

A
**TATTERDEMALION'S
TESTIMONY**

a memoir

SARAH VIGUE

tatterdemalion

tat·ter·de·ma·lion

\,ta-tər-di-'māl-yən, -'mal-, -'ma-lē-ən\

Noun

DEFINITION

: a person dressed in ragged
clothing : **RAGAMUFFIN**

([merriam-webster.com/
dictionary/tatterdemalion](http://merriam-webster.com/dictionary/tatterdemalion))

A Tatterdemalion's Testimony

by Sarah Vigue

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Before We Get Started

Looking into the sky, resting after chasing cousins playing in my stepfamily’s yard, I filled my lungs with the same air that traveled up to the kingdom that God made. As a skin-and-bones, ash-blonde girl, I wanted to make clouds and taste them to see if they were sweet like the sugarcane that grew around me in Georgia. I would cast the clouds into shapes, lying in the grass or sitting under the “creepy trees” (Spanish moss) that canopied every dirt and clay road for miles.

At four years old, I understood from Sunday school and AWANA Club that that’s where God lived—in the clouds. I loved AWANA and felt that Jesus loved me. My siblings and I would sing a made-up song in front of the small Pentecostal congregation:

I wish I had a little red box
to put my mother in.
I’d take her out and kiss, kiss, kiss,
and put her back again.
I wish I had a little red box
to put my father in.
I’d take him out and hug, hug, hug,
and put him back again.
I wish I had a little black box
to put the devil in.
I’d take him out and punch, punch, punch,
and put him back again.

We were empowered to feel bravado against the devil, even while wearing slippery tights and stuffy church clothes. The best defense: Be a good girl so Satan couldn’t send me to the lake of fire.

The lessons of Jesus and the activities of building houses on rocks,

not sand, made sense. It was so inborn and natural at that age to hear, “There is a loving man named Jesus, and He cares about you.” I believed. I was also told, “When you’re born again, you don’t have to burn for all eternity. Ask him into your heart to save you from hell.” I did, was baptized, and was given a certificate. The sincerity of a four-year-old is so precious, but I wonder if that’s too young to be considered a permanent Christian conversion, at least for most.

I liked how Jesus treated people. Walking in his city with gold streets and opening his pearly gates sounded nice. I envisioned going there after playing in the forest and making raindrop flowers from freshly squeezed clouds. It’s like God calling you in as moms do when it’s dinnertime. After all, what could I do in the kingdom? Nothing at that age—because Heaven was like the inside of a church. And I had to die first to get up there beyond the clouds. So I thought, *Someday I’ll be ready. When I get there, I’ll make fat clouds and build them all around the towers and buildings so Heaven won’t fall out. It’ll be safe.* I knew Heaven was all clouds—where angels lived, perfect and beautiful. For many years, I wanted to be an angel, and I wanted to play in Heaven, the *Wizard of Oz*-like city in the sky, just beyond where I could see.

When rain drummed on my granny’s tin roof, I waited for the thunder to rage and crack, smiling and feeling secure and protected when it beat deep and shook the shanty-like trailer that, to me, was a spacious ranch in the woods. Sometimes there was a little fear. Where the thunder and lightning lived, something else made me feel safe. As I said, this Jesus, who was both God and man, was so easy to let into my entire being; the Lord’s Holy Spirit was in me and every living thing, like carbon. How innate it was to know him. My young mind was free to imagine, one day, being a part of God’s glorious sun bursting from the clouds throughout the sky kingdom until these dreams, like the clouds in the summer sky, slowly drifted away and other things moved in.

I read what I just wrote, and it hurts. In adulthood, I don’t dream like this anymore. The ’80s were so long ago and I was so young, like any other child—wondering about being a part of something instead of being apart from people, from life, all the time. I wasn’t dreaming of slowly

bleeding out on spongy, deep green grass—my craving since age twelve, if only I could shake the childhood adage often explained to me by my churches: “People who kill themselves go to hell. If a Christian does it, you’re murdering God himself and you’re turning to evil.” Not knowing that there are different schools of thought on whether you can still get into Heaven after suicide did at least stave off direct suicide attempts on my part. What the Enemy intended for evil, God used for good (Genesis 50:20). This was just how my life played out. As a child, I would look into the sky, resting from my play, as an adult, I played at striving and it cost me everything.

