



Exquisite Hope



*The something more
you've been longing for!*



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BARNHILL



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I Know a Place



I'm *baaack*, girls!

And, may I add, I'm tired.

If you could see me right now (*and let's all just stop and give thanks that Mr. Microsoft hasn't patented that algorithm yet*), clothing attire alone would bear expert witness. Yes, indeedy, nothing quite says, "Depleted, spent, and exhausted" like a pair of ratty, plaid, flannel lounge pants, a red Mickey Mouse fleece pullover speckled with fabric pilling, and puffy, neon green, Steve Madden house slippers roughly the size of Rhode Island.

Ah, yes, the "What to Wear" wardrobe of choice for overtaxed women everywhere. . . .

But my style of dress (*or lack thereof*) isn't the lone indicator of diminishing energy reserves. No, soon after completing *Radical Forgiveness*, I somehow managed to misplace my brain. As a result, I've been unable to retain conversational nouns ("*Would you please hand me that, um, thing right over by the, uh, place that I sit down when I come in the, er, oh, just forget it!*") in the hollow confines of what I once endearingly referred to as "My Mind." The loss was exacerbated, no doubt, by a crammed

social calendar of parent-teacher conferences and visits to the dermatologist for adult onset acne.

So now there are approximately 32 Post-it notes precipitously dangling and vying for attention around the dusty frame of my Dell flat-screen, um, box-looking gizmo. Scribbled on said Post-its are passwords for Web sites long forgotten, bank balances for both business and family checking accounts (*with exclamation points noting less-than-positive numbers*), as well as random sparks of inspirational genius hastily recorded for possible chapter development (*none of which I am currently able to read or decipher, mind you*). There is even order information for Hype Energy Drink, which claims to be full of vitamins, guarana, and natural fruit juices to give you a great-tasting energy drink that refreshes and reenergizes. (*Hmm, wonder if I can order that in IV drip form?*)

All around my computer, on every surface of space that can be filled in my office, in the tape-recorded messages left on my answering machine, as well as the not-to-be-forgotten minor details of marriage, motherhood, and friendship, there are reminders of what I need to do—reminders of who I am to be.

And it makes me tired.

I think you know exactly what I'm talking about. Either that, or you're lying.

Call me crazy, but there's a reason many of you chose to journey with me through the stories and confessions of *Scandalous Grace* and *Radical Forgiveness*. We've laughed so hard we've snorted (*and sundry other physical responses, but I won't go there*) as author to reader, friend to friend, while peeling back and sandblasting the pointless veneer of pretending we have it all together. (*And may I just say I have enjoyed every minute of it?*)

Many of us have not only embraced our cellulite but, more importantly in the grand scheme of life, embraced the reality of being a mess of magnificent proportions. And for those who haven't? Well, they've extended scads of lavish grace toward us who have. We've joined in and "let it go"—all the while waving a girlfriend hanky of agreement for any number of XX chromosome issues and foibles.

So, in honor of our time spent together in previous outings—as well as an official, "I'm so glad you're reading one of my books for the first time!" welcome from me if you haven't joined us before—here goes. As your friendly, messy, "I Lost My Mind" author and all-around companion, I'd like to provide a final offering of girlfriend hanky-waving truth. You know the drill—grab a hanky or another wave-friendly item of choice, stand up, and . . . (*well, in light of my condition, let's just sit down for this round, shall we?*) sit down. Prepare to agree, disagree, or simply find an excuse to be free from that tired old underwire bra you're currently wearing.

Ready? Okay, here we go. . . .

- * If you've ever attended (as an adult) a concert of your favorite band when you were in high school (i.e., Journey), then looked around in alarm and asked your husband or friend, "We don't look as old as everyone else here, do we?" give me a geriatric hanky wave. (*Careful—don't hurt yourself, girlfriend!*)
- * If you feel the same way I do about getting your breasts slammed annually by cold bookends, all in the guise of a mammogram, give me an *uh, ouch* hanky wave.

- * If you've ever gotten a call from your doctor requesting you to schedule another bookend moment because your films were somehow misplaced, give me an outraged hanky wave.
- * If your neighbor just dropped off a whole plate of brownies and you had not one, but *four* of them in the first 10 seconds, give me a hanky wave.
- * If you have ever prayed that the car in front of you would get the speeding ticket, not you, give me a hanky wave.
- * If you have ever told God, "God, if you'll just do this one thing for me, then I'll never do that one thing again," give me a hanky wave.
- * If you have ever been tempted to smash your alarm clock into oblivion, give me a hanky wave.
- * If your cat or dog or fish or child has ever received the brunt of your bad day, give me a hanky wave.
- * If you've ever listened to yourself talking and at the same time thought, *Shut up! Just shut up!* give me a silent hanky wave.
- * If you long for "Calgon, take me away!" and you haven't even gotten out of bed yet, give me a hanky wave.
- * If you know heaven is out there, but it just seems too far away to matter much on an average day, give me a hanky wave.

