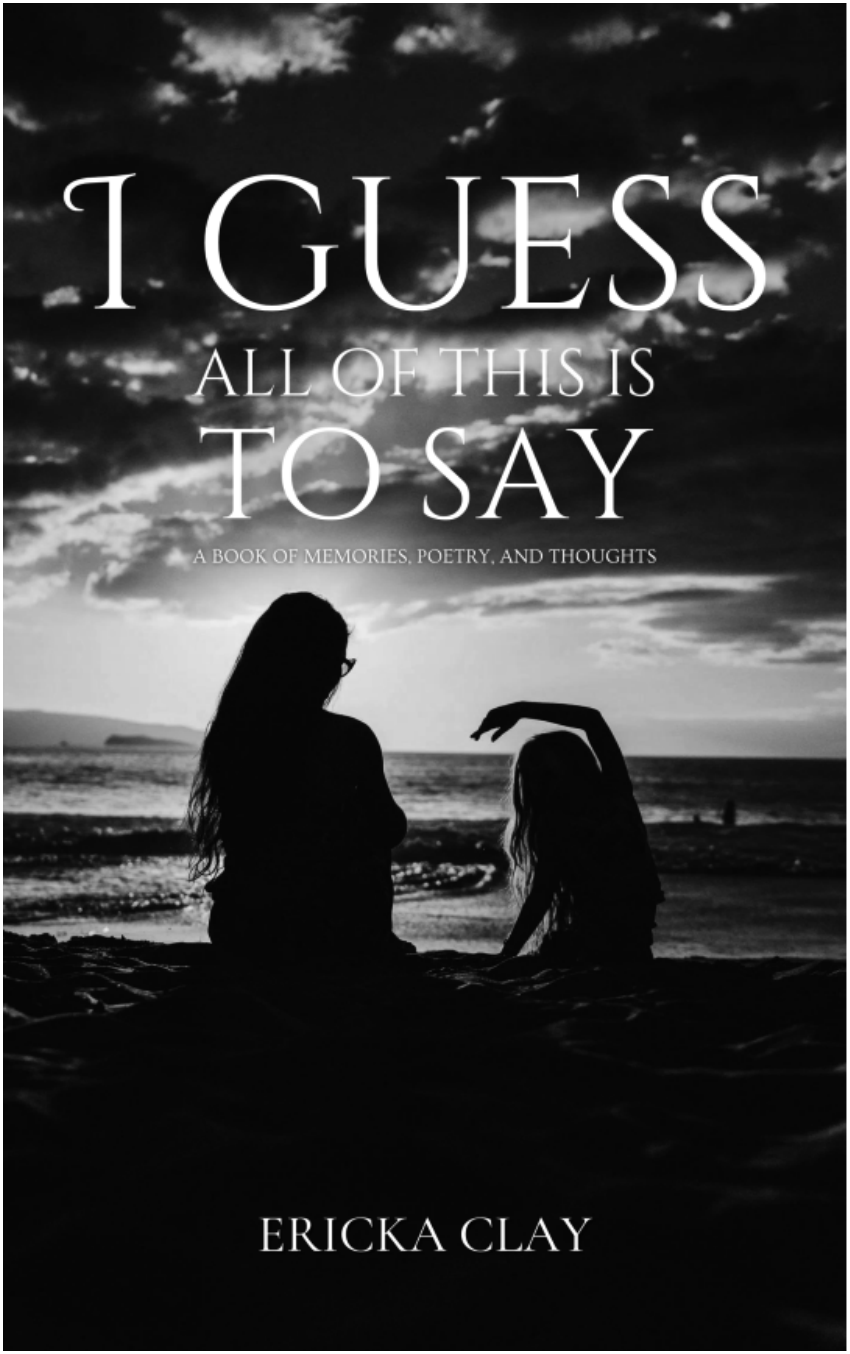
I GUESS
ALL OF THIS IS
TO SAY
A BOOK OF MEMORIES, POETRY, AND THOUGHTS
ERICKA CLAY

I Guess All This Is to Say

Ericka Clay

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This is a creative work. Similarities to real people, places, or events are entirely coincidental.

I GUESS ALL THIS IS TO SAY
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Memories

And so we begin.

I think the hardest thing ever is realizing you're not so great.

That might not be hard for some people. I get that we're all different. We've all gone through so many different things, and maybe greatness has never been part of your vocabulary.

It has been mine.

When I was young—I'm talking roughly ten years old—I'd have conversations with Oprah. Not the real Oprah. That would have been weird. Just the imaginary one that lived in my bathroom mirror.

There we go. Much more normal.

I'd have conversations with her on the yellow leather couch in her studio, sitting in front of a live studio audience, recounting how well my latest novel did on the New York Times best sellers' list.

I was focused at a young age. I knew I'd be a novelist, but I also knew I was going to be a great novelist, a famous one.