Chapter 0

Your Story Is Unique, like Everyone Else's

*Now whenever the cloud lifted from
the Tabernacle, the people of Israel would
set out on their journey, following it.*

—Exodus 40:36 NLT

THERE ARE THINGS I need to tell you—or rather, things I'm not supposed to tell you. Literary experts have warned me that what I write will scare you, that you'll put me in a box because we're “not supposed to talk about certain things.” It's not the first time in my life I've been told this. But I haven't survived this far in life by being silent. Being told not to share the truth—and feeling shame—is soul crushing. I'm tired of that. So this honest to goodness, ragtag voice of mine is trying to use my weird story to interrupt the silence. We have stories to tell, and being vulnerable is how we share them with others.

It all started, around age thirty three, on a beautiful day I refused to let myself enjoy. The clouds were beautiful: evolving forms that shaped themselves into stories like the ones I would not tell. I'd been fighting the urge to share my Christian testimony because it involved telling too much

of my past, too much of being unwanted and worthless. Ruminating on where the clouds originated, what they meant to those gazing at them, and where they were so quickly headed—pointless, I thought. It accomplished nothing in the end, much like telling stories and having a voice. Having a voice makes you a target, and sharing stories doesn't pay the bills. But the full-figured clouds were so pristine white—my favorite. It's hard to be a serious, focused grown-up when plump globes are floating around you. "Gorgeous," I admitted.

Years ago, I gave up cloud gazing, a time-wasting activity meant for babies and weirdos. "But I'm weird," I said aloud to my thoughts. This disillusioned old dog had very little fight in her, despite only being in her thirties. I slipped off my sensible shoes and filled my spirit with the energy that comes from lush grass and sunshine. I shifted my work folders, heard my car keys fall, and watched my empty lunch container bounce onto the ground. Sighing, I piled everything together and looked around at the day. Normal people outside walking, suburban sounds, sun and vitamin D happening. I rolled up my pant legs for the coveted sunshine to deliver the vitamin that doctors tell me my pale skin and depression-prone brain need. I fingered the large thigh scar glaring at me, red and angry.

Images floated through my mind like clouds—images of waking up in the operating room finding that, while my left knee might be fixed, a patch of skin the size of my palm was missing just inches above the surgery site. It had looked—and felt—as if most of my left thigh had been badly burned. The images of the months it had taken to "heal" the wound darkened like storm clouds. They darted like debris in a whirlwind when I recalled the various procedures where the doctors scraped at the burn site until the team smiled at the muscle beneath the growing thin layer of skin. They had seen success as the pick pulled at my scabs and tender flesh; I had felt the cost of vulnerability. A routine knee arthroscopy shouldn't involve neglect and electrocution, but *shouldn't* isn't a definitive word. Sigh. "Heal me. Make it go away," I said into the vibrant sky. A breeze greeted me—nothing else. Just another person with an unwanted scar, just another unanswered prayer.

I rolled my eyes at the clouds and my earlier, childlike wonderings about all that the clouds saw and the lands they passed. Then I adjusted my glasses and picked up my things. Allowing one last guilty pleasure, I shuffled my bare feet in the spongy grass, then slipped on my shoes, leaving the clouds in the sky where they belonged. The tug inside me to share my story—the whole story—stamped down. My life bore the wrinkled scars of one well trained to move on; so I did.

The next Saturday, my inner adult felt more agreeable. The sun was shining over Gloucester Harbor, and the Massachusetts weather was glorious. With plenty of free time, I followed the walking path that connected my apartment to Stacy Boulevard. There was only a tiny barbecue stain on my fitted Walmart shirt—yep, on my substantial chest as always—as the inklings of this manuscript drifted into my mind. If I was going to catch my second wind of Christianity, some deep pain needed healing.

Starting the solitary walk, I asked God for direction—out loud and with feeling. “I can’t write this. Yes, I want to feel like a new zealous Christian again, but I can’t get my big, heavy body over this hurdle. I know revisiting my Christian life and the two-year mission will give me insight on what you had me do and why, but writing stuff about my childhood and vulnerable moments . . . I’m thirty pounds overweight and a Christian. Don’t you want to convict me about that? I haven’t even bent over my gut to count if my toes are all still there. There’s no excuse; no painful low back flare-up in months!” Silence.

