

An Abundant Life
More Precious Than Rubies

Iris M. Williams

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An attempt has been made to recreate events, locales and conversations from the author's memory of them. In order to maintain their anonymity, in some instances, the names of some individuals have been changed as well as some identifying characteristics and details such as physical properties, occupations, and places of residence.

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*To every person who ever felt unloved, unworthy,
and unrecognized.
God loves you. God values you. God sees you.*

*“You can’t make sense of
nonsense.”*

Iris M Williams

Book I

Faith In Self





*For Mr. Jack
I Still Miss You*

Foreword

For as long as I can remember, I never wanted to be looked at or recognized. I was comfortable blending into the background. In my mind, it was safer than to be upfront, the center of attention and under scrutiny.

I never took the time to analyze my life. I was too busy reading and escaping into the lives of others. After all, fantasy was much more pleasant than my own life.

When things happened, I somehow instinctively knew or perhaps was taught, to simply push it aside until there was a better, more appropriate time to think about it.

In the meantime, life kept happening, and with each new circumstance, situation, and challenge, I built a new wall of forbearance.

This was my way of coping. This was my way of being resilient. If I just pushed things to the side, I could move forward.

Well, it sounded good on paper anyway.

Eventually, life caught up.

There is only so much disappointment, heartbreak, and denial one person can endure before he or she is forced to face it, process it, and own it.

I tried hard to suppress my feelings of inadequacy, rejection, and self-loathing. Smiling when you don't feel happy takes more energy than it does to cry.

I was not encouraged or taught to express what I was feeling.

After more than 30 years of suppressing what was hurting me, I was still trying to be my daddy's 'big girl,' but finally, I just couldn't do it anymore.

And I began to cry.

The crying scared me because I wasn't used to it, but also because I was crying about

things that I shouldn't have.

I was angry.

And I cried.

That's when I knew this was serious.

My therapist said, "Your box is full."

"What box?" I asked, wondering which one of us was the crazy one.

"You've been stuffing your feelings in a box for years. And now, there is no more room."

As it turns out, secrets grow larger in the dark.

I was taught that crying was a sign of weakness and that 'big girls' DO NOT cry.

So, what do 'big girls' do when they're hurt or sad?

I pushed my pain down and tried to forget about it.

The thing is, secrets don't die. They fester, but instead of rotting and decaying into nothingness, they rot (and stink) and grow so that they actually weigh more than they did going in.

One day I was at work and my festered hurts flew out of my eyes, onto my face, down my cheeks, across my belly, onto my lap, and slid into my shoes, causing me to stumble and fall. And when I tried to get up, I realized I was carrying the weight of my world in my shoes.

I slumped and slouched and moaned and groaned and even tried to run, but wherever I went, the weight was with me.

Until finally, I surrendered and let go of the secrets.

It was ugly. It stank. It hurt. It was sad.

But then I was free.

Finally, I could begin to live the life God intended for me – an abundant life.

I wrote this book for me, but I also wrote it for you. I want you to know that you can be free too.

My journey towards self-discovery began when I moved to North Carolina. It was the first time in my life that I was truly alone – no Mama, no children, no husband, no responsibility. I was unemployed.

It's not the drop from the top that hurts. It's the landing on rock bottom that does.

When you lose everything, you learn to appreciate everything.

In retrospect, I appreciate the things I lost – material things, friends, love ... because now I know what's real.

Thank you to the people who see me and who give to me without regard for receiving. They know who they are because I tell them frequently.

To God be the glory!

#ButterflyBaby

Prologue

'Things Mama Said'

The things Mama said were not easy for me to understand.

Mama didn't always use the right words.

For instance, if it was cold outside and I didn't bundle up properly, Mama would say, "Put on yo hats and gloves 'fore you catch the new morning!"

Honestly, I didn't have a clue what the "new morning" was. Taking time to understand wasn't my first priority. Catching the new morning (whatever that was), wasn't my fear. I was most afraid of what would happen if I didn't comply with her instructions.

Immediately, I'd put on my hat and gloves.

I was probably in my first year of college before I realized that the new morning was actually pneumonia. And it's true that if you don't wear proper clothing in the winter, you can contract a bad cold or even pneumonia.

Many years later, I learned that while most of what Mama said was true, there were things that were not true.

Mama frequently called me an ignorant ass fool. Because she

didn't use the right words and she mumbled to me while she had mouthwash in her mouth, I was usually scrambling for clarity. From her perspective, I was an ignorant ass fool.

"Mmm. Mmmm. Mmmm," Mama mumbled as she swished Dr. Tichenor's Mouthwash around in her mouth. "Mmm. Mmm. Mmmm!"

Once again, I held back tears as I frantically searched my brain for what she could be

saying. I never got it right, though. And as I stood there dumbfounded, she'd rush out of the room, spit out the mouthwash, and return to the room highly upset.

Smack!

"Go in the bedroom and get my shoes so I can go," Mama yelled. She was always so frustrated that I never seemed to know what she was saying – with or without the Dr. Tichenor's Mouthwash.

Honestly, I didn't understand it, either. As the youngest of thirteen, I felt like I was the only one who didn't understand Mama.

Mama spoke to everyone the same. So, why wasn't I getting it?

I was convinced that what Mam said about me was true. I was dumb. I was an ignorant ass fool.

