

First, the Epilogue

Beneath clouds and moon and stars
on an empty shore we met crashing waves,
our promise broken,
my words wavered,
I just need to be found.

MY EYES OPENED SLOWLY, unknowingly to a new world.

“Hey, you need to come with me. *Now!*” John’s voice had a measured urgency that wasn’t normal for my friend. “The nurse sent me to get you. It’s time. I think this is it. It doesn’t look like she’s going to make it. I don’t think she’ll be with us much longer.”

The weight of this was impossible.

It’s the hardest thing to find something when you can’t see.

Like when you first wake up from a deep sleep or when you stumble through a dark room looking for something in the place

you last left it, in what has been its regular place in your life. It is traumatizing and disorienting when what you are searching for is not in the place you expect it to be.

Faith. Trust. Hope.

Fading.

Time slowed.

Each breath was measured and deep.

I had known this time would arrive, but it seemed to find me too early. I felt lost and disoriented.

Five days earlier, my wife, Marianne, had been rushed to the hospital. She was admitted to the ICU floor, and since then her life had delicately swayed back and forth. During those days, I had quickly lost my way . . . and myself. Suddenly, my mostly undisturbed and enjoyable path—the one that had always seemed to sprawl out much farther than I could ever see—was enveloped in a dense fog that ended at the edge of a cliff. I had never been in this position before. I was used to seeing what was coming and adjusting accordingly. But here, there was nowhere to go. I could think of no prayer that would reveal an inviting detour around the dead end.

I tried to be brave, but my heart melted.

I tried denial, but my heart was reminded that this was real.

I tried faith, but my heart shrank, dwarfed by fear.

All I could do was watch and hope to be saved.

The day before Marianne died, I walked outside and sat on a bench. I couldn't stand to be in the hospital anymore. The rhythmic sound of the ventilator that was pushing air into my wife's body, the beeping sounds of IV machines filling her with medicine, and the rotation of loved ones to accompany us on this terrible journey

was just too much. I couldn't take another hug or look into another pair of pity-filled eyes. The silence in my heart was driving me mad. I walked out of the hospital hoping to hear something different.

Alone in the warm sun, I could feel each of my heartbeats, one by one. But I couldn't express what I felt in my heart with each beat. In one moment, I imagined Marianne as she struggled to open her eyes. As her eyes adjusted to the light, our eyes made contact and a warm smile crossed her face, suggesting all would be well, all would be as it should be. But in the next moment, all I could feel was the vast emptiness of life without her. I was back at the cliff in the fog . . . completely lost.

Maybe God would heal her and use her story as an amazing example of His unending faithfulness and activity in our ordinary lives. Surely He would intervene and rescue her—despite lab reports, scans, and medical professional opinions. After all, that's the way it should be. Those are the stories we hear of faith overcoming what appears to be hopeless circumstances. Those who believe in God escape tragedy. But still I thought, *What if I'm the exception?*

What if God doesn't transcend tragedy for me?

What if she doesn't make it?

What does that mean for our family, our daughters?

For the future we dreamed of together?

For all the work and ways we were faithful?

Yes, certainly because of our diligence and faithfulness, she will pull through. In the five days leading up to this moment, I did what anyone would do: I begged, I pleaded, I bargained, I yelled, I cursed, I cried, I sat alone in silence, and I felt like each

word and emotion disappeared into the sky where the air is thinner and the dead escape to rest.

And then, sitting in the warmth of the sun on the bench just outside the hospital, a thought softer than all the rest somehow interrupted. It was as if God precisely placed this thought so deep in my heart that I couldn't deny the certainty of it—like the air I was breathing.

The thought was simple and short. Actually, it was less of a thought and more of a sense of knowing. I suddenly and internally understood that I wasn't going to leave that hospital with my wife. And I knew that I would never have the chance to walk this earth with her again. That echoing, impossible-to-ignore thought took my heart to a depth both lonely and cold.

I knew all of it. I knew too much all at once.

I knew I could do nothing to change our circumstances.

I knew I was not going to win this time. No matter how hard I tried or what I said.

Still, I frantically searched my thoughts for the right Scripture, for the right prayer, for the right promise. But there was nothing. Every time, I came up empty. Memories of our life together flashed through my mind like lightning splintering across a disturbed sky.