I switched the drink in my hand from left to right and dug my feet into the ground, taking a stand. “You cannot write a testimony without explaining why it was so impactful. That’s way too personal! I can’t write this!” I needed to work around the invisible obstacle before me, and God was watching, so I tried to figure out what I could do and what I was willing to do.

I could work with myself on remembering why I recorded any of this story—my testimony of faith—in the first place. Then I could maybe relight the burner connecting me to God that just would not stay lit. The only way to connect my pilot light to the burner was to picture people

alone, unprotected, and in need of spiritual answers. If someone somewhere was saying, “That’s it. I can’t live like this. I’m desperate. Someone point me in the right direction,” then I should help them. Well, I was qualified to do something. I could do desperate and give basic information, share some experiences to help others. Shoot, that’s not so bad.

Talking to God like this, as if He were around me, I still felt less than a Christian should feel from God. The year 2012, when I became a passionate Christian, was an incredible, unpredictable time. I missed being a yahoo for the Lord and not caring how unpolished my tangled hair and even more tangled personality were, because this Jesus stuff turned out to be real and perceptible. However, I was searching for his tangible presence now and intensely imploring the Lord to give me answers. Walking into the territory of pokeberries—deep purple in the late afternoon sun—I felt a gentle urge to pull the berries off the vines and squish them.

As I degloved the fat little berries, they filled my right hand where my fingers waited to crush the thick juice out of the skins. I had nowhere to be, no place I was needed, and so I squeezed a few more pokeberry vines and watched the blood of the fruit slowly drip through my fingers.

The blood at Christ’s crucifixion came to mind. “This is my blood, shed for thee,” I repeated aloud while drawing a crimson fingertip along the center of my forehead in the shape of a cross. There’s power in his blood. Even when we feel disconnected from God, there are ways to reconnect. We must never give up on him because God never gives up on us, and his blood is a reminder.

I continued telling God what was on my mind.

“There’s something beneath my surface, God. Something that I just can’t reach on my own.”

I balled up my blood-red fist and covered it with my clean hand.

“How do I get to that anger or pride—whatever it is that makes me resistant to back pain healing and antidepressant medication? The doctors and I can’t figure this out. Extract the poison from my system and heal me. Take my will and pride. I’m your slave. I’m in your hands.”

Quickly, I wiped away the forehead cross to prevent staining as bright

as my now-red-and-purple hand. I still had the rest of the walk to finish if I was going to complete forty minutes, and chores needed my attention.

My God moment was over.

I felt good, despite not getting a direct answer from him, so I went about my day, assuming the night would be normal. It is not often that I talk to God like that—it seems sloppy and unrefined to vent to such a powerful deity. That's okay, though, because God is also a person and understands exactly what the full human experience is like.

As night drifted into Sunday morning, I slept poorly. I dreamed I was in a circle of people in a cozy shack, centered in a sparse, New England-style cemetery on a drab day, discussing our writing projects. When it was my turn, I told someone I wasn't quite sure what to do with my manuscript—that maybe it was to serve as a confessional only, something to get out of my system. Never for public consumption.

A woman to my left commented, "Maybe you should call Comcast and ask them. Flip through the Yellow Pages and pick someone." Turning from the rude voice, I faced someone else only to hear her say excitedly to another, "Let's have a séance. That'll scare her." Her companion giggled at the suggestion and made her own snarky comments.

Outside the shack window, thin white tombstones streaked with dark gray accessorized the crunchy grass and the pallid sky. Before I knew it, a vapor-like form rose from the ground in front of one of the stones. Swiftly unfurling into an oblong, upright shape, it darted from my window view on the left, around to the windowed front door on my right.

My view shifted into a melting feeling as my seat slid into a corner, the rude voices and a few others now behind me. My eyes stayed fixed on the ghoul outside the door as it floated and formed before me.

The ghost was a disgusting, horrifying female with stringy, sparse white hair flowing down a long white gown, exposing a decrepit skull and haunting features. My heart beat faster with her formation. She floated through the closed door and hovered in the air, her eyes fixed on me.

