



An Extra Mile

A STORY OF
EMBRACING GOD'S CALL



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Taken from *An Extra Mile* by Sharon Garlough Brown.

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Published by InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL. www.ivpress.com

Part One

In the Shadow



*Be merciful to me, O God, be merciful to me, for in you my
soul takes refuge; in the shadow of your wings I will
take refuge, till the storms of destruction pass by.*

PSALM 57:1

one

Becca

In the three weeks since her mother's death, Becca Crane had learned one thing about grief: there was no predicting what might trigger a deluge of emotion. The simplest things could set her off—an American accent on the London Underground, a box of Cheerios (her mother's staple) on a shelf at Tesco's, the melodic, mournful strains of a violin played by a street musician on the south side of the Thames. For some reason nighttime walks along the river with the view across to the Houses of Parliament evoked such deep pain in her chest that she could hardly breathe.

She pulled her knit beret down over her ears and leaned forward against the cold metal railing. All along the South Bank, the globes on the wrought-iron lampposts cast soft light on couples walking hand in hand, while the laughter of children riding an old-fashioned carousel wafted toward her.

She wasn't sure why she subjected herself to these evening outings. Maybe she preferred the searing pain of loss to the numbness that had consumed her immediately after her mother died. In Kingsbury, her hometown, she had stumbled along dazed and detached, as if she were watching herself in a movie, a short, dark-haired orphan girl trying to convince herself and everyone else that she would survive "just fine."

"Call me if you need anything," her aunt had said on the phone shortly after Becca returned to London for the remainder of her junior year abroad. The words rang hollow. Rachel hadn't even bothered to attend the funeral, using the feeble excuse of a business trip she couldn't change. She had even reneged on her offer of part-time freelance work over the

summer, initially extended so that Becca could spend the summer with Simon in Paris, free of any need for her mother's financial support or approval. But now, as Rachel had caustically noted, Becca had been provided for through her mother's modest estate. "What on earth will you do with a house like that?"

Becca didn't know. She didn't know anything. Except that she missed her mother. Terribly.

An evening cruise boat glided by, lit from within. Becca imagined the conversations of the young women flirting over canapes and champagne, with nothing to think about except the men they might hook up with. Like her friend Pippa. Pippa had tried to be understanding and compassionate, but apart from her frequent bad break-ups, she had never lost anyone. Her advice, though well-meaning, was one-dimensional: distraction. Alcohol, fun, sex—it didn't matter what Becca used, Pippa said, as long as it took her mind off the pain.

Everyone had advice to dispense. Maybe it made them feel better, like they were helping before absolving themselves of any further responsibility of care and concern. Becca had already heard the best her friends on both sides of the Pond could offer:

Your mum would want you to be happy. She would want you to move on with your life.

You should travel, see the world. Life's short. Make the most of it.

Just concentrate on all the good times you and your mom had together. Try to be happy.

Look at everything you have to be thankful for.

None of their platitudes helped. And whenever someone said, "I know just how you feel. When my—insert family member or favorite pet here—died . . .," Becca wanted to scream, "You don't know how I feel! You have no idea how I feel."

She reached into her purse for a tissue and blew her nose. How could anyone know how she felt when most days she didn't even know herself? The one person she wanted to talk to about it—the one person she had, for most of her life, confided in—was gone. Forever. *She lives on in your memories*, Simon said.

Not good enough. Nowhere close to good enough.

She stepped away from the railing and headed toward the London Eye, which was illuminated in bright blue. There—right there at the base of the Eye, near the place where happy crowds queued for their half-hour ride in the large, slow-motion capsules—that’s where her mother had waited for her in December. Becca, spotting her from a distance, had pointed her out to Simon, who laughed and said how small and apprehensive she looked, her head tilted back to survey the size of the wheel. “A bit high-strung, is she?” he asked. Becca nodded. When their eyes met, her mother fixed a strained and determined smile on her face. “Ah, now,” Simon said, “she’s going to love me.” Becca had laughed and leaned in closer to him.

She lives on in your memories, Simon’s voice repeated.

Not good enough.

As she watched families board the Eye together, Becca knew one thing: she would give absolutely anything to have one more ride with her mother. Just the two of them.

Her phone buzzed with a text from Simon: Waiting for you.

She wiped her face with her coat sleeve and replied: On my way.

