

BETH MOORE

ALL MY KNOTTED-UP LIFE

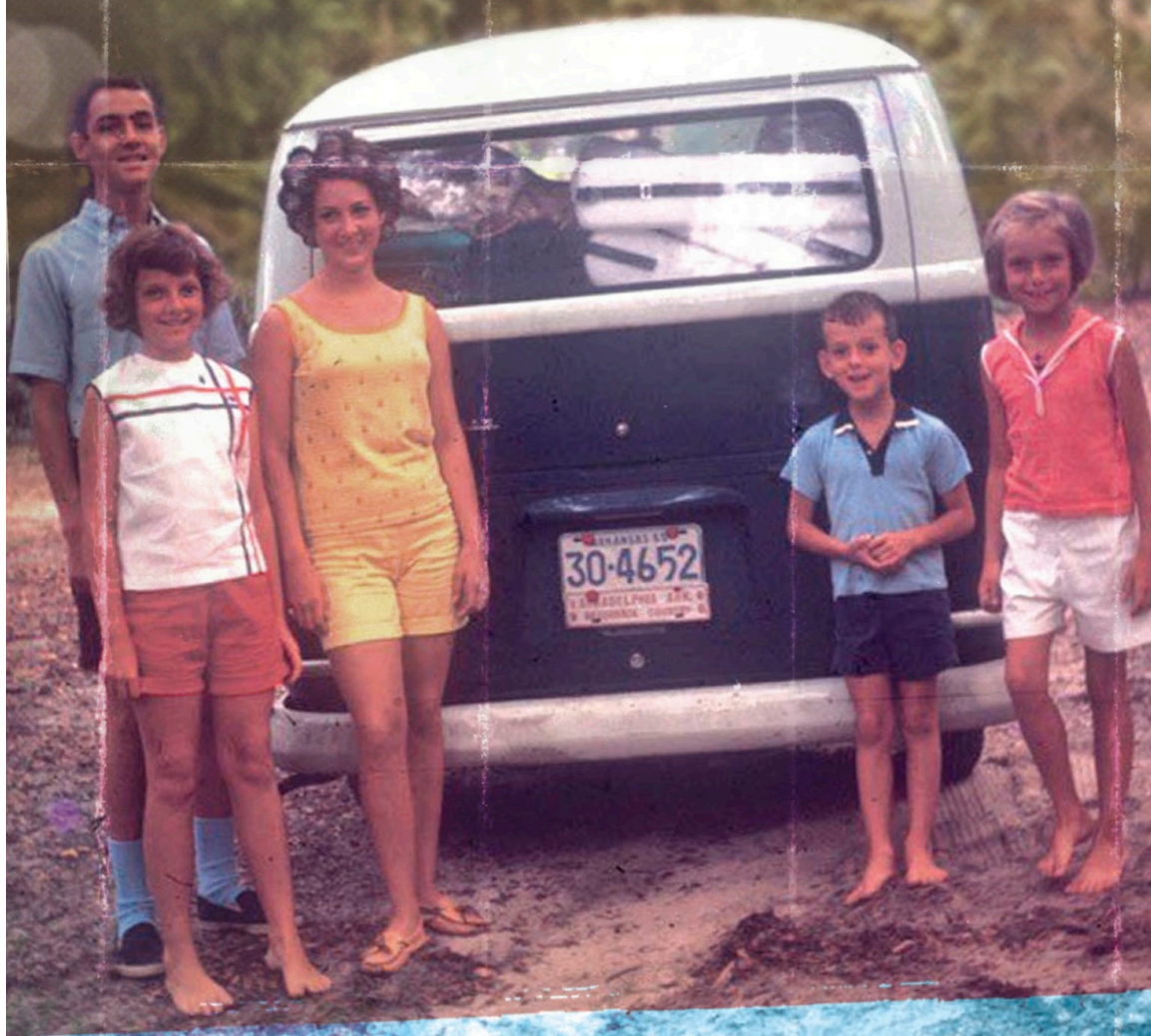
A MEMOIR



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