How well I relate! Each and every hanky wave brings to mind the "to do" and "to be" realities of my life:

the invoices I need to pay
the phone calls I need to follow up

the packages I need to mail
the e-mails I need to write
the lessons I need to prepare
the research material I need to gather
the Bible questions I should be able to answer
the broken, wounded women I should be able to encourage
the appointments I need to keep
the relationships I need to mend
the exercise I should begin (*groan*)
etc.
etc.
etc., already!
(*Heavy exhale of breath*)

Each and every “to be” and “to do” adds up—one on top of the other, piggybacking and hopscotching from one monstrous pile to the other—until finally, fingers flying across cyberwaves, I surf an Expedia.com SOS, desperate to find an oasis, longing to find a slow (*and cheap*) cruise to paradise.

* * *

Paradise—hmm. Now there’s a concept a girl could shake a hanky at.

In January 2004 I embarked on my first Caribbean cruise with my then 15-year-old daughter, Kristen. She and I are cut from the same cloth when it comes to climate preferences, so anytime the mercury drops below 69.9 degrees Fahrenheit, we’re pretty much miserable. And since we live in the state of Illinois

during winter months, well, we're miserable a good six to seven months out of the year. Not that anyone else would even notice. Oh, no. Far be it from either of us to whine, mope, grumble, bellyache, snivel, grouse, gasp, or murmur about cold-weather conditions or the place in which we live.

Nope, not us.

All right, for the sake of the story (*and truth in writing*), let's just say we find Illinois to be the most miserable place on the face of the planet during the months of November through May—late May—and the prospect of sailing to tropical ports of the Western Caribbean to be, well, heavenly.

So that January afternoon we left behind wind-chill factors, icy mixes of snow, and those brittle gusts of wind that suck the life (*and humor*) straight out of you. And onward we flew to Orlando, boarding a Carnival Cruise ship at Cape Canaveral. A mere 10 hours later we arrived on the sunny shores of blissful Pirate Island.

For five days and four nights, I basked in the rays of sunshine. I swung for hours in a hammock on Blue Lagoon Island, thinking how absolutely perfect the world would be without snow.

There were no e-mails to answer.

No cell phones to take or avoid.

No chapters to write.

No deadlines to meet.

No conferences to attend.

All I had to do was rest . . . and all I had to be was me.

Paradise, indeed.

But here's the best part, girls. I unearthed My Mind on those

heavenly shores of the Caribbean (*who'd a think it?*). Yes, it was discovered deep beneath bone-warming rays of sunshine and comforting tides of ocean waves. As a result, I found both My Mind and my physical body believing in the restorative power of hope.

Hope?

Yes, hope.

You see, time and time again, I have found myself right where I was at the beginning of that vacation as well as where I am today.

Restless.

A tad bit irritable.

And more than a tad bit apprehensive and desperate for a reminder of past felt peace, a sense of belonging, and the hope of things eternal.

Yes, I'm the one who told you to look at everything through the following question: In the light of eternity, does this matter?

Author, heal thyself!

Yet time after time I find myself flailing about, having lost my moorings to the anchor tethering my life. Quite honestly, there is an overall sense of predictability about such things, and I think I know why—at least in part. I'm quickly approaching the 4-0 marker of life and, as such, have had ample time to study my habits (*good and bad*), multiple quirks, and also the deficits of my personality and character. I've come to understand certain inevitabilities that will influence factors both in faith and life.

No matter your age, perhaps you will relate—as a woman eager to dissect the predictable reruns of her life.

INEVITABLE RERUN #1: I WILL RUN MYSELF RAGGED.

Take it to the bank, baby—of this you can be sure. It doesn't matter how many books I may read regarding balance in life, work, and love (*my last attempt was during the summer of 1991*), or how many times I come to the end of my rope and drop like a sack of lead, or how many times I've looked at my calendar and realized I've committed myself to three different events at the same time, it always, always, always happens.

It all goes back to my "all or nothing" personality. I promise the moon, with full intention of delivering but resemble a mad-woman during the process. I love deeply, grieve profoundly, and dream humongous dreams of what can be, thereby expending much emotion, angst, and "why not?" imaginings. But that means I have little, if anything, left over for what remains—huh, a little thing called "Real Life." You know, the one that comes with accessories such as a husband, children, work deadlines, and pants I can no longer fit into.