Hannah

One month after submitting a resignation letter to the church she had served for fifteen years, Hannah Shepley Allen was confident of one thing: dispensability was easier to embrace in theory than in practice.

“You’re indispensable to me,” Nathan, her husband of twelve days, said as he stooped to kiss her furrowed brow. “And to Jake. He adores you. And so do I.”

Hannah pushed her chair back from the kitchen table, her eyes still fixed on her laptop screen. Perhaps if she hadn’t been so readily replaced, her ego wouldn’t be so bruised. But the latest email from her longtime senior pastor, Steve Hernandez, indicated that, with dizzying speed, Westminster was progressing with plans for her successor. *We’re wondering if you might be willing to consider a rent-to-own option for Heather to remain in your house.*

She swept her hand toward her screen. “Go ahead and read the whole thing.” Nathan pushed his glasses up on the bridge of his nose and leaned forward to read the words Hannah had read three times. She waited until he stood up straight again, then asked, “What do you think?”

“Well, it sure solves the stress of trying to sell it. Sounds like an answer to prayer to me.”

“No—I mean, what do you think about them hiring Heather?”

“He doesn’t say they’re hiring Heather.”

“It’s obvious that’s what they’re doing.” Hannah set her jaw and read the words again. *If you’re open to the possibility, please get in touch with her to discuss details.* “And why is Steve the one emailing me about it? Why didn’t Heather just call and say, ‘Hey, I’m taking over your job and your office, and I want to take over your house too!’”

Nathan closed her laptop and gently turned her around to face him. “Maybe he wanted to be the one to float up the trial balloon, see how you’d react.”

Well, it was odd. The whole thing was odd. And not even Nate could convince her otherwise. Now that they had returned from their

honeymoon and had begun to settle into a home-life routine, she'd had lots of time to reflect on her transition to West Michigan. Though Steve had framed releasing her from ministry as a gift, saying that it was important she be free to focus on her marriage and not return to Chicago out of obligation, maybe it had been a calculated attempt for control. "You really don't think this is weird?" she asked.

"Do you want me to think it's weird?" His brown eyes smiled at her even as his lips remained neutral. "'Cause I can embrace 'weird' if you want me to. I can run conspiracy theories with the best of them. Like, maybe they planned this from the get-go and devised the whole sabbatical as a ruse to get you out of the way so they could hire this Heather, who is carrying on an illicit affair with—"

"Oh, stop." Hannah lightly punched his stomach. "That's not what I mean. I'm just saying, the whole thing is very . . ." He waited for her to find the right adjective. "Weird." That's the best she could come up. Something was off.

"Well, I won't argue with your intuition, Shep. But maybe Heather's done a decent enough job filling your shoes, and they're eager to offer her something permanent now that they know you're not coming back. Saves them the trouble of a long-drawn-out search, and if she likes the house well enough to stay in it, then why not? Seems to me they're doing you a favor, doing us a favor, by taking away the stress of selling it."

And the stress of a double mortgage, which would begin the first of April. Though Nate hadn't mentioned anxiety over managing two mortgage payments, Hannah had begun to feel the weight of it. With no current income and limited financial resources to bring into their marriage, she ought to be jumping for joy at the prospect of such an easy transition. Instead, she felt resentful.

"Don't let pride keep you from seeing the gift in this, Hannah."

"I know." What she didn't need right now was a lecture. What she needed was time to process this by herself.

He glanced at his watch. "I've got to go. Jake'll be done with band rehearsal soon." He reached for his car keys, which he kept on the kitchen counter, not on the hook beside the coat rack. She had made the

mistake of hanging them there the day before, and he'd ransacked the house looking for them, frantic when she didn't hear his call on her cell phone while she was out shopping. He had been late to class.

"How about if I go pick him up?" Hannah said.

"No, it's okay. I'll get him."

"I'll get dinner started, then. Pasta primavera okay?" She reached for the correct cupboard on her first try and removed a stainless steel pot that had seen better days. Once she emptied her house, she could replace some of his cookware.

"Uh . . . it's Thursday," he said.

Her hand hovered near the faucet. She had evidently forgotten the significance of Thursdays.

"Pizza night," he said. "An Allen Boys tradition. But if you've already got something planned, I'm sure Jake won't mind."

"No, it's okay." If Nathan had already mentioned this particular weekly tradition, she had forgotten. There were quite a few Allen Boys activities to keep track of. She would need to make a list.