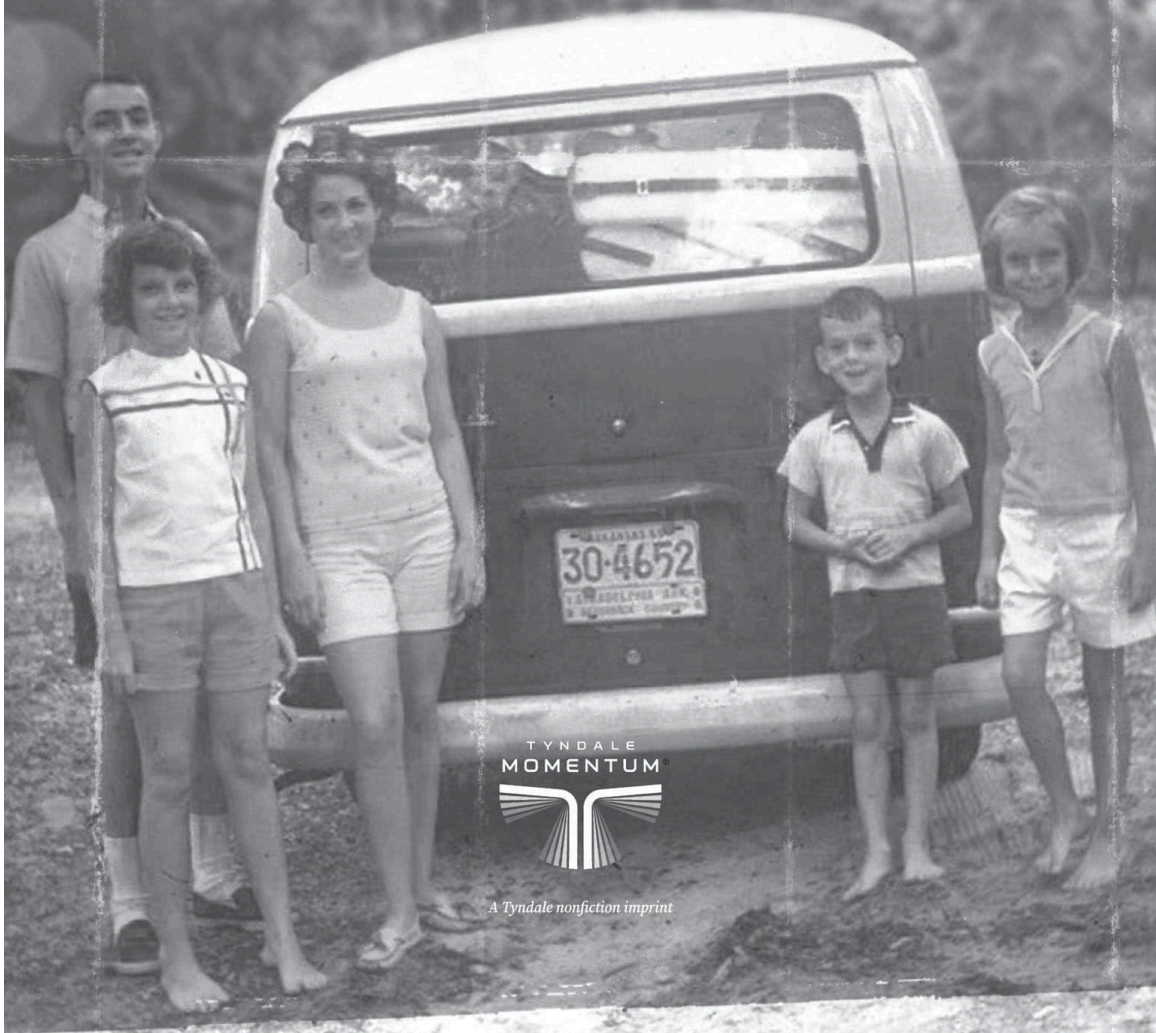
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A Tyndale nonfiction imprint