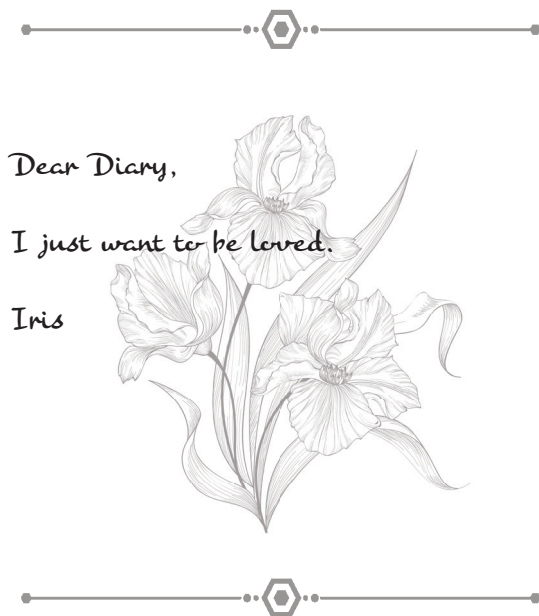
Then one year during my senior high school awards assembly, it dawned on me that perhaps I wasn't ignorant after all. I had consistently maintained the honor roll and was receiving numerous awards.

Was Mama wrong? No, I decided. These people just felt sorry for me. Or, maybe they were mistaken. I smiled and accepted the awards, but in the back of mind, I knew it wouldn't be long before they realized their mistake and came to take the awards back.

It took years for me to accept the fact that I wasn't dumb. But that revelation came too late. The damage had already been done.

Even when faced with overwhelming proof, it's hard to undo years of hurt, disappointment, and abuse.

I had a singular view of my world. Mama was right and everyone else was wrong.



To this day, it's hard to forget the things Mama said.

I find it difficult to accept compliments and I'm always afraid that people will figure out the truth about me.

I am an ignorant ass fool.

Chapter One

'You Gotta Be a Big Girl'

I'd always been Mr. Jack's big girl and I wanted to be.

"I've got something to tell ya, but you gotta promise me you won't cry," Mama said to me. "You gotta be a big girl for Mr. Jack."

I diverted my eyes to the white wall behind Mama. It was a stark contrast to the life I lived. Clean, bright, and uncluttered.

I nodded my six-year-old head up and down. It was still early, so I guess that's why Mama didn't hit me for nodding instead of saying yes out loud.

Our trailer was already starting to heat up. It was August, and the Arkansas sun was already shining brightly. I was wondering why I didn't smell bacon, and why we weren't about to have breakfast. Something was wrong.

"Mr. Jack is dead," Mama said as if she'd told me that my older brother ate the last of the breakfast while I was sleeping.

Based on Mama's disposition, I knew instinctively that being 'dead' wasn't a good thing for Mr. Jack to be. And although I didn't understand, I wanted to cry. I was a sensitive child and Mama hated that about me. She was always telling me to stop crying. The look on her face confirmed that crying wouldn't be tolerated. Besides, I'd already promised I wouldn't. Mama was looking at me. I looked back at the white wall.

After a few seconds, Mama got up and began busying herself with her daily tasks. I followed her around for a time, hoping there would be more information about Mr. Jack and him being dead. But there wasn't, and soon Mama got irritated.

"Gal, go somewhere and play," Mama said. "I got work to do."

Mama was always working. The only time she sat or smiled was on the phone with her many friends or when Mr. Jack was around. Mama's smile faded around the same time Mr. Jack decided to go be dead.

Mama sent me outside, but the farthest I ever went was the front steps. I hated being outside. It was hot, smelly, and scary. Stray dogs, bugs, and the heat kept me wishing I could be inside.

As I sat on the steps and thought about Mr. Jack and him being dead, I decided Mama must have been wrong. I didn't feel like Mr. Jack was dead. Would I know something like that?

So, I waited. Maybe he had just left really early before breakfast. But he didn't come back for lunch or dinner. And when Mama insisted I go to bed that night, I began to worry.

Where was he?

The next morning at breakfast, Mr. Jack's chair was empty again.

I missed his huge, big toothy smile and slow conversation.

This morning, we ate in silence.

Lunchtime came and I quietly waited again by the front door for Mr. Jack to come home. I was hoping that for once, Mama was wrong.

But Mr. Jack never showed up for lunch, and that night at dinner his chair was still empty.

After dinner, I did my best to stay awake. I looked at our black and white television, but I wasn't paying attention to the program. I was listening for Mr. Jack's truck. I was hoping he'd come home any minute and tell me it was time for bed. I wanted him to tuck me in like he always did.

"It's past time for you to be in the bed, gal," Mama said, jarring me out of my memory. She'd been on the phone with one of her many friends. "Go on now and get in the bed. Goodnight."

I knew better than to argue or cry, so I stood up slowly and walked down the long, dark hallway to my bedroom. I pulled back the covers, climbed into bed, and slowly pulled the covers up over my head.

It was clear that Mr. Jack wasn't coming back.

I realized that being dead meant you don't come home. I decided that being dead was definitely not a good thing.

The next morning at breakfast, I stared at Mr. Jack's empty chair and thought about the last time we'd all had breakfast.

"Maybeline, you know you can cook!" He said and flashed that big, toothy smile at me. "Can't she Chico-stick?"

I nodded my head and smiled right back. Chico-stick was Mr. Jack's nickname for me. Every day when he came home for lunch, he'd bring me a brown paper bag full of candies. My favorite was the chic-o-sticks.

"One day, you're gonna cook your daddy some good food too , ain't ya Chico-Stick?"

I nodded again.

"Open up yo mouf and talk," Mama yelled. "You act like you deaf and dumb!" Mama hated for me to nod.

"No," I said as the smile on my face disappeared. "I mean, yes." Now I was nervous and whenever I was nervous, I'd always say the wrong thing.

Mama looked at me and shook her head. "Hurry up and eat yo food so ya can go outside."

Mama didn't like talking at the table or kids being inside. I hated being outside, except when I was with Mr. Jack. He'd let me ride on his shoulders. I was away from the bugs, the stray dogs, and the rocks that hurt my bare feet. On his shoulders, I felt like a princess.