"Jake and I usually get a hand-tossed meat feast, but I can get half veggies if you'd like."

"No, get your usual. That's fine." She crammed the pot back into the cupboard. "I'll fix a salad to go with it, okay?"

"Thanks. I'll be back soon." With a kiss to her cheek, he was out the door.

Chaucer, Nate's golden retriever, trotted into the kitchen and sat down on the floor mat, thumping his tail. "Do you want to go out?" Hannah asked. He did not move. "Out?" He barked once. She motioned toward the back door. "Outside?" she asked, trying to mimic Nathan's inflection. Chaucer lifted a single paw for her to shake. She took his paw in one hand and stroked his silky fur with the other. He barked again. "Oh, sorry! Treat?" He rose and spun in a circle. "Okay. Treat. Your dad forgot to give you one, huh?" She reached into the jar on the counter and tossed two treats onto the floor. "Don't tell him I gave you extra."

She rinsed off her hands, then searched cupboards until she found a salad bowl. In their five days of living together under Nathan's roof, the

only moving-in task she had completed was hanging up her clothes in half of his closet. He had promised to clear shelves for her in the cramped third bedroom that served as his home office, but she was reluctant to invade his space. So the boxes of books and journals she'd brought with her on sabbatical remained in a corner of the basement. The rest of her possessions awaited sorting in Chicago. Nate had insisted he didn't have any emotional attachment to his furniture, and if she wanted to integrate some of her pieces, he was fine with that. *Decorate however you want*, he said. *It's been a bachelor pad way too long.*

A dark bachelor pad. During the winter months she hadn't noticed how little natural light shone inside. But now that the March days were lengthening, the house felt like a burrow with its heavy brocade drapes and predominantly taupe walls. Hannah had never been a fan of bold, bright colors, but maybe they should exchange his drab furniture and her neutral pieces for something cheerful.

She should have taken some photos of the Johnson's cottage while she was living there. Nancy had discriminating taste, and though Hannah could never splurge on interior design, she might frugally duplicate the light cottons and pastel palette. If not for the rift between them, she might even have asked for Nancy's help.

Upon returning from their honeymoon, Hannah had cleared out her scant belongings from the cottage, leaving Nancy a potted plant and a thank-you note on the counter. Fifteen years of friendship, and they were left communicating only via email. All of Hannah's overtures toward face-to-face reconciliation had been rebuffed by cool reserve: Nancy and Doug were very pleased she had enjoyed her time at their cottage, and they wished Hannah and her new husband success in their life together. When Hannah mentioned meeting her at the cottage to hand over the key, Nancy replied that she would have a friend with her when she came to ready it for their family, and she really wasn't sure what their schedule might be. Hannah could leave the key under the mat.

Chaucer, having inhaled both biscuits, plopped down on the kitchen mat with a sigh. "Exactly," Hannah said. Maybe someday Nancy would

forgive her for manipulating and deceiving her. She hoped so. She opened a Caesar salad kit and dumped it into the plastic bowl.

Out of sync. That's what her life felt like. Eventually, she would find her equilibrium in her new reality, with all of its joys and challenges. The adjustment would take time. She knew that. Any grief counselor would look at her inventory of major life changes over the past six months and recommend she be very intentional about processing the upheaval. Even good upheaval brought stress. She knew that. She had walked alongside enough grieving people in pastoral ministry to understand the complicated dynamics of loss and transition.

She rubbed Chaucer's back with her bare foot while she mixed the croutons with the lettuce.

Change in employment? Check. First, a mandated sabbatical and now, a resignation.

Major move? Check. Twice. From her settled life in Chicago to the Johnson's cottage on Lake Michigan to Nathan's house in Kingsbury.

Marriage? Check. A first marriage at age forty.

Becoming a parent? Check. She was now stepmother to a thirteen-year-old boy.

Change in social circles? Check. She had been removed from all of her ministry colleagues and peers in Chicago and had begun to forge new relationships in Kingsbury, particularly with the Sensible Shoes Club, her companions on the spiritual journey.

Death of a friend?

She set aside the salad bowl as, with tears, Hannah realized she had lived almost a whole day without once thinking about her beloved Meg.

Mara

Never underestimate the horror of a magnifying mirror, Mara Garrison thought, or the importance of a good set of tweezers. She tilted her chin higher and tried again to snag a stubborn, wiry whisker. Ever since she turned fifty, her nemeses seemed to sprout overnight.

