregnant lady have it; she needs it. Eat more protein. You deserve a break.*

Eating for two plus taking breaks is not working out for me. I feel belatedly guilty, trapped by forty-weeks-gestation apparatus, betrayed by how my normally slim metabolism treated me when I tucked a baby into my body.

A walk would be a good idea, I think, finishing up the breakfast dishes. The evidence that labor is on its way gives me too much energy to take a break in my baby-ready home. Sterling's jobsite is just down the street and around the corner; I will visit him. On foot. With coffee.

Snow drips down gutters and drainpipes. It slumps along the sidewalk, eager to return whence it came. I am invigorated by the winter air, undepressed by the slush. My baby is coming.

“What brings you out?” Sterling calls from the roof of the house where he is shingling. I can’t tell him, not with the three other fellows on his crew listening.

I hold up the thermos instead. “Coffee.”

Sterling grins. “I’ll be right down.” When he pops around the front of the house to take a cup of coffee, I whisper why I walked six blocks on a Thursday in late December. My baby is coming, and soon.

But Baby takes his own sweet time to come. We visit the midwife for one past-term prenatal visit. On the way home, it starts snowing again. Snow, for the second time in December in Oklahoma. I love the magic of snow drifting through black night, the ambience of morning light on a whitewashed world. I hug the romance to myself. Surely the snow is a gift from God, an extra sparkle for the advent of my first baby.

“Should we go to your parents’ place?” Sterling asks. He hands me the Snickers bar he picked up at the gas station we just left and opens one for himself.

I remember the scales and hesitate. But what could it hurt this late in my pregnancy? One more treat, one more day—then, surely, redemption from the load I carry. I pop the wrapper.

“Let’s go,” I say. “We will only be restless at home, waiting for something to happen.”

My parents are glad to see us on a snowy Friday evening. Mom has a delicious supper ready. My younger sister deftly clears it away. “Just go rest,” she tells me. “I’ll get the dishes this time.”

I should resist, I think limply. But my overstuffed body messes with my reason and I am too happy to do what she says.

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Sterling and my younger brother tinker with the fireplace. Soon smoke curls up, and then flame. Dad flips on the porch light. “Still coming down.”

I watch the snowflakes flutter through the glowing porch light and check the clock again. 7:30. My belly tightens, right on schedule, just like it has been all day. Once every thirty minutes. *And my mother doesn't even know.* I feel smug, lounging in her living room while early labor prepares my body. *Baby could be born tonight, and then I will tell her, yes, I was in labor all evening at your house.*

Early labor is a touchy term. When Mrs. Wolf checks our house that night, all is dark. No lights betray the tension that strikes my abdomen every half hour through the night and on through Saturday.

We spend Saturday at Sterling's parents' house. I putter around with my sisters-in-law, helping them sew and clean and cook. My contractions are so regular I could set my in-laws' clock by them. I grin to myself as my father-in-law blesses lunch while my belly tightens. *Not one of them suspects what I am going through.*

During the night, this tightening quickens and turns painful. I am relieved and delighted and anxious all at once as Sterling and I dutifully mark down each contraction. Every five minutes now. This is truly good news. If only I could do something to speed up my progress!

“You could walk,” our midwife had suggested on Friday. But our dumpy development is not a decent place to walk in the middle of the night. Sterling agrees when I suggest Walmart.

Seven minutes later, we start pacing the empty aisles. Walmart is eerie at 2:00 a.m. Sterling pushes a cart, and I try to look as if I am shopping. But I have never shopped at such a time before, and I can't do it while in labor either. We giggle like furtive teenagers, not soon-to-be

parents. When we pass the worker stocking the shelves for the second time with our still-empty cart and our purposeless gait, both Sterling and I are too embarrassed to keep walking.

Sterling naps on the couch when we get home. I try to curve myself alongside him, but I am too big. Instead, I sit on the floor, prop my back against the couch, and doze.

When Sunday morning drifts in, I have had enough. “Let’s go see the midwife,” I say. “Just for something to do. Maybe a drive would help my labor move along, or maybe Debbie could tell us if anything is even happening.”