"Aw she aight Maybeline," Mr. Jack said to Mama.

“No, the gal need to know how to open her mouth and talk and quit acting like she don’t know how to talk.” Mama shot me an angry glance and headed into the kitchen.

“When she ready to talk, she will.” Mr. Jack called out to her. Then he patted a spot on his lap. I scooted back from the table so fast my chair fell backward.

“What is all that racket in there!” Mama yelled from the kitchen.

“Just me Maybeline,” Mr. Jack called to Mama. “I got it.”

I looked toward the kitchen afraid Mama would see that it was really me who knocked the chair over. Mr. Jack helped me with the chair. Then I sat on his lap. He gave me a hug and a kiss on the cheek.

Mr. Jack was always rescuing me. Who would save me from Mama now?

“Eat yo food before it gets cold, gal. We got to go to town.” Mama’s voice interrupted my thoughts. “We ain’t got time for you to be daydreaming.”

I loved bacon, and normally, breakfast was my favorite. But this morning, the eggs, bacon, and potatoes may as well be cardboard. I ate it anyway because I knew Mama would be mad if I didn’t. “Waste not, want not,” she always said.

After breakfast, me and Mama caught a ride into town. Mama didn’t drive so we were always catching rides from one of her friends.

We got dropped off in town and walked to the bank and to Fred’s grocery store to pay something on her bill.

Mama surprised me too and bought me a pretty blue dress from Buck Won’s. Everything in the store smelled like Chinese, but their prices were the best in town.

“What you need ma’am,” Mr. Buck Won asked Mama. Mama said he and his family had lived in Holly Grove since she was a little girl, but he still didn’t speak English good. “I get for you.”

“I jes need this here dress for my gal,” Mama said and put the dress on the counter. It was

the color of the sky and had a belt that tied around the waist. "I think it will fit her bony butt."

Mama was always talking about how skinny I was and that she was going to have to get me some vitamins so I'd eat.

I looked down at my legs and realized there were skinny.

When we finished our errands, we walked to Mama's best friend, Ms. Helene.

Ms. Helene had a lot of kids like Mama, and the two of them had been friends forever.

"Leen, I'm sorry to hear about Jack." Ms. Helene said calling Mama by her nickname. She leaned over from her chair and spit in a small metal can. "He was a good mane."

I loved to visit Ms. Helene's house. It was alive. There was noise, people coming in and out, and kids for me to play with.

"Thank ya Helene," Mama said, looking sad. "I don't know what I'm gonna do without Jack. He was my backbone."

Ms. Helene spat in her can again. The brown spit smelled strong. Sometimes she would spit far off the porch and into the yard.

I tried spitting that way at home once, but it just landed on the front of my shirt. Mama smacked me real good for doing that. Later when she told Mr. Jack, he laughed so hard that Mama ended up laughing too.

Mr. Jack was the only person that made Mama laugh like that. She laughed sometimes with her friends, but not like she did with Mr. Jack.

"When the fune gone be?" Ms. Helene asked my Mama.

"I think I heard it gonna be Sa'day," Mama said, and she looked even sadder. "I don't think we gon go, tho. I don't want no mess."

"Chile, I wouldn't care about no mess," Ms. Helene said. "You loved that mane, and he

loved you. Wouldn't nun keep me way from there!"

"I guess I will," Mama agreed. "Jack be mad ef I didn't go."

I heard what they were saying, but I didn't understand most of it. I didn't know what a 'fune' was, but whatever it was, it made Mama sad. And it made Ms. Helene mad.

I went to sit under the tree while Mama and Ms. Helene talked. I knew her kids would be home from school soon.

I had missed my first year of school because I had hip surgery. I was up and walking now though, and I was ready to go to school. Mama had arranged for me to get my lessons at home so I would still pass kindergarten, but I wanted to go to school to be with the other kids.

Ms. Helene's kids were my only friends. They taught me a lot of stuff including how to Chinese jump rope. Mama didn't like me jumping rope. She said it wasn't good for my hip. I didn't want the other kids to know I couldn't jump rope, so I always convinced them to jump in Ms. Helene's backyard instead.

I sat on the stump and looked back at Mama and Ms. Helene. Mama had just got her hair done; it was real shiny and black. Her curls hung soft to her shoulders. Ms. Helene wore her hair very short and in an afro. She always looked so comfortable and happy. Today, she wore a pair of lime green capris and a crisp white sleeveless top. Mama never wore capris because she said she had broken veins. I looked down at my legs to check for broken veins. I didn't see any.

I heard the kids before I saw them and stood up. Ms. Helene's kids came running around the fence. School was finally out. I hoped we could jump rope before Mama's and my ride came to take us home.

"Get in the house and take them school clothes off and go get started on dinner," Ms. Helene called out to her kids.

"But we was gonna jump rope and play with Iris," Janine said.

"No, you ain't. It ain't Saday," Ms. Helene reminded her. "Y'all gotta get dinner, do your lesson, get baths, and get ready for school tomorrow."

I sat back down. I was sad to hear we couldn't jump rope. I looked at Mama and she was looking at me. But I didn't say nothing.

Janine and her older sister, Carol Anne, went inside like their Mama told them, but Louvelle, their younger brother, ran past his Mama. Ms. Helene jumped up to run after him, but he was too fast. Soon, he was out of the yard and out of sight.

"Louvelle!" Ms. Helene called out. "You betta get yo ass back here and help these girls!"

Louvelle kept going. We could hear him laughing and we knew where he was going. A lot of the kids went to the town park after school to play.

I thought Ms. Helene was gonna be mad, but she wasn't. She spat and sat back down next to Mama.

"Leen, I don't know what I'mma do with that red tail boy." She laughed. "Ef I say go left, he takes his ass right."

