

An exclusive excerpt from...

***Nothing Bad Between Us:
A Mennonite Missionary's Daughter Finds Healing in Her Brokenness***
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I overheard Dad's long prayers, as he and Mom and my younger siblings sat around the breakfast table. I refused to sit at the table with them and was squatting on the lowest step of the concrete stairs leading down from our veranda. It was still early morning, but the cicadas were chirring, and the heat was already suffocating.

I heard him solemnly name the members of our family, beseeching the Lord to bestow health and blessings on each one. "Lord, we ask that Thou mightest richly bless..." He went from oldest to youngest, as was his custom. But he didn't name me.

I huddled lower on the step, clasping both arms around my knees. When his prayer ended and they rose from the table, I ran to my room.

I lay on my bed with my hands on my belly. *Certainly, I wasn't someone who deserved the Lord's blessing. But was I doubly cursed? Was there a married man's baby in there as well as a cancerous growth? What would I do with this baby? What would I do if I had cancer?* The questions were so overwhelming that I couldn't focus my mind. At eighteen, for the first time I could remember, I had no plan to get out of the mess I had created. I turned over on the bed and pushed my face into the hard pillow.

Mom rapped on the door. When I said nothing and didn't move, she came in. "Marlena, you need to eat something," she said softly. "You need to build up your strength for the surgery."

"I'm not hungry," I mumbled into my pillow.

"Please, honey..." She began to cry and left the room.

I just kept pushing my head against the hard pillow, my eyes pinched shut against the world. I hated that Mom was acting like nothing had happened. Like I should just sit down at the table with them and eat. Like this was a day like any other.

A week passed. I ate almost nothing, said almost nothing and spent almost all of my time in my bedroom, trying to figure out what I could possibly do with my life. One afternoon, there was a loud banging on my door. Dad walked briskly into the room.

“Get yourself out of that bed right now, Marlana. If you don’t want to eat, that’s fine, but you’re going to make yourself useful. Get out of here and start helping with the chores. Now.” His voice held a bitter edge.

“I’m not getting up,” I said, wishing even as I said it that I had said something else, anything else.

He grabbed my arm and pulled me off the bed, dragging me behind him, out onto the veranda.

“Let go of me,” I screamed.

My mother came out of the kitchen, her face drawn.

“John...” her voice faded.

Still gripping my arm, Dad’s voice exploded in a sharp staccato. *“There. Are. Plenty. Of. Other. Children. To. Love. I. Don’t. Need. You. I. Want. You. Out. Of. My. Life.”* His nostrils spread wide and taut.

The weight of Paraguay’s late afternoon humid stifling November heat fell heavily on the three of us standing in an awkward semi-circle on the open veranda of our house. My light cotton shift dress stuck to my sticky sweaty skin. I glanced up from the floor and saw my mother’s stooped figure, her eyes turned down, her neck muscles pulsing. I looked back down and saw her toes, with those dirty unkempt toenails, moving in a nervous rhythm up and down in her flip-flops. Up and down. Up and down. No one said another word.

I started back toward the girls’ bedroom, ten or so meters toward the far end of the veranda. Halfway there, I felt the by now familiar heaving of my stomach and leaned over the banister to throw up. My entire body began to shake. Acid still stinging in my throat, I stumbled the rest of the way to the girls’ room.

I heard the kitchen door close. Was I supposed to pack a suitcase? But I had nowhere to go and no money to get me there and a baby and some sort of weird tumor in my belly. So I sat on the hard bed in my room and stared out the window until the final rays of sun vanished and welcomed darkness enveloped me. The cicadas’ songs outside my window were beginning to fade. I heard the clattering of dishes in the kitchen at the other end of the veranda, I smelled the familiar pungent smell of the kerosene lamps being lit and I strained to hear the murmur of my parents’ voices. But they didn’t come for me and I didn’t leave my room.