My heart was pounding, but I knew what to do! My confidence in the Lord—my faith—was as strong as my racing, kettledrum heart.

With complete surety, I opened my mouth to rebuke the ghoul in Jesus's name—but my breath was stolen. That feeling you get when you roll down a car window and stick your head out, that breathless panic overwhelmed my body, generating so much dry heat.

Nothing. I had nothing.

The nightmarish image oppressed me as it moved closer to me, then I felt something like air expand my entire chest cavity. Someone, or something, was about to speak through me the way a spirit speaks through a medium. As my lungs filled, the words came through me, starting with a guttural croak and ending in my own voice, but all spoken with authority: “Jesus is the Messiah! Leave and don't come back! Shame on all of you!”

That last sentence was mine—finishing off what my Father in Heaven started. Only these words weren't mine; they were given to me. I was a powerless child, protected by my Father's authority. It's stupefying to have a relationship with Jesus like this. Nevertheless, whoever spoke through me (I assume it was the Holy Spirit) will always have my gratitude! Though I was asleep, God came to me and glorified his reign.

I awoke, not from my booming heart but by someone divine stepping in for me when I was most vulnerable. God was answering my earlier plea—allowing me to reconnect with him by letting the Enemy oppress me. I knew I was on the right track; evil doesn't like to see good succeed. The attack made me cling to Christ. God is so powerful, so in control. He answered me and stirred my spirit with the juice of pokeberries.

When the Holy Spirit spoke through me, the words were not “I rebuke you in Jesus's name,” something I would have said. Instead, the words were a proclamation of Jesus and his position, something I hadn't understood until that night. “Jesus is the Messiah” overpowered the malevolence whispering in my ear that night. When I needed it most, this truth set me free and radiated God's authority, as it did when demons encountered Christ in the Bible. Mark 5 describes Legion and the demons' response to Jesus—instantly knowing his name and all the authority it carried. What happened in the Bible is still happening today.

When my pulse reset and I cautiously left my bed, I knew I had some

thinking to do. *It's time to squeeze some personal direction out of a pragmatic but Spirit-led Christian leader. I don't need to do this alone.* Waking up and fighting back wasn't enough, though it was a vast improvement over how I reacted when I fell into new ageism. It's solid biblical practice to go beyond rallying your family and friends. A trusted Christian authority, someone unafraid to challenge the status quo, offers surety when it comes to protection and sound decision-making. Despite all the mistakes I made when first exploring Christianity as an adult—and because I stuck with it and with the church—I now had spiritual siblings and leaders. I was blessed to be able to choose the right one for guidance.

If you are sleeping in some way and you need to wake up—fighting or not—you study the Word of God, follow the Lord, and rally the Christian troops. The head of my troop for this mission—writing my testimony—would be Darrell, a house painter and New Testament scholar.



I pulled my used Corolla into the expansive, vacant Anglican church parking lot. Darrell's and Marty's empty cars sat side by side, clean and waxed in the light of the setting sun. Doug's clunker straddled the parking lines, somehow angled behind both vehicles. Doug—a modern-day John the Baptist who spends all his time pointing people to the Lord—parks like he has ADHD because he does. That's part of why we're dear friends. Doug, who is the strongest Christian I've ever encountered and the person who introduced me to my Tuesday night theology group, was clearly onto something. I parked right smack in front of Darrell's and Marty's cars, blocking them in. Laughing too hard to appear sane, I watched Joe maneuver his long-bed truck in next to Marty's Audi. Despite over an acre of parking space, we all chose to be sandwiched together—Doug and I no exception—parked like the divergent minds we are. Joe slapped his thighs and yell laughed at my parking job as I stepped out of my car.

“What are you doing? They're boxed in. Darrell's gonna think you've been eating dairy again.”

“No, this is all Sarah right now. We’re safe. So far,” I replied. “Look, Doug’s onto another car.” We shook our heads in concern—probably another car accident—and entered the octagonal cathedral while I inquired about Joe’s brood of kids, all of whom I adore. From inside the sacristy, we heard, “. . . because modern feminism is ruining America. That’s why Trump’s going to get reelected!”

I approached my place next to Darrell—as the unabashed apple polisher of the class—and asked, “Did we walk in on Christian feminism or politics?”