They both laughed and kept right on talking. I saw Janine and Carol Anne peek out the curtain at me and motion for me to come inside. I got up and quickly walked past Mama and Ms. Helene.

Janine and Carol Anne were mixing and chopping food like Mama did when she was in the kitchen. I didn't know how to cook. Mama never allowed me in her kitchen.

Dear Diary

I wish I understand where Mr. Jack was.

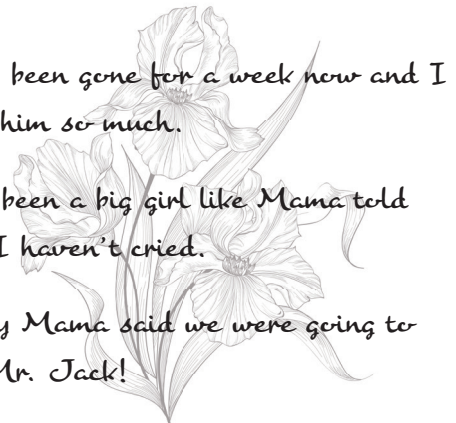
He's been gone for a week now and I miss him so much.

I've been a big girl like Mama told me. I haven't cried.

Today Mama said we were going to see Mr. Jack!

I can't wait.

Iris



Iris M. Williams

"You sad?" Janine asked me.

"No," I said. "Why you ask me that?"

"Cuz yo daddy died guhl," Carol Anne said and both girls looked at me strangely.

"Ef it was my daddy, I'd still be crying," Janine said. "I wouldn't stop."

Now I wanted to cry. I missed Mr. Jack and wanted him to not be dead. But I promised Mama that I'd be a big girl.

"Iris," Mama yelled into the house. "Com on, our ride here!"

I was glad it was time to leave because I didn't want to talk to them about Mr. Jack. I didn't want to explain why I couldn't cry.

That night as I walked the long dark hallway alone, pulled back my covers, and climbed into bed, I wanted to cry very badly.

I didn't know if Mr. Jack was gonna stay dead or if it was just for a little while. I felt so lost and confused.

I pulled the covers up to my chin.

Mama said big girls don't cry. She said I had to be a big girl for Mr. Jack.

So, I wouldn't cry.

Epilogue: The Truth

'More Precious Than Rubies'

The questions surrounding my life story are many. I wanted to tell my story from the perspective of the person I was. I wanted readers to experience what I experienced – confusion. For most of my life, I had more questions than answers.

Why was Mama so harsh? Why did Mr. Jack have to die? Why did I feel so alone? Why as I not enough?

Although I don't claim to have all the answers now, I can say that I have more than I did. And I believe that the resolution to my problems are found in Jesus.

Probably the number one question I'm asked is, "How did you make it through?"

And my answer is Jesus.

The more I sought after Him, the more answers I received.

Clarity began when I moved to North Carolina. I had a lot of time on my hands, and for the first time since I was fifteen, I had the opportunity to only think of myself.

I hadn't ever liked what I saw in the mirror, so I didn't spend much time there. But in North Carolina, I at least had the time to search myself. I didn't like what I saw there either.

Perhaps the biggest revelation for me was realizing I'd been a liar for most of my life.



I was a people pleaser, doing what others wanted me to do, even when I didn't want what they wanted me to do. I went places I didn't want to go. And I led those around me to believe I was happy to do so. I was afraid of what would happen if I stopped pleasing others.

Would they have a reason to stay around?

Fear and lies governed my life.

In reviewing old journal entries, I notice how I repeatedly wrote of being tired and lonely, even when I was in a relationship.

Fear was why I was tired. It takes works to keep up a lie. Smiling when you don't want to is exhausting.

Fear was also why I was lonely. I was afraid actually allowing people in because they may discover the truth. So, I had to keep them at a distance.

Truth is, I was a hypocrite. I never gave Mama an opportunity to know how I felt. I was too afraid to tell her.

And yet for years, I blamed her for not speaking to me about the things I felt we needed to speak about.

I had to forgive Mama, but I also had to forgive myself for all the things I did and said and for the things I didn't do or say that I should have.

God hadn't given me that spirit of fear.

So, why was I living in fear? Why was I hiding?

Part of the reason I was so afraid was because I knew what I thought of myself. I didn't want others to know. So, I hid and forced myself to become invisible. It worked and for years, I'd gone undetected and unnoticed until I met myself in a mirror.

A mirror reflects who you are. Mirrors reveal two faces – the one you see and the one looking back at you.

Most people run from mirrors for obvious reasons. We don't *really* want to see ourselves. This is evident in the heavy use of photo filters. Ever wonder why Snap Chat is so popular? Check out the filters.

My mirror pulled back the veil and exposed me.

"If you know you deserve more, why are you settling for less?" The mirror asked and waited for an answer.

The question took the wind from me and exposed the first layer of hurt.

How dare it ask me such a thing! Didn't it know that I sacrificed my worth because of my love for it?

The awkward silence felt like a challenge. I felt myself shrink under the scrutiny.

The mirror didn't say anything, but it didn't need to. The question had said it all. The mirror saw me, the real me.

The truth had always been that I settled for less because I didn't *really* believe I deserved more.

A second layer of embarrassment fell away. I attempted a cover up by saying, "I settle because I love you." My voice sounded like the voice of a child. And no wonder, since I was clearly behaving like one.

I went on with a barrage of supporting facts to the "I love you" claim, but the mirror and I both knew it went deeper than that.

Yes, I loved the mirror – deeply, but that wasn't why I settled for less.

"Why are you settling for less if you feel you deserve more?" The mirror wasn't going to let me off the hook. It demanded an answer.

"I settle because you're more important than me," I admitted to myself.

Surely, the mirror knew that. Isn't that why it asked?