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Designed by Jacqueline L. Nuñez

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

ISBN 978-1-4964-7267-0

Build: 2022-12-20 10:06:49 EPUB 3.0

*To Keith:
Through the fire,
through the flood,
God has been faithful to us.
I love you.*

*With deep gratitude to my siblings,
in the order of appearance on the cover,
Wayne, Gay, Sandra, and Tony.
I do not take lightly your willingness
to allow me to invite a public view
into my corner of our private lives.
I love you all.*

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A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

THE BURDEN IN TELLING OUR INDIVIDUAL STORY is ironically the same thing that made it bearable: we were not alone in it. Perhaps we felt we were, but the truth is, the threads of other people's lives are inevitably knotted into ours even if only by their conspicuous absence. Who, after all, plays a bigger part in our story than one who—whether by sickness, injury, dozing, distraction, occupation, brokenness, divorce, or death—didn't show up? Every life story entails a community of individuals who share one precarious common denominator in the narrative: *you*. Good or bad, *you*. Right or wrong, *you*. The responsibility is immense and, to anyone with a whit of sense, terribly intimidating.

I love a story told, and I love the actual storytelling, but I have not been in a hurry to write a memoir. I think I've been waiting for everything to work out neatly and cleanly. Sensibly. Politely. You hold this book in your hands in large part because I gave up on that. But in a way, the giving up feels more like relief than resignation. I suppose I've also been scared to see the pieces of my story tied together. Scared to discover that what made the whole of it hardest of all was me.

I've waited to write a memoir until my reasons to do so finally exceeded my reasons to refrain. Time had to pass. People had to pass. Others had to age enough to no longer care much what people think. I've worried about hurting people. I've wondered if the kinder thing to do for those who have known my family might be to leave them with better impressions. I lament that telling my story might imply more about the experiences of my family members than either they or I would wish. I've asked their permission and received their blessing and tried my best to leave the most vulnerable parts

of their stories to them, but I'm not blind to the cost of showing up in someone else's book. I wince knowing that a story, once told, cannot be untold.

I've attempted, by the grace of God, to untie some knots in these pages. Several of these knots I've kept clenched in a sweaty fist all my life. They needed air and light perhaps even more than understanding. The same distance that can clarify a story can also cloud it. The trick in writing a memoir is knowing which is which. Am I ready to tell it because it is clearer now or because it is less clear? My deep hope, my determined intention, is the former, but the lens of human perception is inevitably impaired.

Few things are more unnerving than writing a memoir of your life with an unknown measure of it yet unlived. For instance, what if the good parts go belly-up before the book even hits a shelf? Publishing a book is always an act of faith. It's a way of saying, "Dear Reader, here is what I'm thinking right now—what I believe to be true and long to be of value to you—but would you forgive me and not hold it against the God of whom I speak if time or divine Providence proves me wrong or woefully deficient?"

And now, if you'll entrust to me a bit of your time, I'll entrust to you a bit of my story.

PROLOGUE

DON'T LET GO. Whatever you do, don't let go. I crumpled my eyelids in two tight knots then cracked them open enough to get my bearings. The current was milky with sand like someone had topped off a big glass of water with a splash of buttermilk. A clod of seaweed grazed my forehead then tumbled off my nose, and water shot through my head, foamy and thick with brine, meeting no apparent barrier and whirlpooling between my ringing ears.

Forcing an eyeshot behind me, I caught sight of my dad's foot. His skin appeared translucent beneath the water, the noon sun turning his purple veins an anemic lilac. We'd been standing beside one another in the surf seconds earlier. We'd inched further out without even moving somehow. The watermark reached the waist of my red one-piece, but he was little more than knee deep. And he was my dad. He'd know where to stop. I dangled my hands just below the surface, palms forward and fingers outstretched, making rivulets in the curl of the calm waves, dazzled by their constancy. This was my maiden voyage to the sea, the first I'd felt the curious tickle of a shifting floor of sand between my toes.