“Gotcha!” she exclaimed as the root yielded with a satisfying pop. She swiped her chin to verify success, a gesture that brought to mind her grandmother, who had frequently sat with a pair of tweezers in hand, squinting at her reflection in the oxidized glass of an antique dressing table. After she finished her primping rituals, Nana would pat the embroidered seat cushion, and Mara would position herself in front of the mirror and grimace while Nana combed out the tangles of her dark auburn hair. As Nana combed with firm but loving strokes, Mara would confide in her about the girls at school who had nicknamed her *The Whale*. “Don’t you pay them no mind, Sweet Pea,” Nana would say. “Sticks and stones will break my bones . . .”

Mara would finish the sentence with a valiant, sniffled, “But names will never hurt me.”

Whoever made that up was a whale of a liar.

If she ever got wind of anyone calling her granddaughter, Madeleine, names, they would have one angry grandmother to deal with. An angry daddy too. Her son Jeremy wouldn’t put up with any bullying nonsense, that was for sure. And besides, with all the anti-bullying policies and procedures in place, kids didn’t get away with as much as they used to. At least, they weren’t supposed to be able to get away with it. She’d heard enough bullying accusations against Brian to know that teachers and students and administrators were pretty vigilant about that.

She wrapped herself in her red plus-sized kimono robe and shuffled down the hallway. “You up, Brian?” she called to a closed bedroom door. She hadn’t heard his alarm go off. Bailey, Brian’s dog, stood on his hind legs and pawed at the wood. “Down, Bailey.” She nudged him with her slipper. “Get down, Brian?” Still no answer. She cracked the door open,

the stench of sweat and day-old pizza engulfing her. How many times did she have to tell the boys not to leave food lying around? Bailey bolted inside. “You awake?” She stooped to pick up a pair of gym socks and glowered at his bed, where his Green Bay Packers comforter lay in a rumpled heap.

“Where’s your brother?” she asked fifteen-year-old Kevin, who, red hair awry, was plodding toward the bathroom the two boys shared.

“Dunno.”

Bailey wove in and out of her feet as she descended the stairs to the family room—no Brian—and to the kitchen—no Brian. “Brian?” she called down to the basement. No answer. She flipped on the light switch and walked down far enough to verify that he wasn’t asleep on the couch or playing video games.

Her youngest had been in his room when she went to bed. She’d heard his music—his latest moody grunge or metal band that supplied the soundtrack for his obstinate defiance of her authority—and she had almost pounded on the door to tell him to turn it down. But weeks ago, at her counselor Dawn’s suggestion, she had decided to choose her battles with him more carefully. So far that strategy hadn’t paid off. At. All.

Kevin trudged into the kitchen and reached for a box of Lucky Charms, which he poured into his mouth straight from the plastic liner.

“Hey! How about a bowl?” Mara opened a cupboard and set one down on the counter. He filled it without commenting and ate the dry cereal with his fingers, picking out the marshmallow pieces first. She decided not to insist on a spoon. “Run down to the basement and check if he’s down there somewhere, will you, Kevin?” Maybe Brian hadn’t heard her calling for him. Or maybe he was ignoring her.

“I’m eating.”

Pick your battles, Dawn’s voice instructed.

Fine.

She was halfway down the basement stairs when Brian, wearing boxers and a rumpled T-shirt, emerged from the laundry room. “What are you doing? Didn’t you hear me calling you?”

The split second of panic on his face morphed into his usual expression of scorn. Without replying, he tried to brush past her on the stairs.

“Whoa!” She thrust out her arm and, before he could resist her, sniffed his hair, a swift maneuver she had learned years ago during Jeremy’s adolescent experimentation with marijuana.

His nostrils flared. “What are you doing, you freak?”

“Nothing. Just wondering where you were, that’s all.”

“Yeah. Whatever.” He snarled something else under his breath.

“Excuse me?”

“I said, Whatever.” Bounding up the stairs, he shouted in anger when Bailey tripped him at the top.

“You’re the one who wanted a dog,” Mara muttered. She snapped her fingers and summoned Bailey. In the months since her soon-to-be-ex-husband, Tom, had bought Brian the dog in order to spite her, Mara had become quite attached to the little guy. She rubbed his face in her hands and patted him on the rear end before he raced off.

