

JACKIE HILL PERRY

GAY

GIRL.

GOOD

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The Story of Who I Was and Who God Has Always Been

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Introduction

I WROTE THIS BOOK out of love—a common word used so out of context on most days. This work is not a miscommunication of my intentions; it is a direct product of it.

Before writing it, I lived out the words. A gay girl once? Yes. Now? I am what God's goodness will do to a soul once grace gets to it.

In saying that, I know I've already offended someone. I don't assume that every hand that holds this book will agree with every black letter on the pages. There are many who, while reading, won't understand gayness as something possible of being in the past tense. It is either who you are, or what you have never been. To this, I disagree. The only constant in this world is God. Gayness, on the other hand, can be an immovable identity only when the heart is unwilling to bow. There is more complexity to this than my modest introduction will allow. I will only encourage those hesitant to turn the page because of my particular perspective on truth to keep reading. I'll admit that I have much more to say about gayness and

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God that will be a bit countercultural, but I hope will also be intriguing to the point of consideration in the grand scheme of things.

There are others who only know of the hetero love that makes a book such as this one for studying the unknown. These are the Christians (the “I’ve always been straight Christians, that is”) for whom this book was also intended. I have not always loved how they’ve loved the gay community. Between the banner-painted hate and the interpersonal silence, my love for the church moved me to attempt to write something of balance—something that can make the love for which they are called to walk in, the tangible proof of what God is like.

This book, however, is not to be confused with the Scriptures themselves. It, God willing, will be of benefit to the church, but these words are not to be esteemed as being what is most important for the church. That is what the Word of God is for. This is not an appendix to the Scriptures; it is simply the telling of a story impacted by the Scriptures, with practical instruction gained by living out the Scriptures. My love for the LGBT community makes me desperate for them to know God. My love for the church makes me desperate for them to show the world God, as He is, and not as we would prefer for Him to be—this book being my efforts toward such an end. Coming out of the gay lifestyle and into a brand-new world of loving God *His* way is a wild life—a wildness so sufficient that it will

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either turn a new saint back or make them into someone better. If I were to call the experience by another adjective, I would call it “hard.” A hardness much like a mountain too beat-up by the sky to climb. But even they can be moved.

For those saints, my love is a gathering up of my life, failures, victories, and everything I’ve figured out about God, edited and made into text for them to read. As they do, a deep “She gets it” might well up. But even better would be a “God is good,” only to be followed by an “All the time!” from within. They are the demonstration of how often God saves. That there are more gay girls and boys that have been made new by a good God. For them, these words landed face-first that they may know that they are not alone.

In writing this book, I did it as myself. Meaning, I am as honest as I know how to be. I have never been one for pretense. When, as a new Christian, I was introduced to the typical nature in which some Christians speak of their lives in the loveliest terms, I refused to give in to the convenient misery of being ambiguous about the truth. If the truth is what sets us free, then why not walk in it at all times? With wisdom and love, of course, but also with the reality that truth is where freedom begins.

Finally, in this book you’re holding, every sentence is the pursuit of showing off God. Leaving this word-filled place with a developed understanding of me and a shallow revelation of

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God would make all of my efforts worthless. This is a book with a lot of me in it but with a whole lot more of God. He is what the soul needs for rest and what the mind needs for peace. He is the Creator God, the King of Glory, the one who, in love, sent the Christ to pay the penalty for and become the sin that we are all born with. It is the words from and about this resurrected Lamb of God that I hope will lift off the page and into the heart. This book is a lifted hand, a glad praise, a necessary hymn, a hallelujah overheard and not kept quiet. This work is my worship unto God that, with prayer, I hope will leave you saying, "God is *so* good!"

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PART 1

Who I Was

CHAPTER 1

2006

JACKIE, YOU WANNA BE my girlfriend?" she asked me, squinting like she knew her question might be offensive.

I'd seen her before. Back in middle school, she was one of the few who didn't hide their lesbianism in hallways, classrooms, or wherever else conversations were held. If you knew anything about her family, you knew those hips belonged to her mama. She wore her identity with a smile, a smile that sat on top of her skin, skin that looked like bronze that had sat in the sun too long. I noticed it and the body she constantly called attention to.