Driving does seem to help, at least if more pain is helpful. By the time we get to Debbie’s birthing clinic, I’m gripping Sterling’s arm through the spasms.

Debbie is calm and encouraging. She checks me, then her watch. “You’re progressing,” she says. “You are doing incredible! When I saw you walk in here, my heart sank, because I thought I’d need to tell you nothing had happened since Friday. Go on home now. I’m guessing you’ll have a baby by noon. Get yourselves something to eat, stay rested, and I’ll follow you shortly.”

I am ecstatic as Sterling drives me home. “Honey, did you hear that?”

Debbie arrives during our quiet midmorning, carrying in accessories that I don’t want to think about yet. I visit and pace and breathe. My rounds take me into our nursery, one of the two bedrooms in our house. Denim Teddy sheets clothe the crib we borrowed from my mother. Denim Teddy curtains hang at the two windows, my coordinating diaper bag hangs from a Denim Teddy hook. A Denim Teddy even hugs the light switch. Because I don’t know whether we will have

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a boy or a girl, I painted the nursery ingeniously: each wall is a different pastel. Blue, green, pink, yellow. I open the top drawer of the changing table my brother Lucas built and sniff the intoxicating miniature garments waiting there. *This is fun. Labor is a piece of cake. I haven't had to make a sound yet. Sterling is dotting on me. The midwife is gentle. Our labor snacks are yummy. And oh, oh, my baby stuff.*

By nightfall, I am bored of pacing round our 1,000-square-foot home—and exasperated with my body. My labor is not hard, but neither is it productive. Sterling follows me around, offering his arm when a contraction grips me. He reads aloud to me, to both of us. We are tired of waiting.

I am more than tired—I am exhausted. By the time Debbie lets me drop into the birthing pool, I am falling asleep between contractions. I want to cry, but I am too tired.

Each pain jerks me rudely awake. I wheeze through it, then collapse back into sleep. “Do you have any juice?” Debbie asks.

“Yep. In the fridge.” Sterling gets the juice that we bought for the birth kit weeks—maybe years, an eternity—ago. Debbie puts a straw to my mouth.

“Drink, Anna. You've got to stay awake. You need energy.” I hear her and I sip, but then I am asleep again and I can't do anything about it.

When the next pain rouses me, Debbie has a cup of iced coffee waiting. I don't want iced coffee. I don't want anything except sleep. Most of all, I do not want another pain. I do not know what is wrong with my body. *Why is it slow? Am I doing something wrong? I thought labor was fast and unbearable toward the end. I am done with these irritating, lazy contractions.*

Suddenly, a force beyond description grips me. I am wide awake. “Oh, Debbie, what is it? Ohhhhhh!” I shriek.

Debbie pushes Sterling away and grasps my arm, takes my chin in her hands. “Anna, look at me.”

I focus on her coiffed gray hair, her sparkly silver eyes, her turquoise necklace. *Birth is wonderful*, her gray t-shirt reads.

“Anna, look at me,” she commands again when that awful grip squeezes my self-control right out of the pool. “Your baby is getting ready to meet you. Your body was made to do this. This is okay. This is normal. Now focus. I want you to look right at me.”

Debbie speaks with authority and a touch of snap. I look at her, and listen, and work with the pressure that threatens to break apart my body. Sterling murmurs soothing sounds and offers me the iced coffee straw. I don’t want it, but when I look pleadingly at Debbie, her eyes flash.

Almost two hours into Monday morning, my baby is born. Our infant appears completely at ease. He waves his arms and looks around at his new watery world, eyes wide in his blue-gray face. I have never seen anything so marvelous.

“Oh, sweetheart, you did it,” Sterling breathes, his eyes fastened on our baby.

“That was six minutes between contractions,” Debbie says. “You pushed for two hours. Pick him up.”

“Me?” Sterling squeaks.

“Yes, you,” Debbie chuckles. “He’s not that fragile. You have a son, Sterling!” Sterling pulls our baby out of the water and lays him in the warm blue flannel that Debbie offers. She folds the blanket loosely around him and places him on my chest. It is 1:52 a.m.