But isn't that what love is? I wondered. Isn't that what love does? Don't you sacrifice yourself for love?

The tears came easily now and were a nuisance to me because they didn't offer a release. They were a sign of weakness and defeat. I'd failed to keep this disgusting secret.

"I feel stupid," I said tearfully. The last thing I wanted was to be found in this weakened state.

"You aren't stupid. And you certainly aren't weak."

That wasn't the mirror's response, but I wanted it to be.

Was it because the mirror felt I was stupid and weak?

Insensitivity threatened to chip away at the very foundation of the house that love built. In an effort to hold myself together, I acquiesced to the man in the mirror.

Once again, I surrendered. Once again, I walked away and left a piece of me behind.

Had I turned my back on my worth?

The tears continued. I was too spent to pray. But thankfully, God's grace is sufficient.

The Holy Spirit took over and reminded me of who I am.

"Far more precious than rubies."

The phrase came out of nowhere. And even though I was alone, I heard it clearly. I quickly dried my eyes and typed in the words on my iPhone. Immediately, the Proverbs verse displayed: "She is worth far more than rubies."

The words were like water to my dehydrated, wounded, and withering soul.

Is a Proverbs 31 Woman made or is she invented? Is my worth an inheritance that I don't have to earn or is it a fortune to be made?

As the pit in my stomach emptied what I felt and replenished itself with what I knew, I

felt myself growing stronger.

Maybe it's a bit of both.

Maybe it's like being handed a robe that's way too big. It's yours, but you have to grow into it.

When I look back over my life at all the relationships I've had (romantic and otherwise), one thing stands out the most.

It has never been the people who I gave myself to who were the problem.

The problem has always been me giving myself away.

So, it never mattered who was on the receiving end – I would always be empty if I gave myself away.

Where did I learn this behavior?

As I continued to read about the Proverbs 31 woman, I saw Mama. I read the passage over and over again and each time, I saw Mama.

- She worked hard.
- She worked farmland and brought home her harvest.
- She worked well into the night after we'd all gone to bed.
- As a single mother, she provided for her children and kept them all.
- She taught her daughters how to serve others.
- She tended a garden and shared its harvest with others.
- She worked vigorously and was strong.
- She gave to the poor.
- She glowed with the light of the Lord.

- She knew how to keep her family warm in winter.
- She could sew and make clothes and quilts.
- She was strong and dignified.
- She was wise.
- She was never idle.
- She feared the Lord.
- Her children call her blessed.

As I read, more tears came as I realized that I as a direct descendant of a Proverbs 31 Woman! Her strength was in me. God saw fit to place me at the feet of this woman to learn how to glorify Him.

I was the daughter of a King and my mother was his Queen.

A Proverbs 31 Woman is worth far more than rubies.

Was I a Proverbs 31 Woman? If I was, why wasn't I behaving as such?

I cried, poured out my heart in pain, but the mirror didn't offer solace. Instead it said, "This doesn't feel like love. This feels like something else."

Is love real if it can't be felt?

My defenses were down. "So, what do I do?" I asked, praying for a solution.

"I can't tell you what to feel or what to do," the mirror continued calmly. "You have to decide what you feel and what you will do if what I offer is not enough for you."

I continued to cry silent, humiliated tears while the mirror twisted the knife. "I don't know how you normally handle your feelings," the mirror said. "So, I'm not sure what to make of this."

For years, I'd shared with the mirror. Yet, it didn't know how I handled my feelings? I realized the mirror only knew the me I'd allowed it to see.

Did the mirror recognize me as precious? Why would it if I wasn't?

I certainly hadn't portrayed myself as such.

"Why do you settle for less, if you know you deserve more?"

That one question broke the final piece of a barrier that held together a fake persona.

And as the walls came down, I saw me.

There is a picture of me as a girl of about six. I'm not smiling and my eyes are sad. For years, I thought it was because no one saw her. No one cared for her. No one valued her. But I realize that little girl was sad because she didn't see herself. She didn't care for or value herself.

Who we are is not a mystery or a secret.

God provided us with a blueprint for knowing who we are and how we are to conduct our lives.

If we follow the plan, we can have what He says we can have.

In seeing myself, I saw my Father, and I began the final stage of metamorphosis. As I accepted my heritage, I began to grow stronger.

My tears dried. The pain stopped and my humiliation evaporated.

The prodigal daughter returns home.

My Father runs to me, His precious daughter who is worth far more than rubies, with open arms offering me an abundant life.

When I began this journey, my definition of An Abundant Life would have been about things and people, external factors.

Iris M. Williams

Finally, I understand that An Abundant Life is about knowing who you are, discovering His purpose for your life and pursuing the life that He planned for you.

An abundant life is about reconciling your inside and your outside to where love resides – in Jesus.

I know my purpose. I know my worth.

Knowing that I'm more precious than rubies encourages me to live up to that standard.

Bonus Chapter: Finding Love

'Wonder Twin Power'

The writer's conference was held in Championsgate, Florida, at the beautiful Marriott Hotel. Prophetess, who was also a stylist, was helping me fix my hair. We'd gone down to the hotel pool, and I hadn't been able to resist.

"Sis, what is that you're reading?" She asked.

I'd bought a Christian Romance book to read on the plane. It was so good I couldn't put it down.

"It's by Francine Rivers," I said. "And based on a Bible story."

"Romance in the Bible?" She looked skeptical but then said. "Well, then again, it makes perfect sense. After all, God is perfect love."

"Francine takes Bible stories and imagines what the relationships were like based on what we know to have happened. This book is about Gomer and Hosea and his undying love," I said. "I would love to see it on the big screen."

"You really do love romance, don't you?" Prophetess said and smiled. "Your love will find you when you least expect it."