“Both,” exclaimed Marty. “Ware havin’ a serious talk about all this political gahbidge. Nothin’ but trash on the news. This is why I yousta drink!” Marty’s a longtime Massachusetts native, and his South Boston accent and mannerisms punctuate his endless comedy like nothing else.

The guys pretended not to notice my awkward, sciatic sitting and grimacing. Darrell calls it “preserving one’s dignity”—a Christian way of giving public privacy to an injured or disabled person.

“Where’s Lori?” I asked. “No one’s suggested I take up pot or CBD oil to ease back pain in a while. That must mean she’s out of commission or in that healing group thing.”

Joe interjected over Darrell’s mumbling: “You missed it. Darrell told her to stop focusing on blood moons and the end being near. She hasn’t been back since.” He struggled to breathe through his belly laughter, while Darrell rolled his eyes, saying something in his upper-crust Rhode Island accent. He only breaks it out when he’s mocking us for mocking him.

“She’s right, though, Joe. Ware all goin’ t’hell in a hand basket!” Marty gestured expansively, sloshing condensation from his enormous, icy Dunkin’ Donuts cup onto one of the church’s Bibles. I shook my head. Can’t take these guys anywhere.

Richard, the octogenarian with skin cancer so advanced that pieces of his scalp routinely fall off, used his extrastrength magnifying glass as a gavel to settle down our jocularity. “Are we ready to begin?” And so we were.

One hour into the class, I heard an opportunity to steal some

direction for what to do with my testimony-turned-memoir. "We have to grow in a mature way and minister to the people God has placed in our lives," said Darrell. "Eighty percent of the time, prayer changes me because—just like in any other relationship—I have to get myself out of the way."

"A testimony functions in the same way, then?" I asked. "It's for one's own self a little, isn't it? It's deeply personal and unique. That's part of why non-Christians find our conversion stories confusing or interesting—but not that relatable."

Darrell reacted to my uncertain tone. "God is present, and the kingdom is active. We have to meet people with like faith instead of relying on churches divided by denomination, and we also have to speak to nonbelievers."

"Testimonies put feet to our relationships with others," Joe said. "Sometimes people who know nothing about Christianity will say, 'Tell me about your story,' because there's something about you that's interesting. My daughter's friend had never heard of Jesus not being a religion but a savior. He had no background in anything Christlike."

"Verbally sharing my testimony became hard after maybe three years," I said. "It's not so bad if an individual or small group pulls it out of me, but actually giving the full account nowadays . . . Being an authentic Christian is powerfully intimate because it's not unusual to feel the presence of God. Even when there isn't a clear presence, but you feel connected and charged, the atmosphere is different from normal. Trying to capture that for others is like chasing butterflies. People should experience the Lord for themselves. It's way better."

Sigh. "And digging up awful past moments to explain why the Lord's actions are so meaningful—because He let you 'walk with him' . . . I'd rather forget," I admitted.

"We shouldn't forget our first love," Darrell said sympathetically. "We have to grow in the faith. It's not that you can't return to when you were a nonbeliever or a child in the faith, but you can't stay there."

"That's right," Doug said with passion. "We move from mother's milk to meat."

“Darrell’s telling me to act my Christian age and to get to work,” I declared in my nasal, monotone voice.

Darrell smiled.

I conceded, “I’m in a state of reconciling with my past, so maybe now I can effectively express my faith. But shouldn’t Christians focus on being yahoos for the Lord again? One gets so excited when joining the faith—and that’s everything.”

“But that’s not our normal relationship with God,” Darrell said, imploring. “Looking for that ecstatic experience all the time isn’t healthy. Christians are in union with the risen God. We need to put away the first times. Nothing will be like those first years when you just met Christ, and it shouldn’t be.”

“Yeah, you haven’t had any trials at that point yet,” said Joe. “Then suddenly—boom!”

We chuckled knowingly and all started talking at once, saying things like, “Yeah, before you know it, you’re religious! You’re involved in too many ministries, and people gripe with each other. Be careful—religiosity will get you!” There is nothing worse, for these heart-led men, than to stop caring about something because passionless works get in the way.