I was going to snub my nose at everything that seemed utterly provincial in my childlike mind.

Here's the thing: you've gotten to see how that all played out, and by now you've probably figured out Oprah's nowhere in sight.

It's hard when you believe the lie in your head. For me, it was if I'm not greater than those around me—if I don't prove how talented I am on a large scale—then who am I?

What am I?

I know now the truth. I am Christ's. I'm the vessel He uses to paint pictures with words and to show Himself to a select group of people. I'm His masterpiece, given tools and talents, honing them all these years not for my own pleasure but for His.

The moment I realized this, the moment my life unhinged from the "could have been" and anchored into the "what really is," things changed.

It only took me thirty-seven years.

So, moving forward, this is where I'll chronicle my journey, searching my past and walking toward my future with God. I'll be truthful even when it hurts because it truly is the truth that sets us free.

Little miss perfect.

I was raised in a uniform, which is probably why real clothes scare me. It was like I turned eighteen and everyone was all like "okay, go find clothes to wear," and I was like "you mean this?" indicating a gray, stained t-shirt I found on the side of the road next to a dead armadillo.

I'm starting to think that's not what they meant.

Catholic private school. No, scratch that. Catholic ALL GIRLS private school.

It was, to say the least, a real trip.

When I unearth what's beneath my breastbone, digging through years of muck and all the things I shouldn't have done, I see the beginning seeds of my perfectionist tendencies when I was a kid.

I remember being in my mother's classroom. She taught at one of my schools and was my teacher for the first and second grades. And I remember sitting there one afternoon, waiting for her with the door open. A few kids walked by, and a "teacher's pet" drifted through the door and smacked me in the face.

It should have stung. It should have made me feel a little ticked off. And at first, it did because I thought the person was a coward.

If you're going to say something to me then come and say it.

But I started to like the way that name felt. I *was* the teacher's pet. First of all, I was her daughter so there was that. But I also was a straight-A student who didn't say "boo" to anyone. I didn't just do the one reading assignment, I did both options that were presented to us and honestly thought I had won the lottery.

Apparently, nobody else felt that way.

When you realize things about yourself, you tend to use them to your advantage. It's the human way. If you're pretty, you use your looks to get ahead. Funny? Then you crack those jokes until the job is yours. If you're smart? You do whatever it takes to get even smarter, and you make sure everyone around you can smell it on you.

It's the vice that sent our kind to build the Tower of Babylon. Why wait for God when we're obviously smart enough to drag Him down from Heaven ourselves?

As the days dragged on, there were warning signs. I had a high sense of anxiety that I trotted around like a dog on a leash. I think it was partly because my mother had Crohn's disease, and some days she'd be late picking me up from school due to a flare-up. In these moments, I always pictured her dying on the side of the road (why are things always dying on the side of the road in my imagination?), although my brain was fully aware that this was normal. It would be fine. She'd eventually come and pick me up.

But my body was constantly in fight or flight, my guts knotted and pulsing.

Here's the kicker: I couldn't say anything about it. I couldn't tell my teacher that I was panicking. I couldn't tell my friends who were always after-school stragglers (and never seemed to worry about the fact that their parents could possibly be dying on the side of the road somewhere too) that I felt the intense urge to vomit merely because my mother was five minutes late to pick me up.

I wanted them to think I was calm, cool, and collected.

The very opposite of who I am on the inside.

My guts continued to knot and throb as I grew older. At sixteen, I was the mess of messes even though I put up a good front. I spent the whole summer eating next to nothing and running for miles in the hot Houston sun. I'll probably write more about this at some point, but what I want to talk about now is the time I had a nervous breakdown.

We were assigned to read *Cold Mountain*, and I'd go sit in my closet with the book in my lap. My closet had a window, and I'd look outside

the window and then at the cover, and then back outside at the window and then back at the cover, and then my hand would go to try to open the cover and I would start to cry like someone was taking a knife to all those knotted guts.

I was too young and too unskilled to understand the pressure was killing me. The pressure to look perfect, to act perfect, to make perfect grades. Let me be very clear here: my parents never put that pressure on me. They never worried about me doing well because I was my own slave master. They simply loved me and supported me and did things like help coach me in tennis (even though my father never played a day in his life but somehow was exceptionally good at it. You'll meet Mel in more of these posts...this is pretty much his M.O.) and take out beautifully crafted full-page ads in my yearbook to let me know how loved I was.

I wish I could have just paused in that love to really enjoy it as I do now. But I was too busy keeping up the rouse.

We ended up moving that summer anyways, which took away my excruciating circumstances and which I mistook for all my problems being solved.

I eventually break again in college. I'll get into that later, too, because that time in my life deserves its own book. An unhinged sorority girl/poetry major (I'm pretty sure I was the only one to have ever existed) who spent her time drinking because As were way too easy to make after you've beaten them into yourself for all those years.

I snapped. Like hardcore snapped. But I suppose God can only work when you're willing to give Him your pieces.