I don’t care about anything anymore except Sterling and my baby and the awe draping the room. Labor and delivery could not be any more fun. Debbie fusses over me, feeding me yogurt and juice, tucking

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me into a clean couch bed. Sterling sits at the other end of the couch, one hand on my knees, his face rivaling the recessed lighting over our bookcase. We watch, fascinated, as Debbie expertly weighs and measures our baby, unrushed by his indignant squawks. “Eight pounds, six ounces,” she tells us. “What name shall I put on his birth certificate?”

“Cole Silver Martin,” Sterling announces proudly.

Perhaps it is exhaustion, but I think it is mostly giddiness that fumbles my fingers when I try to dress Cole. I feel like a klutz. Even though I have dressed my newborn nieces and nephews, I cannot dress my son. Debbie watches, then gently takes Cole. “Let me.” I am happy to lie back and let her. She dresses and swaddles Cole, then hands him back to me. But my adrenaline suddenly sags. I am too tired to even hold my baby. Sterling takes Cole to bed with him in our room. I sleep on the couch, the sounds of Debbie tidying up the house cradling me with care.

Several hours later I awake, fuzzy. Sunlight pours through the windows, the dryer hums, my house is spotless. Then I remember, with star-splitting wonder: my baby. I’m pretty sure new moms should not move around much, but I can’t help it. I shuffle into our room. There, tucked into the crook of Sterling’s arm, lies my baby. They are asleep, white sheets and comforter crumpled comfortably around them. I fall in love with my husband completely anew. Motherhood smites me with crazy little tingles of joy, bells going off in my heart and head in full symphony. I kiss them both, my husband and my son. And because I am not a crying woman, no one sees, but tears course down across my heart. I did not know that love could feel so much.



Chapter 2

Cole receives as much attention as if he is a newborn prince in our small Poteau kingdom. My parents come, then my sister, then my brothers. My married brother calls to say he will drive up from Texas for the weekend to meet my son. I say yes, and yes, and yes again, and visitors come and go all day. I cannot get enough of Cole's wrinkly newborn face, his curling silky fingers, his intoxicating scent, but I scarcely see him. Relatives pass him around me while Sterling and I rehash the details of his birth.

Even Mrs. Wolf knocks at the door. "Oh, I just knewwww," she croons. "I was doing my laundry last night and I saw the lights on at your house and the strange car parked in your driveway and I just knew it was time!"

"I see," Sterling says, uncertain how to respond.

"Oh, I won't bother you right now." She steps back from the door. "I just had to see if the baby had come. Now is it a boy or a girl?"

"It's a boy." My husband expands with this announcement. He gestures. "Would you like to come in and see him?"

"Oh no, I won't bother you right now," Mrs. Wolf says again.

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“You’re welcome to come again,” Sterling tells her as she leaves. “Anna would be glad to see you and show you the baby.” My husband is magnanimous. I, not so much.

My first day of motherhood slips between my fingers like so much water and is gone. At last, all the visitors are gone too. Even the daylight is gone.

But Cole is fretful. He is so tiny, but he makes so much noise. As Sterling and I pass our baby back and forth, seeking to quiet him, a curveball hits me: I cannot hand him off to his mother to soothe him.

Cole’s fists fight with the blue waffle blanket he is swaddled with. He *cries*.

I have not slept solidly for over eighty-four hours, and I simply cannot think what to do for him. Finally Sterling asks, “When did you last change his diaper?”

“His diaper?” I look at him stupidly. “Um. Well. Um, the midwife put a diaper on him when she dressed him this morning . . .”

Sterling’s face struggles, but words win. “No wonder the poor boy can’t sleep!” He carries Cole into the nursery and lays him on the changing table. I summon strength to stagger over and watch, feeling helpless but duty-bound to at least appear at the jobsite. When my husband gingerly tugs open the doll-sized pampers, we both see why Cole couldn’t settle. He has done his first whopper job as a newborn—and his mommy did not think to check for it.

As Sterling arms himself with a clutch of wipes, lights sparkle and pop outside the nursery windows. *Boom! Boombedy-boom-boom!* Our house vibrates as fireworks explode all over our town. New Year’s Day is here.