I couldn't stop thinking of Marianne's smile. Her words echoed in my wilting heart like symphonic tones, beautiful and warm. "I love you, stud," she would say with a smile that beat upon my heart like relentless waves on the shore.

I felt abandoned.

I felt betrayed.

And I felt too overwhelmed to know exactly what I felt.

I vividly remember walking to her room that morning. I understood the time had come. John had told me she was fading. This news was just as definite and sure as the quiet thought that God dragged across my heart two days before. I knew this was it. I had arrived at the line that I feared most, where earth and sky meet, where life as we know it here resigns to death.

My wife was dying.

I could do nothing about it but breathe and wait and try to find just enough space to be okay. In mere moments, our lifetime together would come down to one final breath, and we would be separated by the only thing that could overcome us: death.

I remember the day we got married. We waited for what seemed like a lifetime for that day. We had talked and dreamed and hoped about what the day would be like.

Marianne had worked diligently to put all of the pieces together for our wedding. It was going to be just as we wanted it. When the day finally arrived, all the pieces were pushed into place. Our friends and loved ones soaked up the warmth with us, all of us basking in the glow of love and potential. I had never felt so much love in all of my life.

Everyone seemed to be genuinely happy for us. Several friends hugged me and affirmed that Marianne and I made so much sense together.

I grinned like a giddy schoolboy as her dad walked her down the aisle. Marianne glided past our friends and family with a grace I imagined only angels could have. Her eyes glowed with life and love, and her smile was as inviting as the rising sun on a cool morning.

I stood still in my tuxedo, watching her get closer. My heart was on fire. We smiled nervously throughout the whole ceremony, wishing in unison for the shared lifetime before us to begin.

That day felt like a dream—a dream you want to live in—where the sun is warm, the pace is slow, and everything falls on the right side of the line. We held hands. Each passing moment felt full and forever.

But now I was the one walking toward her, down the hall of the hospital. And there was no grace in my movement as I approached her room. I kept thinking, *wishing* I were dreaming. I *must* be dreaming. Surely, this isn't real. This can't be the end of our story.

I can't breathe.

The air is stale and old, familiar with the life I once knew so well and loved so completely, but can no longer find. This life fades into the night, disappearing and leaving only me in place.

I want to see her alive, unharmed and unclaimed by death, waiting for me as she always did, with a smile. She was so good at being only herself. And herself is what found me.

Now I'm shuffling along with legs too weak to carry me another inch, closer to the end. I know life, in some semblance, will continue after this particular closure, but this sense of ending is so decisive I can't envision what might lie beyond. It's cold, colder than a northern wind stealing your breath and cutting deep to your bones.

This end is my beginning, though I don't yet know it. I can't yet understand any time or progress or middle to this suffering. And I certainly don't comprehend what kind of life might be in front of me.

I'm grasping for what is fading, like a child trying to hold smoke or catch fireflies. But what I reach for evades me. This ending is happening, thrust upon me, whether I comprehend it or not.

No word or act of agreement deviates death's course, though I've tried. Death is intent on winning, on completion. In this moment, what feels sure is that God has miscalculated or misjudged . . . or misled me. The preciseness of where He is doesn't matter much. He's not where I need Him to be. Or so I think. And so I accuse.

Everything is so sterile and clean. I can barely stand it. The antiseptic, washed-out environment tries to cover up all that feels dirty and wrong with death.

I know everyone dies. Don't we all? It is just that she shouldn't be dying or dead or gone. Not yet.

"Where will I find anything without her?"

She is I, and I am she. We are one. How do you take away half of one and still remain whole?

Why was I led here? Why do I have to let go?

Who is God, really, to watch in stillness and silence?

How do You love me, us, and them?

I think about our children . . . they will never understand. This is their nightmare: to lose their symbol of stability forever without saying goodbye, to part ways without a mother's kiss.

God, the cost they will pay is too much for me, Your accepted son, to bear. That loneliness and tragedy and sadness will rip straight through their souls. I wish I could swallow that bitter reality pill that will separate earth and sky as far as night and day for them. If possible I would fall on that grenade to keep

their hearts from exploding. If I could trade places with her, for them, I would. I would never want to leave her and them alone.

But You know that, don't You? And maybe that's why. If so, that's a horrible reason.