Then, out of nowhere, I was underwater. My arms were instantly taut, elbowless, jerking my shoulders until they swore they'd snap. *Grab me, Dad, before I let go.* My fingers were laced around his right ankle, knuckles locked. My spine stretched into a thin strip of taffy. At the pull of an unheard trigger, I was a bullet of skin clinging to the end of a barrel, begging not to be shot out to sea.

As swiftly as the undertow had sucked my feet out from under me, the current shifted and I swung around, unbending, like the second hand of a clock dropping from 12 to 6, face planted in the sand. My father's sudden

yank on my arms snapped my hand-lock from his ankle and I swung like a rag doll to my feet, coughing up a salt mine, a mud-pie patch over one eye. I bit my lip to keep from crying.

I don't remember what Dad said. Perhaps something like, "You're okay. You're okay." It would have been true enough. My arms were limp, but they weren't torn away from my shoulders the way I'd pictured. No sea monsters had managed to drive me out to the open sea and into the gullets of great fish with ten-inch teeth. But *something* had happened, and I wanted to know what. I wanted to know what took him so long. I wanted to know if it scared him that the water tried to swallow me. And I wanted him to say he was sorry, even if he couldn't have helped it. He never knew I had any such questions. I couldn't form a word.

I was turned over to my mother, who was perched on a rusty blue and green web-strap chair under a beach umbrella to shield her fair skin and her seventy-seven-year-old mother from the unfiltered rays of the Florida sun. She gently faced me forward and held me securely between her knees, still chatting with Nanny. Something about my cousin Steedy Boy. He sure was going to be tall, they agreed. The frazzled edge of a strap on the folding chair scratched and bit at the back of my leg.

"Reckon does he have a girlfriend?" My grandmother loved knowing that kind of thing. I liked that about her. I wouldn't have minded knowing the answer myself, just not that very minute.

"Well, I don't know," Mom replied to Nanny. "You'll have to ask him."

"Well, I'm asking you."

"Well, Mother, I don't know."

"Well, *why* don't you know?"

My teeth chattered so hard I thought they'd crack, and my throat stung from the saltwater rush like a potato peeler had been taken to it. As Mom towed off my shivering six-year-old frame, she asked quizzically, "You cold, honey?" I paused a moment trying to figure out if, somewhere beneath the scared, I was just plain-old ordinary cold. Maybe so. I nodded. She rubbed my arms briskly with a turquoise towel that had a blue and yellow turtle on

it. “Let me warm you up!” I still couldn’t get a word out. I don’t know why, exactly. She would have let me tell her that I thought I was drowning. She wouldn’t have made me feel silly. She would have pulled me into her lap and let me cry, and I just know she’d have been hopping mad at my dad. But I couldn’t tell her any of it. Never did. My grandmother’s question just hung in the air. “Well, why don’t you know?”

CHAPTER ONE

WE WERE RIVER PEOPLE. River people don't have any business going to the sea. The state of Arkansas is an innard in the abdomen of North America, a gallbladder maybe or a spleen. Our arteries pool with visible edges. Arkansas waters are crossable, bridgeable, cushioned on every bank. My hometown of Arkadelphia rests at the bumpy toes of the Ouachita Mountains where two rivers converge. The Ouachita, some six hundred miles total, gathers up the shorter Caddo just north of town, and together they run green and curvy down the city's east side on their lazy way to Louisiana.

With my dad's recent purchase of a blue and white Volkswagen bus, we Greens finally had a vehicle with a wide enough mouth for all eight of us. Since we all fit, why not drive for days on end, packed tighter than my great-grandmother Miss Ruthie's chewing tobacco, from our small college town all the way to our cousins in north Florida?

"What's a few more miles?" Dad said, taking a red felt-tip to the map and tracing an additional eight-hour jaunt due south to Miami Beach. He, Major Albert B. Green, took charge of the wheel. My mother, Esther Aletha Rountree Green, rode shotgun, with my four-year-old brother, Tony, wiggling like a caged spider monkey between them.