I wasn't sure about that anymore. Maybe love had passed me by while I was busy making bad choices.

"When I was a kid, there was a cartoon that came on Saturday mornings called Super



Friends. The storyline was about a group of friends who all had different superpowers, but they all had a common goal - to defeat evil and to save the world. Two of the Super Friends were the 'Wonder Twins.' Apart, they didn't possess power, but together, they were insurmountable," I said with a dreamy look. "Even as a kid, I remember thinking how special the Wonder Twins were because unlike the other superheroes, they had a partner. They had to work together and be one in order to accomplish anything great. I want a love like that. A love that I can depend on, and instead of pulling me down, it will lift me up, and together, we will soar."

That kind of sentimentality has always been a part of who I am.

Before I went to school and learned to read, as an only child, I'd spend hours alone making up conversations with people who weren't there.

Then when I got to school and the teacher would read to us (and then show us the picture), I was completely involved and hated when the reading circle was over because I wanted to know what happened. I'd go home and imagine an ending.

Quickly I discovered that I preferred my ending over the actual ending. Even to this day, when I watch a movie or read a book, I can often predict the ending. I walk away thinking, "I could have done that. But I would have done it like this or that."

After years of being obsessed with words, finding myself as an author and publisher wasn't much of a stretch. It seems I was destined to be one. I love what I do and would do it for free (I practically do) if I could. For me, there is nothing more satisfying than taking words and shaping them into something that moves people to feel, act, or respond.

And for most of my life, I had never met anyone who felt the same.

Until Raymond Melbourne.

After the conference, the Prophetess and I were having dinner in the hotel's restaurant. She noticed Raymond right away.

"Sis, look at that man over there," she nodded her head, and I followed her gaze. "What you think about *that*?"

The man she was pointing to was very handsome. But I'd never had a 'type' of man that I was attracted to based on how he looked. I was more stimulated by a man's mind.

"He's very handsome," I said offhandedly, but I quickly dismissed him. Besides, I never wanted to contend with was an overly handsome man. Who wanted to have to fight off the women who were bold enough to ignore wedding bands? Not me!

"Yes, he is," she continued, "but look what he is doing."

I had shared with the prophetess that I was looking for someone to work with me. I needed more than an editor. I needed someone who was as passionate about words as I was.

I looked again and noticed that he was furiously marking papers. From where we sat, it looked like he was grading or editing them. His glasses were on the tip of his nose, and the pen he held was red.

Interesting.

Then, he looked up. Our eyes met, and he smiled. I smiled back. From across the room, I felt a *knowing* that I had never experienced before. It was charging and left me feeling unsteady.

He removed his glasses, got up and walked over to our table.

"Hello," he said, extending his hand to Prophetess while looking at me. She shook his hand; then, he extended his hand towards me. "Good evening. My name is Raymond Melbourne. How are you ladies this evening?"

As much as I loved words, they escaped me.

"I noticed that you're dining alone," he continued. "Would you mind if I joined you? If you say yes, I'll spring for dessert."

Prophetess loved sweets and immediately said, "Yes, that would be wonderful."

Raymond went back to his table, expertly gathered his items into what looked like a

very expensive leather case and made his way to our table.

The waiter came, set an extra setting and took our dessert order. I felt like I was in a trance of some sort. My palms were sweating, and my heart was racing. He was in my space, and it seemed he was taking up all the air in the room. This man was larger than life, but his eyes were kind.

"I have a confession," he said and leaned forward without taking his eyes off me. "I have an agenda."

I knew it. This was already too good to be true.

"What is that you want?" Prophetess asked and smiled a huge smile. She must have already had a 'sense' about this man.

"I'm a writer, and I noticed that you two are as well," he began.

"How do you know that?" I blurted out. Finally, I could speak.

"The badges that you're wearing," he said and pointed as I looked down. I felt foolish. We were still wearing our Writers Conference laynards.

"I'm a writer, but this lady right here is the one you want," Prophetess said with a glint in her eye. "She is actually a publisher and an author."

"Oh really," he said and seemed to move in even closer. "Today must be my lucky day."

"There is no such thing as luck or coincidence," Prophetess said.

And in unison, they both said, "It has already been written."

We all laughed, and the tension subsided for me. Raymond had a beautiful smile. He was clean-shaven and had a receding hairline that only served to create a distinguished look. When he turned his head to speak to Prophetess, I took the opportunity to look him over from head to toe. Impeccably dressed and fit, I was starting to feel myself become intimidated.

As he spoke, I found comfort in his soothing voice. I could listen to him speak all day.

“So, Ms. Williams,” he smiled as he read my name. “Or is it Mrs. Williams?”

“It’s Ms.,” I confirmed. “But you can call me Iris.”

“Iris it is,” he said and took my hand. “If you’ll call me Raymond.” Then, he pulled my hand up to his lips and kissed it so gently; I wasn’t sure if he did or if it was my imagination.

I nodded my head. My voice seemed to have left me again.

“*Speak up!* I heard Mama’s voice. Don’t act like a deaf-mute!”

“Raymond, it is,” I said and shook my head, trying to free myself of Mama’s harsh voice.

“I’m a Professor of Literature over at Florida State. I’m here having an early dinner and was grading some papers when I noticed you two walk in. Perhaps it is fate, since as you looked my way, I felt a strong and unusual urge to introduce myself. And I see now that I was right. I needed to meet you, Iris.”

Prophetess clapped her hands like she was watching a Hallmark movie. Raymond and I looked at her and laughed.

“And why exactly is that?” I asked curiously.

“Because I’ve written a romance novel and need someone to read it and give me honest feedback. If it’s good enough, I’d like to publish it too.”

“Isn’t that something,” Prophetess declared. “Iris loves romance. It’s her favorite genre! And didn’t you tell me that you were looking for a male romance author?” She said excitedly, squeezing my arm too tightly.