Yet here I am. I remain now, soon to be fully alone, torn with a clouded but grateful heart, I think. In a way, small yet distinct, I'm glad to be the one left behind. I would never want her to have to sink deeply into the dark alone. I would never want her to have to hold them and support them on her own.

Maybe I'll wake at some point, a cold sweaty mess, fully relieved that this was the worst dream my darkest subconscious could ever create. I would dream that dream every night for an eternity if I could wake to find my world still undisturbed and in place . . . to see her smile . . . just one more time.

But I know I'm not asleep. I just woke up. I can smell the sterile, clean environment of the hospital trying to convince me all is well while tragedy rips away the thing that defines every area of my life.

Surely the rudder will turn and she will narrowly skim the edge of the earth and return back to us. There's no way that God would allow this to happen to me when all I've tried to do is give my life to Him.

I've tried to quietly and faithfully serve Him. But maybe it doesn't matter. Maybe life and death burn uncontrollably—contained, but not controlled.

After what felt like an eternity, I arrived at Marianne's room in ICU where she had been for nearly five days. Sympathetic looks from the hospital staff both crushed me and enraged me. Lonely

violence gripped my heart instead of the calm, peaceful acceptance you hope to experience in those moments.

I walked into her room and asked everyone to leave. And for the first time in over a decade, I stood alone. The aloneness settled on me with the weight of a thousand days.

Not every story resolves the way you wish it would. Not every ending is happy. Sometimes the credits roll unexpectedly, leaving plotlines unfinished and precluding further questions. And then, the end.

II

“Where were you when I laid the earth’s foundation?

Tell me, if you understand. . . .

Who laid its cornerstone—

while the morning stars sang together

and all angels shouted for joy?”

JOB 38:4, 7

What is life about and what is its value?

When you are sewn to someone who dies, you can’t escape the moment. All you know about life and purpose is called back to the drafting table.

We build kingdoms in careers, houses, dreams, and possessions. We find love and determine what we desire. Those things define us, and we call it life. When those things leave us, we call it death. What we know and learn, what we can see and control, we call earth. What we cannot, we call sky, or heaven, or forever . . . or nothing.

Fullness of the truest, most unmistakable kind exists in the moments when life meets death, earth meets sky.

When we become aware of death, life takes on more value. We're forced to acknowledge something bigger at work, active beyond the existence we take to be everything. Suddenly, everything we reached for and attained, everything that satisfied us—and everything we reached for and missed—is reduced to things and moments.

Love remains. Love and the knowledge that maybe that's all that was real in the first place. Maybe earth is just a frontier being resettled and redeemed in our hearts.

What I called "life" had been calm and peaceful. My days passed, warming safely in the sun, familiar and friendly. I was blessed with ease and love and comfort. I had a wife who truly and fully loved me, and together we learned how to love and live.

Everything felt graceful, sometimes unnaturally so. We experienced seemingly little resistance to the good we lived. And we always overcame the minimal resistance we faced. We were in love with each other, with God, and with all that He meant to us.

We never had a home nestled in a quiet suburb, perfectly landscaped, manicured with bright flowers and shady trees, positioned within a perfectly kept, white picket fence. But we felt like we lived in a picture . . . a perfect picture. And looking back at the bumps and bruises we experienced in our life together, the strength we gained from going through each trial made life seem even more perfect.

Many times, friends and acquaintances commented on how perfect our life seemed and how good we had it. We exchanged deep smiles and agreed wholeheartedly.

I had most of the things that I needed, and I was reaching for what I wanted. I was confident that in the end, no matter the circumstance or difficulty, everything would work out and be okay. If the waters became rougher and the waves more threatening, most problems were only temporary, and the storm would eventually yield to sunshine.

I regularly recognized God's apparent hand in my life. I had good reason for optimism. I thanked Him for protecting me, my family, and the life that we were building. Things were going so well that my life seemed to be on autopilot. Rarely was there reason for alarm or concern.

I was indeed thankful for God's presence and direction in my decisions, but day to day I was mostly on my own . . . unless I really needed Him, of course. Then He would gracefully enter, and things would be okay again.

In the world I knew, God was a saving God, rescuing those in need. He had famously sent His Son to save the world. But I never fully understood His ability to save until I became hopelessly lost, until I pleaded for rescue from fear and loss and accusations in the new, unfamiliar day. On that day, I was desperate.