It was the high school dance, and we were both standing in the middle of the gym floor turned dance hall. On one side, near the entrance, you could see a group of girls too popular for kindness. They laughed like everything was an inside joke and watched all who walked past for the sole purpose of making fun of what they saw. Across from them, underneath the glare of

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swirling party lights were last year's homecoming king, and all the other boys whom girls flocked to dance in front of. They were hoping that one of the boys would detach himself from his clique and ask one of them for their phone number. If she was pretty enough, he might even remember her name when he called. But for now, the boys loved the feeling of having their ego lifted on a Saturday night.

We stood in the middle of the room. I could tell she was growing impatient. I hadn't answered her question yet or even let my body tell her what my mouth wanted to say. All I could think about was Monday, and what it would have in store for me if I said "yes" to her invitation. The news wouldn't walk but run toward every ear and fly out of every mouth that heard it—until the school no longer saw me as the girl that had a smart mouth and a timid frame but as, "The gay girl."

They'd say my name like it was contagious. Like what I was would rub off on their skin, crawl inside of their little heterosexual hearts, and meddle with it until they ended up just as "sick" as I was.

I thought about the violent ones the most. They came from the same breed as the popular girls in the corner. It was a gift of theirs to use words as weapons and never discard them even if it killed everyone they spoke to. Gay slurs were their favorites. They concealed and carried them everywhere they went. Unloading one wouldn't be a challenge. I saw her face and I

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heard the sound of a pistol being loaded. She was still waiting, intrigued by my silence. I thought I could hear bullets ricochet off the floor and tell me to be quiet.

“Girl, don’t play with me like that! I ain’t gay.” I sounded so straight. On purpose. I’d come to the homecoming dance to take part in the traditional teenage revelry that these nights were made for. My clothes, purchased with twenty hours of weekend work, were put on to draw attention to me, but she was after more than I was willing to pay. She wanted me, and probably expected me, to take her up on her offer. But to me, that would’ve been no different than unclothing in front of a crowd. I was not willing to undress my secrets in front of her or anybody else for that matter. For now, I was okay with the fantasy of being honest. At least I knew it would keep me warm.

CHAPTER 2

6,000 BC–AD 1995

I WAS ATTRACTED TO women before I knew how to spell my name. My mama had given it to me. She thought it sounded dignified. Like a spine unwilling to bend. She'd heard it often in her younger days every time John F. Kennedy's wife was mentioned in the news. As for me, in second grade, I didn't know who the 35th president had been or what wife he'd let stand beside him as he waved to the world. All I knew was that our name had too many letters in it, and that my teeth had a small gap in it, reasons for which my ancestors were to blame, and that—according to my teacher—I asked too many questions.

When I looked at the sky, I didn't understand why it wasn't the color of my hands, instead of looking like my teacher's eyes. And why that one girl, who sat two desks over, made me feel weird. Or why my heart moved whenever she did. Or how, during recess, we'd end up in the corner of a Fisher-Price

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cabin, doing things we'd never seen, making sure our doing so remained as such.

The roof reminded me of a crayon—the green kind that you brought out of the box only when you needed to draw grass. The cabin itself was a boring version of brown, with the only excitement being the bright mustard yellow shutters that framed the plastic window cutouts we kept closed while inside. Without being taught to, we hid ourselves. Somehow, our minds carried rules that our hearts knew we were breaking. My mama was at work and when she thought about me, she probably envisioned my not-yet-guarded eyes, full of glee as it ran across the jungle gym like a brand-new lion dressed in a red shirt and blue jean shorts. With hair, dark and thick as my father's pride, swinging in the wind, until it was time to go back to class and learn how to write. She didn't know I was learning *other* things. And how what I was feeling hadn't told me its name yet. All I knew was, I had to keep *it* to myself.

Parents can't help but pass down things to their children. Every time I stood next to my mama, some joke we could both catch on to got ahold of our mouths—it would crack open and let a laugh out. Behind it, you'd see that gap and know we were related. That she'd given me, what had been hers all of her life, only because I was born wearing her genes.