Over the din, Darrell announced, “We should open in prayer.” We’re a little backward sometimes. Still, these blue-collar men—none of them under fifty—with their rough New England accents, show up every Tuesday night to grow in the Lord.

In the summer months, I see paint stains Darrell can’t quite scrub from his twice-baked skin, while Marty unconsciously squeezes sections of Bible pages until they’re dog eared—completely forgetting the stone dust on his hands, face, and shirt because he’s telling jokes, exhausted, and stoked for Jesus all at once. Joe wears his green landscaping sweat-shirt, full of holes, and I have no idea why one of his twelve children hasn’t told him it’s time for a new one. Half the time, the seminary-level class is too intellectual for the kids—some of whom aren’t even in high school—but they’re the most loving kids (like my niece and nephew), especially the one with chubby, puppy cheeks. Lanky Doug has holes in his shoes and is hopped up on artificial colors and dairy (he’s got ADHD,

giving him the same food sensitivities as I have), making it hard for me not to laugh at his inappropriate jokes and tangents while Darrell tries to manage him. These are my people now, these fellow Christians.

I reflect on this throughout the rest of the study. Leaving friends behind because you don't like who you are around them is just as awkward as trading friends who don't understand—or support—your new lifestyle or the people now entering your life. I seldom see my avuncular guys outside of Tuesday night classes, but I am so at ease with this family. I made the right trade: from secular to faith.

As we walked out of the church and into the night, Doug pointed to my ridiculous parking. "You're getting worse than I am. We're both on the spectrum! It's like one brain communicating with another. Wow!"

Marty motioned to the others. "Hey, look. Sarah blahked us in. Look at that—she's in the aisle of the pahkin' lot!"

"Yeah, now you can't leave." I giggled.

Darrell's mouth dropped open. "Geez, were you sipping the communion wine again?"

"No," I said. "I only did that once. I'm so much more mature. It's been, like, eight months. And I needed something to go with the communion wafers I pilfered."

Darrell eye rolled.

"You know you guys are spending the night anyway. You'll do contractor talk until midnight—or whenever your wives call."

"I think she's catchin' ohn!" Marty mock whispered.



The night sky is extra sapphire after many of these Bible studies, and tonight did not disappoint. Back home in the harbor, the weather still cooperated, and the yard bugs were few. When I closed the car door behind me, the sound echoed loudly in the quiet air. When it's still like this, it's as if a vacuum has sucked all the sound in the night. I let myself enjoy it, then plopped down my shoes, purse, and glasses. Lying against the sloped, bowl-shaped yard leading to my apartment door, I itched

against the grass until I got comfortable and blinked with the stars—or jets, or marina lights. They all look the same with blurred vision, but they are pretty and peaceful, nonetheless.

Stillness—floating on a cloud of peace—is often what I feel moments after choosing to trust God. When you release the sadness and rest against the hurt, you can't help but accept the truth. It hurts to hurt, but there is honor and integrity in knowing who you are and how far you've come. I sighed. My resolve to follow the Holy Spirit pulled me to my feet—well, that and the shrill whine of a mosquito.

Once inside, I took the final step in making my decision official with the Lord and I set expectations. “God, I have absolutely no idea how I'm supposed to write about Peggy, the Mommy Dearest step-grandmother, or how nine months of living with her affected us kids.” I paced back and forth on the living room carpet. “Without you, I can't pull off interesting descriptions of life history: The same one I've had to repeat to doctor after every friggin' doctor or write on some intake form because childhood trauma affects everything. But I guess if my dentist needs to know my life story, then why not every-friggin'-body else?” I got sad. My eyes watered. I kept going. That's what I do.

Hanging my head, I admitted, “I like having a choice—to hold private matters that really don't need to be shared.” Sigh. “This is sad.”

It's always after this complaining that the Lord gives me insight. I heard my heart yearning for freedom, rights, and safety. I know there's no tenderness or security like the Lord's. He's my everything, and He will be with me, full of love meant just for me, until the very end.

“Crap.” I sighed. “Here we go.” And I started to write. We need to remember love—and all the pains that make love so excruciatingly beautiful and necessary. That's what telling your story is: It's a way to redevelop your voice, the one that never should have been taken from you. One person's story can change everything. And one person's already has; his example is worth following.