What do you do when life doesn't add up?

What do you say when the heavens are hauntingly silent?

Where do you go to escape the life that is eerily fading to mere memories, leaving you with only pictures and pieces?

How do you reconcile a deep-seated trust that has been invaded by tragedy?

God is the sovereign, majestic, mysterious King. He doesn't exist because we created Him; we exist only because of His grace.

He has always loved us. He always will. But He's not our waiter or butler or maid.

Words like *good*, *love*, and *happy* are very real, but we tend to define them based on our experiences. It's not that they don't have autonomous and independent meaning; they do. But we understand them far better in the context of their opposites. Those words have meaning, too—words such as *bad*, *hate*, and *sorrowful*.

In the darkest night, alone and lost, I found God . . . or perhaps I should say He found me. One way or the other, I was found, and that was all that mattered.

God has a magnificent way of redeeming what is broken and wrong. His love and goodness flood into our lives, constantly challenging, changing, and reshaping us. I'm learning to live in His redemptive broad strokes as well as in the fine details of His artistry in my life. Pain and loss have become my greatest treasures. Through the experience of overwhelming tragedy, I have experienced God to be something different, something greater, so much more than I ever imagined.

In the depth of the darkest night,
tighten your hands to the smallest light . . .
small enough to invade your heart,
whole enough to heal what is a crumbling mess,
able enough to hold the world ignoring.

I had always been slightly mistaken about exactly who and what God is. Even the tiny detail of referring to God as “He” pushes my understanding off just a bit. The description of “He” is

understandable because it's part of the human context. But God isn't part of the human context. He created the human context. He described Himself this way to help us comprehend Him.

The way we understand God is based on how He has chosen to reveal Himself to us, but God is so much more than what we can understand about Him. I understood God to be personal and relatable, a friend—the God who chooses companionship with those He creates. But God isn't limited to being my personal God. Or, I should say, that's not *all* He is. God isn't the God of my life alone. He's so much more. He's the God of the universe where my life exists and is sustained.

If He were merely the God of my life, He would be subject to my judgment. If He were only my friend, He would exist for my comfort and entertainment. If He were limited, then I would be on my own in this universe, left to fate and chance—a more overwhelming cosmic swelling tide than I ever imagined. However, if He is indeed the God of the universe, if every person and circumstance is subject to His existence as the source and creator and author of life, then I am a piece of the fabric of His cosmic creation.

I am sustained as part of all that He is sustaining.

I am well taken care of no matter the terrors that threaten.

After all, what tragedy can possibly threaten a cosmic ruler? What horror can disrupt His ability to tend to His world? Through the experience of tragedy, God has not become depersonalized in my life. Instead, He has become more complete in my thinking and relation to Him. I have become more personal to Him. He makes Himself small for my sake, but He is not small, not at all. For a long time, I had it wrong. Previously, I knew God as small—

small enough to be held in the space of my heart. But now I know He is infinitely larger and ultimately complete.

His ability to take care of us needn't be questioned. God exists outside and beyond all that unfolds in our lives. In Him we find our beginning, and through Him we discover there is no end—even in death.

III

This book is not about death. This book is not about grief. This book is not about sadness and all the prickly little things associated with it.

It is a remembering and an acceptance of moments when boundaries were pushed back, when darkness succumbed to light and life swallowed death. It is a confession of God, present and very near, sustaining life by all means necessary, a revealing of Himself through abundant grace.

It is ultimately about life, love, grace, and being found. That wasn't clear to me when I first started composing words and recollecting memories. It's clear to me now, although the clarity doesn't make the remembering much easier.

Be my shelter,
and may Your heart be my home.
Give me rest from the swelling storms;
quiet my violent mind,
which hates easily and lusts for control.

Sweep the dust that has gathered on broken floors,
carry it out back and burn the pictures;
spread the ashes over fertile soil.

May the dimming light in my eyes
be swallowed by the warmth of a new dawn.
Let the pieces of broken bones be collected;
plant my heart deep within Your ground
so that it may never again be found.

My hands are untrustworthy
and my steps are unsteady.
My eyes lie often and my lips know no good.

But only keep me here,
in the eternity of Your shadow,
where grace breathes strength invincible,
where stained hands are held, not broken.