



AN OCEAN

Without

| Learning to Embrace Boundaries |

a story in poems by Sarah Steele

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To James: who carried me when I fell

Three Meals a Day

He made breakfast every morning.
I was not sleeping well—
the baby, the heartache.
If I did get up before the littles,
I desperately wanted to read my Bible—
or at least sit and stare.
So he woke up with time enough
and made breakfast every morning.

He made lunch every noon.
I was always nursing
or correcting or crying.
If I did have time to stand on my own,
I desperately wanted to take a shower—
or at least hide in the bathroom.
So he took a break from work
and made lunch every noon.

He made dinner every evening.
I was so tired from having existed all day
and protecting my mind from itself.
If I did have energy to make food,
I desperately wanted it to be muffins—
or at least tea and honey.
So he returned from his full day at work
and made dinner every evening.

Dear Reader,

The following words recount
a difficult period in my life;
my slavery to doing good deeds
had only reaped a harvest of strife.
When I finally came to a bitter end
and found I had injured many friends,
heart started to shake and then descend—
it was clear I was losing the fight.

The rest of the story includes
anxiety I had never known;
deep sorrow pervaded all through me,
right down to my very bones.
But through tear-filled counseling and God's true Word
and friends who ever-so-gently spurred,
a rebuilding began as had never occurred—
with Christ as my Cornerstone.

If you want to talk about boundaries
or personal limits God has placed,
if you want to discuss codependency
and whole selves being erased,
if anxiety's pressing hard on your mind,
or people-pleasing's put you in a bind—
take care and come close; we are of the same kind.
These words will grow us in grace.

♡ Sarah

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PROLOGUE

Redeemed I

I used to love and serve
and give sacrificially.

It made me feel
good and worthy.

But one day,
my love was not enough;
my service was unwanted;
and the sacrifice was me.

It made me feel
broken and useless
and very afraid.

Today I love and serve
and give sacrificially.

And I don't feel anything
but gratitude to God.

This book is the story
of what happened
in between.



chapter one

Swimming

fear of insignificance

i became friends with
people who needed me,
to whom i would not be
expendable.

empathy

i see your pain and
hear your pain and
feel your pain
in the depths of my soul.

i'm not sure how i
can sustain your
life with mine,
but i'll try to control

the pain you feel and
the pain you hold and
the pain that's
coursing through your life.

i'll be there for you;
i'll see you through,
and you won't bear alone
one more moment of strife.

come to me,
all you who are weary
and heavy-laden,
and i will give you rest.

—only Jesus should say that

lies i tell my friends

i am big enough
for all your problems.

out of my way

i am an endless source
of energy and
helpfulness;
i identify problems
and enact solutions.
no consultation
necessary.

—you're welcome

the helper's high

inhale the air of needs

exhale nervous energy

inhale others' pain

exhale mounting anticipation

inhale a plan to help

exhale the assistance

inhale their gratitude

exhale—and look for more

Needy Servant

You don't have to say a thank-you.

(I might crumble if you don't.)

You don't have to see my service.

(I won't be hurt—I won't.)

Maybe I should serve you longer

or louder for a time;

I'd just hate for you to miss me

while I'm in my service prime.

Yes

Yes, I'll hear your fears
and offer help;
you don't need to implore me.

Yes, I'll text you back
with hours of thought;
it's okay if you ignore me.

Yes, I'll wash your clothes
and clean your house
and scrub your dishes too.

Yes, I'll gather
other helpers up;
it's the least that I can do.

Yes, I'll give you milk
I pumped myself,
while I eat your special diet.

Yes, I'm sorry that
I once complained;
I'm thrilled you made me try it.

Yes, I'm "here to serve,"
I "aim to please,"
and all those other isms.

(I just can't say no
and open myself up
to criticism.)

good girls don't swear

boundaries is the
christian b-word,
and i want nothing
to do with them.

but a friend says
boundaries
are important,
so i roll my eyes
and give it a whirl.

i tried || boundaries: take one

um hi!
how are ya?
oh not great?
tough day?
ugh, i'm sorry to hear that;
that's really terrible.
so this probably isn't a good time,
but i was thinking about
stepping back and
helping juuuust a little bit less
and was wondering—
what's that?
oh, things are actually getting worse for you,
and really, if anything, you need more?
of course!
how thoughtless of me!
how selfish!
no, no, it's really no trouble.
i'd love to keep it up.
i mean, truly, it's a gift to ME
to serve in this way.
how 'bout this:
whenever you're ready for less,
you let me know,
and i'll stay over here
plugging away until then.
of course!
don't give it another thought.
love you;
hope tomorrow's better!

close call

stomach tightens
then releases
with the conflict
just avoided.
giving people
what they ask for
isn't like being exploited.
it's just helping me
to be less selfish
when my needs are voided.

disappointing others
is worse than
disappointing myself.

for if you're disappointed,
surely God is too.