But do I admit this? Do I restructure my reading, my rope, or my calendar to make room for less ragged and more rest? (*Do you?*) Of course *I* don't. I just keep at it—plugging away and throwing back one Red Bull after the other because there really is little margin for ragged in my world.

INEVITABLE RERUN #2: I WILL LOSE SIGHT OF WHAT IS IMPORTANT.

Many of you reading this book may have been raised with a church background similar to mine. I attended Sunday morning church services as early as I can remember (age four) and participated in Vacation Bible School programs and a program

called Girls in Action, where young girls could learn more about foreign missions work and the Bible, throughout elementary school. It was a given, once summer rolled around, that I would either attend or work as a counselor at one or two church camp programs.

Overall, I always found it enjoyable learning about God. I never wrestled much with the concept of a Creator—a God who lives in a place called Heaven. Nor did I find it difficult to believe in Jesus as God’s Son. In fact, I really loved that idea. I’ll never forget reading for the first time a story found in the New Testament book of Mark:

“While he was still talking, some people came from the leader’s house and told him, ‘Your daughter is dead. Why bother the Teacher any more?’

Jesus overheard what they were talking about and said to the leader, ‘Don’t listen to them; just trust me.’

He permitted no one to go in with him except Peter, James, and John. They entered the leader’s house and pushed their way through the gossips looking for a story and neighbors bringing in casseroles. Jesus was abrupt: ‘Why all this busybody grief and gossip? This child isn’t dead; she’s sleeping.’ Provoked to sarcasm, they told him he didn’t know what he was talking about.

But when he had sent them all out, he took the child’s father and mother, along with his companions, and entered the child’s room. He clasped the girl’s hand and said, ‘*Talitha kum,*’ which means, ‘Little girl, get up.’ At that, she was up and walking around! This girl was twelve years of age. They, of course, were all beside themselves with joy.”¹

Now really, who couldn't love a Jesus like that? He was kind and cared a lot about children.² And he even brought a little girl back to life! How cool is that? And so I did choose to love him with a head-over-heels, all my heart, soul, strength, and mind kind of commitment. I suppose that's why this particular rerun of life eats away at me so much.

I know, thanks to great teaching during those multiple trips to church, that the life I live is God's alone. I know each breath comes from him. I know he's numbered the hairs on my head (*and forearms*). So if I know these things, why do I do the things I do or lose sight of those things that are most important? Am I simply a shallow, self-centered Christian pinhead who doesn't recognize such things in her life? (*Send comments to: julie@juliebarnhill.com.*)

If I'm really being honest, *I've lost hope that I truly believed the Bible verse I memorized as a young teenager and have quoted year after year since: "In Him we live and move and have our being."*³ Next time you see a puppy chasing its tail, think of me and this rerun. For that's how I see myself: *knowing* it's all about Jesus logically and concretely, yet still managing to lose sight of what's important, over and over, around and around, again.

INEVITABLE RERUN #3: I'LL LOSE HOLD OF LIFE'S ANCHOR—HOPE.

Do you see a pattern in these three reruns?

First I overextend myself, wear out, and grow weary. This leaves me with a tendency to lose sight of what's important, thereby rendering me weak. And then I lose my grasp of The One who gives me life and makes my life meaningful.

And when these three things occur? Well, it's all over except for the Prozac.

Be it momentary or a long-fought struggle through weeks, months, or even years, losing hope always hits like a sucker punch to the gut. It goes against my nature—this loss of confident expectation, and it never, ever feels right or pleasing.

And so hope finds me (us) oftentimes stranded between dreaming and wishing.

Between faith and despair.

Between the way things are and the way we wish them to be.

Oh, yes. I'm old enough now to know there are thousands of women who suffer from soul sickness as a result of shattered dreams. Dreams built on hope—hope for restored relationships, upward-moving career developments, an anticipated marriage, healing for the one that fell apart at the seams and ripped our heart to shreds. And hope for doing better, or being different, or anything *other* than what we've actually accomplished.

Or am I getting the cart before the horse?

* * *

What, exactly, is hope?

Is it simply wishing really, really, *really* hard?

Is it the power of positive thinking—something we slap on over fear or apathy as we pull our spiritual bootstraps higher and higher in a pseudo-spiritual *I think I can, I think I can* little-red-engine confession of faith?

Is hope real?

Can you touch it? See it? Smell it or plant it and harvest more of said commodity?