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Way before my mama had a mouth to smile with, or her mama had hands to clean collard greens (hands that came from a woman who had a slave's eyes, a stolen African's cheekbones, and a European's last name)—there were the two people to see God's face first. Adam and Eve looked much different back then. I'm sure they stood as tall and as strong as God had intended, with almost glorious skin, just like the baby they never had to be. But how they looked had more to do with whom they reflected than how attractive they might've been. When made, their bodies and their souls were unblemished—clean, almost glass-like through which to see their Creator. He couldn't be compared to anything other than Himself, nor easily described by the things He'd made. Words like *gorgeous*, *amazing*, *wonderful*, or *breathtaking* are easy, borderline lazy when used to describe the Holy One.

If, over coffee, we could ask Adam what word came to his mind the moment after he exhaled and saw God for the first time, he'd probably say, "Good. I saw Him and knew He was *good*." Somebody who'd been born after Adam would most likely say under their breath, as not to seem irreverent, "Good? That's the best word he could come up with to describe God? Heck, even *I'm good*." The doubt whispered was the familiar smile, the identical eyes, the matching cheekbones, and the busy hands. And it was Adam, and not God, that had passed that down to us all.

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It all started after Adam's wife, Eve, who had been made from a rib in his side, started having conversations with one of the animals her husband had named. The serpent, as Adam determined it should be called, was slick. He had the kind of character that an elderly woman, who'd been burned twice and never again, would sniff out as soon as it walked in the room. It's not mentioned if, when the serpent approached Eve, he had the decency to introduce himself. Telling her his name might've confused her or worse, given her the chance to ask him where he'd come from. Adam named it *serpent*, but the one speaking was known by every demon in hell as Satan. Being smarter than that, he stuck to asking only questions first. They could save the "getting to know you" portion for later.

Not being one for small talk, he went straight to questioning her about something God told her husband a little after He made him. God, after making the heavens, the earth, and everything in it, put Adam in Eden's garden. What surrounded Adam were trees, and lots of them—all pleasant to look at and good to eat from. In the middle, there was one that wasn't any more spectacular than the rest, but just as beautiful as them all, named "The tree of the knowledge of good and evil." Adam was told that all of the trees were his to enjoy. Seeing that God Himself planted them for his delight, they would produce the best fruit he'd ever taste. Every bite would remind him of the goodness he'd seen the day he came alive. However, to bite

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from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil would kill him. God told him that would be the case and as holiness would have it, He wasn't lying when He said it.

As a child, I might've needed to learn how to write. Or how to put nine letters together and spin them into my first name, but nobody had to teach me about joy. I came out of the womb already built to take it in. The first sip of milk clashed against my newborn taste buds before it fell into my brand-new belly. As it did, I was not only satisfied by being full but by experiencing the taste of food. A small smile grew from within because of it. Growing older, I found other joys such as friends, cartoons, sleepovers, carnivals, hugs, toys, Snickers, Christmas morning, and laughter. God's goodness spread out through all that He'd made, including me, giving me the capacity to enjoy image-bearers and what their hands created. Joy has never been the problem. It was our hearts that bent us away from finding our ultimate enjoyment in Who'd made us, which crippled how, what, and who we got joy from.

Back in the garden with Eve, the serpent starting speaking:

“Did God actually say, ‘You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?’” And the woman said to the serpent, “We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, but God said, ‘You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden,

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neither shall you touch it, lest you die.” But the serpent said to the woman, “You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths. (Genesis 3:1–7)

What the devil had in mind when he picked Eve’s brain was not necessarily a matter of wondering what answer she’d give. It wasn’t even the question itself that she should’ve been weary of, it was the *way* in which it began. “Did God *actually* say . . .” Or to be said another way “Was God telling the truth?” The question was a subtle indictment on the character of God in which, if believed, would draw Eve away from seeing Him rightly. A lying God couldn’t be trusted, let alone worshiped. He’d only say things He didn’t really mean or make claims He’d never be able to fulfill.

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Satan then tells her, after she fails to rebuke, that God is more like the devil than she might've known. By promising her immortality even after disobedience (though God had warned death), Satan was framing God as a liar, and himself as the bearer of truth—that God's Word was as fickle as a promise in the mouth of a con artist. He promised that she'd be able to sin and still remain alive. That God's holiness, and goodness, and glory, were all a sham. Only to be fully discovered by doing what He commanded she shouldn't.