My maternal grandmother, Minnie Ola Rountree, whom we called Nanny, took a lion's share of the middle seat. She was not a small woman, swore she never had been nor did I ever want her to be. Nanny was squooshy, ample-bosomed, pillowy for napping against. The middle seat was a slightly abbreviated version of the back bench seat, and Nanny bounced on its wealth of springs between my nine-year-old sister, Gay, and me. Born three years apart, we two Green girls were thick as thieves and would prove to be precisely as trustworthy.

Named Aletha Gay after our mom, she favored her in appearance, sharing her pecan-brown hair, fair skin, and fetching swathe of freckles across her cheeks. I, the lone blonde in the family, was told from the time I could walk that I favored a different wing of the family. In an era when laboring moms were knocked out for delivery, I came with a bit of a rush, causing my mom to forego the usual protocol and keeping her wide awake for every contraction. Still woozy-headed from the furious ordeal, she took one look at me and bellowed with clear astonishment, “She looks just like my brother-in-law!” This declaration invited all manner of mischief from the nursing staff, who made eyes at her when my dad visited the hospital then winked at her when he came to drive us home.

Two years later, Tony came along looking a good bit more like Dad and the singular one of us born in our hometown. Gay and I were the only built-in playmates the poor little guy had. He could, therefore, either play what we were playing or play alone. Since we mostly played dolls and he refused to be shut out, he had no recourse but to join us. Tony possessed the maternal touch of a Mack truck, so we assigned him a lesser-cherished baby doll and one durable enough to withstand him. He promptly stuck it all the way to the toe of a long white sock of Dad’s and carried it around by the ribbed cuff each time we played. Watching him knock it clumsily against table legs, doorframes, and tree trunks day in and day out caused Gay and me considerable consternation.

Tony was the baby of a three-generation family well-versed in children, so he was warmly humored. “Whatcha got there, Tony?” the adults and big kids would ask. “Oh, this old thing?” he’d say, shrugging his bony little shoulders. “Just a plain ole doll.” This was, henceforth, the name it bore. We were forbidden to take any toys bigger than our palms on our summer vacation in the VW bus. One can’t be entirely certain that Dad hadn’t contrived such a rule in hopes of leaving Plain Ole Doll home in a sock where he believed it belonged. Luckily, two Matchbox cars fit perfectly in Tony’s palms, so he made motor sounds and crash noises every waking moment of the trip.

Since Tony's head only popped into view when we hit a pothole, Nanny, who'd never procured a license nor once been behind a wheel, had a clear view to aid my father vociferously in his driving from her perch in the middle seat. Her second advantage was full range of motion to swat anyone who proved worthy of it. Old as she was, she aimed more than struck, so the sibling next to the offender may as well have been complicit. Whoever coined the idiom *hitting two birds with one stone* was looking square at the arm of my nanny. The generous amount of flesh that hung from her upper arm flapped winglike when she swung. I figure this was the secret to her momentum.

Riding caboose in the VW bus were the oldest two of us five Green kids. My sister, Sandra, was an exotic eighteen. She knew how to do good hair and makeup, and she had a college-aged boyfriend. Gay and I were in awe of her and had high hopes of her turning out to be deliciously scandalous. She never delivered, but we set the bar low enough for scandal that any drama at all satisfied, and if the Greens were good at anything, it was drama. Next to her in the back seat was my dreamy big brother, Wayne. He was fourteen, the uncontested crush of my entire young life, and through my hazel eyes, Paul McCartney's identical twin. And he was musical. Who on earth would think this a coincidence? Sandra and Wayne were inarguably in their prime because they knew how to dance. They could put a stack of 45s on the record player at home, shake and swing like they were on Dick Clark, then flip those records over and do it all again to another set of songs. They may as well have been hippies.