I looked at her and wondered why she seemed so eager about *this* man and *his* work. But she was right. I had mentioned to her that I was looking for someone who could write stories like the Hallmark movies that I loved so much, but from a male perspective.

“There seems to be a lack of romance in the world,” I’d complained. “That’s why Hallmark

is my favorite channel. I want a love like that.”

“It’ll find you,” Prophetess had assured me. “You’ve just got to be patient and wait for it.”

Waiting had never been my strong suit. But after all I’d been through, I knew that it was time I moved out of God’s way and let Him send me the man that He made just for me.

“What’s your story about?” I asked Raymond. “And what makes it different from any other love story?”

“Well, first, it was given to me by God. I’m just His vessel. The story belongs to Him,” he said with such passion and certainty, I already knew I’d love it.

I sat and waited for him to tell me more.

“People have love all wrong these days. They think it’s something you receive or fall into, but it’s actually something you share. When it comes to romantic love, the best kind is the kind that you share when you become one with a person. When you meet that person that was made for you, together, you become something great. You two ladies may be too young to remember this, but do you remember a Saturday morning cartoon called Super-Friends?”

Prophetess teeth threatened to escape her mouth and her smile grew even wider.

I nodded in recognition, then quickly spoke up to avoid hearing Mama’s critical voice in my head about not speaking.

“Yes,” I said. “I remember the Justice League.”

“Well, I’m looking for the other half of me. I’m looking for the woman who, with me, we possess a force that is impenetrable. I’m a man after God’s own heart and I’m searching for a woman whose worth is far more than rubies. I’m looking for my Wonder-Twin.”

A wave of emotion came over me, and I felt myself smiling from the inside out.

In unison, he and I said, “Activate.” Then, we all laughed again.

The restaurant had a spot for dancing out on the patio. A Bobby Womack song came on, and I heard Raymond gasp.

“That’s one of my favorite songs,” he exclaimed. “Prophetess, if the lady will permit me, would you excuse us while we take a swirl around the dance floor?”

Prophetess nodded; then, Raymond held out his hand and assisted me as I stood.

Sparks flew, and I felt my smile grow wider. On the dance floor, he pulled me in close to him, and I marveled at how perfectly I fit in his arms.

Love has finally come at last, and I’m never gonna give it back ...

Raymond sang in my ear. His voice was overpowering Bobby Womack’s rendition.

He held me tight and I felt his heart beat against mine. Or was my heart beating against his? His breath was warm in my ear as he sang. I laid my head on his chest and felt safe. I felt at home.

I felt myself falling in love.

BUZZ

BUZZ

BUZZ

My alarm clock buzzed, and my eyes flew open. For a minute, I didn’t know where I was. As the realization came over me, I smiled.

For years my dreams had been nonexistent. When I closed my eyes at night, there had been nothing but blackness.

Could it be I had regained hope?

I was encouraged by that thought and my acceptance of my past. I was no longer ashamed, fearful, or hopeless. I now embrace my past because it helped shaped who I am today.

Iris M. Williams

I accept the fact that I'll always hear Mama's voice. Her influence will always be with me.

I'll temper her words with Prophetess's advice to "Chew the meat but spit out the bones."

Not everything Mama said was negative. There was wisdom in her words. I simply didn't understand the relevance of it at the time.

On this side of life, I know that Mama loved me. She gave what she had.

I'm ready to live and love, at last.

About the Author

Growing up in a small rural town in Arkansas, Iris M. Williams experienced life in its simplest form. However, her life was anything but simple.

For most of her life, she felt she was in a fog of questions for which there were no answers.

Although she was an avid reader from a young age, she never found herself or her life between the pages of her beloved books. Those happy stories were about other people, people who didn't look like she did.

Although she couldn't identify with the people in the books she read, she could escape the pain and disappointment that was her life.

In the final book of a three-part series, the author invites readers to look forward, to acknowledge the past, to heal, and to view their life based on who they are today. She encourages you to envision the life you want and make it happen!

By sharing her story, Iris hopes that readers can see themselves, and instead of escaping their reality, learn to face it so that healing and growth can occur.

To contact or learn more about the author, visit her website:

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A Poem: This Woman's Work

There was a time when the thought of you with her,
My black brother with some other. . .
Made me angry, drove me to anger, made me mad!
Until one day I realized that it just made me sad,
Sad for you, sad for me, sad for this society
Who taught you that she was superior and you inferior,
And that somehow being with her made you more,
Or in some strange way evened the score.

After that epiphany, I knew I couldn't be mad,
Because I had work to do.

Not just for you or for me, but for we.
For little black girls who sit behind golden curls
And dream of having The Bluest Eye.
Then go home to Mamas who fry and dye
And braid and weave so that "good hair"
Can be achieved.

For little black boys who'll grow up to be men
In a world that counts them as statistics,
More likely to spend time in the pen
Than to pick up a pen and write great books,

That you know Black folks won't read anyway,
Or so they say.

And it saddens me deeply that The Mis-Education of the Negro
is just as relevant today!

I've got work to do, not just for you or for me,
But for we. . .

For we the people who continue to perpetuate the myths and the lies,
With blue, green, and hazel contact-lensed eyes,
Because we just don't see the beauty of our own, deep dark brown.

For my people who have fallen victim to ourselves,
And feel so trapped in this present hell
That we try to buy our way out with material possessions,
Our own new obsessions,
From wheels to grills,
Just to prove who we are or announce that we've arrived
But remain too ignorant, to recognize our own strength and power.