Eve looked. The tree still stood. Before, it might've only been a part of the garden that caught her eye on rare occasions. Only to be overshadowed by all the glory God turned loose around it. It had always been forbidden to eat from, but never to touch. But, there were always better things to do, and eat, and touch, and sit on, and delight in, and live with. One tree being off limits was the least of their worries when they could see God every day. Until doubt came.

I imagine the tree looked different then. The fruit hung beneath their own branch, loose enough for the wind to move through each one. She noticed them and thought of her next meal. How they'd taste good on her plate, even if it meant she might not live to see the next chew. One blink later, her eyes saw how gorgeous the tree was. How it looked like God, only better, she thought. She remembered what the serpent had

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said about God, and how the tree would make her like Him. She figured fruit and not faith, sin and not obedience, would give her the wisdom she needed to be more perfect than she already was. Interestingly enough, some of what she saw was true. The tree was indeed good for food and pleasant to the sight; God had made it that way (Genesis 2:9). The deception was in believing that the tree was more satisfying to the body and more pleasurable to the sight than God. All of the wisdom she thought the tree could provide left her body the moment she did something foolish: Believe the devil.

To me, the devil made more sense than God sometimes. Both he and God spoke. God, through His Scriptures; Satan, through doubt. I'd learned of the Ten Commandments in Sunday school in between eating a handful of homemade popcorn and picking at my stockings. The "Thou shall nots" didn't complement the sweet buttered chew I found myself distracted by. They were a noise I didn't care to welcome. "You can't. You shouldn't. Do not," didn't sound like a song worth listening to, only a terrible noise to drown out by resistance. Satan, on the other hand, only told me to do what felt good, or what made sense to *me*. If lying allowed me to keep the belt in my mama's hand from tearing my behind in two, then lying was a *good* thing. I defined goodness on my own terms. It wore whatever definition I decided it should have on for the day. God had indeed been the original one to introduce the concept of

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goodness into the earth but for me to live in His kind of goodness, faith was required. All that He said was good *was* good because He was. Including all that He'd commanded me not to do, for He knew that the cruelest thing He could ever do was to not tell me and everyone alive to avoid what would keep us from Him.

Yet, unbelief doesn't see God as the ultimate good. So it can't see sin as the ultimate evil. It instead sees sin as a good thing and thus God's commands as a stumbling block to joy. In believing the devil, I didn't need a pentagram pendant to wear, neither did I need to memorize a hex or two. All I had to do was trust myself more than God's Word. I had to believe that my thoughts, my affections, my rights, my wishes, were worthy of absolute obedience and that in laying prostrate before the flimsy throne I'd made for myself, that I'd be doing a good thing.

After Adam (who'd been standing there with the wife he failed to protect from the serpent) ate from the tree, they died. Their bodies still stood, warm blood still pumped through their veins, eyes still let the light in. But what God said would come from disobedience, happened. Their refusal to trust Him over and above their inordinate affections, their distorted logic, and their desire for autonomy rendered them no longer friends of God but enemies. His holiness was actual. His judgment was real. And their knowledge of sin was now not just intellectual, but experiential.

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Sin, when in the body, cannot not stay put. It's not a guest that stays in one room, making sure not to disturb the others. It is a tenant that lives in everything and goes everywhere. It can bleed into every part, choking out anything holy. The glass shattered and broke when it moved in. Adam and Eve, God's first image-bearers, made to love and reflect God in creation, had now become the world's first sinners.

Everyone born after Adam inherited it. And, just like Eve, I from birth, would experience the remnants of her dealings with the serpent. Being born human meant that I had the capacity for affection and logic. Being born sinful meant both were inherently broken. The unnamed attraction I felt at an elemental level only highlighted how greedy sin can be. Desires exist because God gave them to us. But homosexual desires exist because sin does. Loving Him, as we were created to do, involves both the will and the affections, but sin steals this love God placed in us for Himself and tells it to go elsewhere. Sin had taken hold of the heart and turned it toward something lesser. Same-sex desires are actual. Though born of sin, they aren't an imaginary feeling one conjures up for the sake of being different. But the actuality of the affection doesn't make them morally justifiable. It is the mind, when conformed to the image of sin, that moves us to call evil good simply because it feels good to us.