It still creeps in sometimes, even as I'm wearing my gray, stained, dead armadillo t-shirt. The need to perform, to perfect. But what little power

I have to do so. Just like the builders of the Tower of Babylon, I stand, my eyes straining upward, as God scatters me out into the beyond bit by bit. And then it's just me and Him and my eyes forward as He walks me through my past, and we leave it, dust at our heels.

Exploded in light.

I once caught an episode of the *Today* show in college. They had Jamie Lynn Sigler on who played on *The Sopranos*. I wasn't really paying attention because I never watched her show, but she wasn't there to talk about that. She was there to talk about her exercise bulimia.

It was like a light bulb went off in my head and my brain exploded in light. That's what I had. That's what I had been dealing with for so many years, and I never even knew it had a name.

I never even knew it was really a problem.

College was hard for me. Not the grades. Just the social aspect.

I had a 4.0 in the honors college, and I remember rolling the thought around like a lozenge in my mouth whenever I started to feel too hedged in. It didn't matter that I wasn't popular or barely had any friends in my sorority (all because of my own doing, *thank you very much*). The sole reason I had been asked to join anyway was because of my GPA since their collective score was tanking, and they needed all the help they could get.

Even from the likes of me.

I wasn't fair to them. I know that now. I think of all the missed opportunities to sit and talk with people. To get to know them and lead them away from the darkness. But how can you lead someone away when you live there yourself?

The blind leading the blind.

I would get so drunk on Saturday nights, sometimes close to blackout. I remember walking down sidewalks, enjoying the cool breeze on my face, anyone liable to snatch me up and take me away without me hard-

ly noticing. For all my anxiety during the day—my watchful eyes on anyone in case they made one wrong move—drunk Ericka was quite the opposite.

And maybe that's why I liked her so much.

Drinking curbed my anxiety. It of course causes a plethora of other problems like bad skin and weight gain (not to mention the moral and ethical degradation of one's soul when it becomes a god to you). And that's what it was, my god.

It was my savior.

When I'd drink too much, I'd eat too much the next day. A whole large supreme pizza just for me.

I'd eat it in the dining room of our sorority house where nobody would be on a Sunday. Some might have been at church, others with boyfriends.

But I didn't care. I had a whole pizza to eat and then a day at the gym to punish myself for it.

As a Gender Studies minor (Creative Writing major), I was pretty perturbed that it was officially the 21st century now and frats could invite us sorority girls over to party, but we weren't allowed to do the same. So, I took the initiative to devise a secret party with my roommate when our house mother was out of town.

We, of course, got caught the next day. And when I was questioned by our house mother and a few alumnae who I suppose gathered for these kinds of situations, I was asked about the party, and I point blank told them that yes, I did know about it because I was the one who had come up with the idea.

They didn't kick me out because I was the only one who was honest with them. For all my problems, I couldn't stand a liar. Oh, the irony.

I was still punished, however. They took away my drinking privileges at all sorority functions.

I thanked them for their time and then went to visit our President to tell her I was quitting.

I'd rather leave a semester before graduation than have to quit drinking.

When I talk to God, I ask Him why He spared me. I could have died so many times because truthfully, I've only given you a quick glimpse of what this particular season of life was like for me. It was so dark, and I seemed to crave its darkness.

I was drinking the poison, thinking it was the cure.

He never answers me, but then that's not correct. I actually suppose He does. In the way my husband loves me unconditionally and my daughter is growing and thriving at her new school. In the way I can still write these words even though you'd think all that alcohol would have dumbed me down by now. In the way I'm healthy and can move and breathe and bring in this new upside-down kingdom that has nothing to do with placating our fears with evil but giving those fears over to a good, good God.

In the way He counts my heartbeats.

People in the desert.

Poor Moses.

He tells those people in the desert, the Israelites, so many times about the God who loves them and won't leave them.

And how quickly their hearts are willing to leave that God.

Or Paul who tells us to renew our minds constantly. That we are saved but we're also in the process of being saved and will one day be saved as well. How incredible that concept, how outright insane.

It's happened and happening and will happen.

The beginning and the end. Always and forever.

He won't stop loving us.

In college, when I wasn't getting drunk to forget my ex-boyfriend or spending every waking moment with my current one (who I still want to spend every waking moment with. Love you, Matthew), I'd sometimes spend time with my church group.

You read that correctly.

It was odd being an atheist in training and being a part of a tight-knit group of young women who had so many problems and few answers.

I was raised Catholic, and this group met at the Catholic church on our campus. We called ourselves the Setons after Elizabeth Ann Seton, the first saint to be canonized in the United States and who is the patron saint of Catholic schools, widows, and seafarers. We were none of those things, and I can't even remember why we were called that. I do remember that our leader (let's call her Jane) had a reason for liking Elizabeth so much, and I remember trusting her decision at the time.

So, let's just go with it.