I don't recall ever officially applying for hope. What about you? So how is it we feel it deep within our soul and grieve in an even deeper place when we feel as though it's lost or has been taken from us?

And what purpose does hope serve in my life . . . in yours?

Is hope just another *good* feeling we get when things go well?

A crutch of convenience we lean on when things go—well—horrible, and we find ourselves unable to understand or explain why?

(And what's with this compulsive need/pressure to explain everything, anyway? Maybe that's a book one of you could write!)

Why do we need hope?

And while we're asking (*okay—I'm asking, you're pondering*), is it possible to separate the virtuous trio of faith, hope, and love?⁴ Can you have one without the others?

Does one "possess" hope, or are you "given" it? And perhaps just as importantly, has Wal-Mart found a way to slap a smiley face on it and sell it?

Where and with whom does hope begin?

And where does it ultimately lead . . . or *end*?

Some questions, huh?

I'm guessing you are far more like me than you may care to believe. That's why I know many of you have dared to dream and hope somewhere along the way of life and have come up empty-handed—empty-hearted. I know you most likely ache to believe dreams matter. Better said, you ache to believe *your* dreams mat-

ter—to know that those dreams are endorsed and sponsored by The One who authors all such things.⁵

Despite age differences, socioeconomic status, ethnic backgrounds, or any number of extenuating circumstances, we all bear an indelible mark of connection as women. How can I know this? Because I've read and responded to your e-mails, spoken one-on-one with you after conference events, stayed up until 3:00 AM talking and laughing in front of a crackling fireplace while eating decadent Texas sheet cake, and returned phone messages after meeting you via the Internet, magazine articles, radio interviews, or television appearances airing in places as far away as Budapest, Hungary; Stephenage, England; Singapore, Asia; and as near as Bushnell, Illinois; Opelika, Alabama; and Duluth, Minnesota.

I believe there is a place where tired women like me (and you) can find reprieve from life's inevitabilities. I believe there is a place of *safe harbor* from our frenetic living, *sanctuary* for our hesitant faith, and *confident expectation* for what lies ahead both today and a hundred years from now.

I believe in a place called Hope.

Hope demonstrated through dreams and longings.

Hope as the ultimate destination package.

Hope as a noun, found in the person of Jesus Christ.

Forget about dog-paddling or bobbing along through life like an untethered cork, girls! In this, our third literary outing, we'll bask in the undulating nearness of hope. This is all about living and believing and trusting in The One who is able to keep us secure in his grip. This is all about anchoring our past, present, and future to tranquil and profound hope.

Many of us (*how I hope all of us*) have had the canvas of our life marked by the distinguishable color palate of the Divine. His strokes of chartreuse grace have inundated our lives and quenched scorched places. Swaths of magenta forgiveness have rescued and redeemed us from our secrets and sin, leading us to this final, turquoise-hued moment. Now hope beckons us to lift our heads a bit higher—encourages us to gaze toward life's horizon with a bit more confidence. And it urges us to come away and find rest.

Rest?

Yes, lasting rest.

So what do you think? Are you ready for a relaxing read and a bit of refreshment for your heart, mind, and soul? Are you ready to consider a few of the questions I proposed a few paragraphs back? And are you willing to believe, even slightly, in The One who embodies all hope, who knows each and every one of our dreams, and even now is preparing a place of eternal sanctuary for each and every one who will trust him?⁶

Then let's go!

I've found a perfect spot to settle down. It's right on the beach (*my favorite place in the entire world*), and we can set up our lounge chairs to catch the best rays.

Here—take some of this sunscreen if you're prone to burning.

Ah, let's burrow our toes and feet about ankle deep into the damp, cool sand. That palm tree provides the right amount of shade, don't you think?

Hmm. Everything is just about perfect, except we're missing a carbonated beverage with a slice of lime and one of those

colorful little paper umbrellas. (*Forgoing a Pepsi addiction, I order 7-Up. "Uh, waiter!"*)

As we wait for Coco the cabana boy to return, in your mind's eye, listen closely to the sounds. . . .

Pebbles tumbling in the surf . . .

Oystercatchers calling as they feed among the rocks . . .

Seagulls and surfside songbirds contributing to the song of the sea . . .

The rhythm of the waves lapping lazily against the shore . . .

Oh, my! Now *this* is just what the author ordered. Are you comfy? Shall we continue on, or is a Caribbean siesta in order? Okay, onward then to Chapter 2, as the magnificent mysteries of hope are revealed.

*Exquisitely Yours,
Julie Ann Barnhill*

P.S. Pass me that box of Ho Hos, would ya?