We were told to pack light, so a mishmash of no less than ten pieces of luggage was strapped hillbilly-like to the top of the van alongside our brand-new tent from the Sears and Roebuck, still in its packaging. None of us had ever camped before except the major, of course, on battlefields in World War II and Korea, though we hoped for a different ambience. Motel expenses for a voluminous family on summer vacation were out of the question on an Army budget. Our kind of people didn't take destination vacations anyhow. We only went to see relatives on account of cheaper food and lodging. It

wasn't until much later, after we moved to Houston, that I'd ever hear anyone say, "We're going snow skiing for spring break." *What kin live there?* "Who's Ken?" they'd say. *I didn't say Ken. I said kin. Your relatives.* Texans didn't have the vocabulary God gave a groundhog. "Well, none," they'd say. *Well, why are you going?* "To ski," they'd say.

Since I have no vivid memory when this wasn't so, I don't think it's too soon to say that Albert and Aletha were not as fond of one another as one might hope on a two-week vacation or, for that matter, what would turn out to be a fifty-something-year-long marriage. I could offer a good many reasons why this was true, but for now, only one is needful: my father drove with both feet, his right sole on the accelerator and his left on the brake, even when he was privileged to be at the wheel of an automatic.

The erratic spasms of Dad's two-foot driving made a catnap particularly challenging for passengers on a protracted trip. My mother was the anxious type, at which I, a woman of like ilk, choose to cast no stone. I mean only to paint the picture of my parents, Albert and Aletha, in the front seat of a VW bus for hours. She kept her left arm stretched over my little brother at all times and her right hand braced on the dashboard with a lit cigarette between her index and middle fingers, catching a drag when catch could. And catch always could.

I was raised in a cloudy pillar by day and a lighter by night. To this day, I nurse a fondness for the sound of a match head combusting against the striking strip of a small rectangular box—*tet-szzzzzooooo* like a petite bottle rocket on the Fourth of July—and for the pitchy quick-fading scent of sulfur dioxide.

The real work on that summer vacation began when we stopped for the night at the Fort Walton Beach campsite. I suspect saving the expense of motel stays might not have been the solitary reason for the tent purchase. My cousins were campers in the same way ants are insects. They were the sort that could have started a fire rubbing dandelions together, and lost in a forest, weeks of wild berries, grasshoppers, and deer milk would have left them no less robust.

We were more the Piggly Wiggly type. It was never said, “How hard could putting up a tent be?” But what did go without saying was that my father never missed a chance to compete, and my uncle, whom we’d see shortly, was a formidable foe. He was the only one in the entire extended family whose record in the armed services came close to Dad’s, and let no one suppose that a competition’s being “friendly” makes it a whit less serious. Dad didn’t use a lot of profanity, but he had a way of making perfectly respectable slang words sound brazen. He found little aid from the written instructions that came with the tent packaging and what appeared to be no aid at all from the audible instructions that came with Nanny. On the average day, an impressive number of Nanny’s sentences began with the words *Well, why don’t you . . . ?* On this trip, as far as I could tell, she was clocking at a record 98 percent.

Dad was tricolored by now, his face deep red against that one narrow strip of white in a head full of hair that was otherwise the color of cocoa. I’d always thought that one shock of white looked like someone dribbled a tablespoon of trimming paint on his head and, feeling something wet, he’d run his little finger from forehead to crown to wipe it off. I’d been wrong all along. It was as clear as a bell now exactly what it looked like: a single strike of lightning. This was not so much frightening as it was factual.

While Dad tried to figure out which side of the tent was the top, Mom emptied half a carton of Pall Malls. The more he huffed, the more she puffed. The rest of us coped with the taxing assemblage in our own ways. Wayne stood by wide-eyed, fidgeting with an edge of the canvas, scared to help and scared not to. Any second, Dad was going to say, “Are you just going to stand there?” I suspect this quickly approaching inevitability is why Sandra suddenly volunteered to walk Gay to the campground restrooms. Tony threw rocks, which lessened neither the huffing nor the puffing, and I sucked my usual two fingers and stared at the night sky, wondering why Florida had no stars. We had stars in Arkansas.