I've got work to do, not just for you or for me,
But for we. . .
So that my young daughter
Will grow up remembering the lessons that I taught her.
That nappy is GOOD
And Black is Beautiful

And regardless of your 'hood
You can still represent to the fullest
And it's cool to be smart,
It's alright to follow your heart,
But never forget where your head is.
And by knowing all of this,
She will know self-love and won't
Need to look for it in all the wrong places,
Or compare herself to the many different faces
On television and in magazines
Promoting a beauty standard based on superiority
And embedding a feeling of inferiority
That runs way too deep and keeps
Me standing here today torn between anger and sadness.

I've got work to do, until
Your being with her no longer
Makes you feel superior
And me that much more inferior.

I've got work to do, not just for you or for me. . .

But for we.

Cassie (Miller) Hartaway

A Poem: Relationship Status

If I were in a relationship, I'd treat him like a King.

Then, why don't I live like a Queen?

If I were in a relationship, I'd gladly make him something to eat.

So, why don't I nourish myself,
instead of now and then as a treat?

If I were in a relationship, I'd care for him and love him gently.

So, why don't I care for myself in all ways, completely.

If I were in a relationship, I'd be there for him –

he wouldn't have to ask.

So, why don't I shower myself in love,
better yet why in it don't I bask?

If I were in a relationship, I'd love him as I love myself.

So, doesn't that mean I need to treat me as if I'm kept?

If I were in a relationship, affection upon affection I'd never spare.

So, shouldn't I practice personal self-care?

If I were in a relationship, I'd shower him with material things.

So, why do I deny myself the pleasure finer things can bring?

If I were in a relationship, he'd be a priority.
So, shouldn't my priority list also include me?

If I were in a relationship, I'd need to be whole.
So, why aren't I waiting for the one with whom I share a soul?

If I were in a relationship, he would be my King.
So, why would I ever settle for less than being Queen?

Iris M. Williams

Whatever Happened To ...

We gravitate towards who we are inside.

When I was sick, I attracted people who highlighted my sickness. I believe God designed it that way for us to confront and resolve our issues.

However, instead of looking at me, I blamed them. I put the focus on them instead of dissecting me to figure out why I felt and behaved the way I felt and behaved.

Yes, people do and say things to hurt us, but how we respond is more about us than them.

When I read my journal entries, I realized that before each marriage, I'd seen the warning signs and had ignored them all.

I knew what those marriages would bring, and instead of making a choice that was healthy for me, I gave my power away. I never felt like I deserved anything better than what I was being offered.

I didn't know that I was a Proverbs 31 woman and that my worth was far more precious than rubies.

Even though those relationships didn't last, they were successful in that they served as gold bricks on my road to Oz.

In my books, I highlighted the bad parts of my relationships to make a point. As we know, nothing is all bad or all good. I believe the people who hurt me didn't do so on purpose. Maybe they were sick too.

In speaking with readers about books I and II, there were questions asked that I wanted to answer here in the final book.

Benny Pete left our small town and enlisted in the military. Years later, he and I had an opportunity to talk about what happened, but too much time had passed to recapture what may have been. He is married and living on the west coast.

Alisha's dad died in 2014 from cancer. He had been in prison, and the two of them had corresponded through letters. I was happy that she had those letters in the end.

I never spoke to **Jamie's** dad again. I only had his 'nickname,' so I couldn't search for him on Social Media. Anyway, what would I say?

Bradford married again, but is now divorced. He had two other children, and he and our son, BJ, are in touch on a regular basis.

I heard **William White** is now a pastor of a church. Part of me wonders about his sincerity, but I do know that people can change, and God does work miracles.

Donald Ingram is a good man. He has stayed in contact with my children and my grandchildren. There was the hope of a reconciliation, but I didn't see much in the way of change and decided it was better not to repeat bad habits.

Malcolm got divorced and plans to retire from the military. I saw him a few times after moving back to Arkansas, but things never felt the same. Too much had been said and done to ever go back.

Gregg and I don't talk anymore, but I know I can call him, and he'd be a friend. He successfully battled cancer and called me after the fact to report his miracle and to tell me that he's finally going to remarry. I'm happy for him.

After seeing **Anton** in the grocery store, a few months after he left without saying goodbye, he called and begged me to let him come back. By that time, I was talking to William, so I didn't entertain it, but if I'm honest with myself, I probably would have agreed if I'd been alone. Sadly, that's just how low my standards were.

Mr. Jack died just as I became comfortable having him in my life. I was in my twenties when I found out by accident that he didn't live with us. In fact, he was married to someone else, which explained why I was taught to call him Mr. Jack (among other

things). Maybe some of my animosity should have been directed towards him, but he was dead, and Mama wasn't. I still haven't grieved him.

Mama has health issues that are challenging to manage and even more difficult to witness. Admittedly I'm not doing a good job with accepting what is or maximizing the time I have. When others counted her out, she reminded them of how strong she is, and I thank God for that. Mama sowed plenty of good seeds when she could and now, she's living off that harvest. Her illness prevents us from having the conversation I'd like us to have, but maybe it isn't necessary anymore. Through forgiving myself and Mama, I can finally appreciate her.

And as for **me**, I turned 50 in July of 2019. It was a quiet and uneventful day. I worked that day, had dinner with my children that evening and was home in bed by 10 pm that night.

I'd always thought that turning 50 would be a momentous event celebrated with lots of food, fun, and friends. It wasn't.

I don't have a husband or a boyfriend.

But I have found love.

It's been more than five years since I returned to Arkansas from North Carolina – broken and absent of hope.

During that time, I've learned to cry, to speak, and I'm seeking an authentic life. I desperately want to live the life I speak about.

I falter and have setbacks, but the recovery time gets shorter and shorter.

The team around me is strong, supportive, and refuses to let me isolate for too long.

I'm grateful.

“The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy.

I came that they may have life

and have it abundantly.”

John 10:10