Hearing a door slam upstairs, she headed to the laundry room to see if anything was amiss. Years ago, when Jeremy was a little older than Kevin, she had found all sorts of contraband in the laundry room. She had survived Jeremy’s rebellion, she reminded herself as she rummaged through a trash can. He had grown up to be a loyal, loving, and affectionate son, husband, and father. Maybe there was hope for Brian. If he didn’t become even more like his dad.

The trash can was filled with nothing but lint and wadded up tissues. No cigarette butts and no baggies with suspicious substances. Brian had never done a load of laundry, had never even put away his own clean clothes. So what was he doing down here? She kicked at a pile of dirty clothes on the concrete floor, not sure what she was looking for until, Bingo. She found it. Buried beneath multiple pairs of jeans, boxers, and sweatshirts was a fitted twin sheet crumpled into a ball. He had been trying to conceal his embarrassment.

And she had been quick to assume he was up to no good.

No way she could talk with him about it. Tom was the one who had handled the puberty conversations with the boys, and she sure wasn’t

going to text Tom and ask him to reassure Brian that there wasn't something wrong with him. She tossed the sheet and some towels into the washer and started a load. She would put clean sheets on his bed while he was at school, and he would know that she knew. Rather than him being grateful that she didn't mention it, he would probably be even more resentful toward her for finding out and fixing it. Because he didn't want to need her, Dawn had once explained. What he wanted was to go live with his dad in Cleveland.

Tom wouldn't have it. He had made it clear through their attorney negotiations that what he wanted were visiting privileges without day-to-day responsibilities. At least, that's the way Mara saw it. He insisted that primary physical custody be granted to her for both boys, no matter what Brian begged for. Tom would drive in and see the boys every other weekend, get every other spring break and alternate major holidays, take them on expensive vacations during his allotted summer weeks, and preserve his role as their fun, spoiling hero. The drudgery, the conflict, the day-to-day stress of single parenting two teenage boys—that would continue to be hers.

A week ago Tom had submitted a proposed financial settlement that to Mara's astonishment enabled her and the boys to stay in the house until Brian graduated from high school, at which point the house would be sold and the profit split. After crunching the numbers, her attorney advised her to take it. It was a good offer, he said, with equitable monthly child support for the boys. They would be well provided for. By accepting the deal, she could stay out of court and be free to move on once their mandatory six-month waiting period expired in June.

She ought to be elated. Grateful. She ought to feel relieved. And she did. But she couldn't help feeling like Tom had played her. He would make sure both boys knew that his "generosity" had enabled their lives to continue with the least possible amount of disruption. Hero dad. That was the script. And if Mara didn't follow it, the boys would resent her.

She didn't want to feel indebted to Tom. Maybe what she wanted was a fresh start, a clean break. Maybe subconsciously she'd hoped that his settlement proposal would reveal him to be the bullying oppressor she

had endured for the past fifteen years. Instead, he was coming off as magnanimous. Even with a gift that ought to have set her free from some financial stress, he had managed to retain control. She wasn't naïve. Anything that appeared to benefit her and the boys would actually be benefiting him first. He probably wanted to protect his investment, hold on to the house long enough for the market to fully recover so that in four years he would get more money for it.

In all likelihood, the proposal was also a manipulative attempt to keep her from prying into his personal affairs, including whatever agreement and relationship he had with the pregnant girlfriend Kevin had told her about. Maybe his attorney had recommended generosity as a way to cover an "indiscretion." His company might not look favorably upon him getting a woman pregnant and then divorcing his wife. If, in fact, it was his kid. She didn't know that for sure, and she wasn't going to ask Kevin to find out.

Let it go, she commanded herself. Let it all go. The bitterness. The desire for revenge. She had turned it all over to God the night the Sensible Shoes Club met at Meg's house to pray with the story of Jesus washing the disciples' feet. But Mara was daily reminded that she needed to keep letting go, especially when her buttons got pushed.

She picked through the rest of the dirty laundry pile, separating out all the dark colors. The agreement, at least, bought her some time to get on her feet. Maybe someday her part-time job at Crossroads House shelter would become a full-time job with benefits. Miss Jada had told her the board was open to that possibility. What an answer to prayer that would be! She loved coordinating meals and overseeing hospitality for the homeless and displaced guests who came in search of a safe place to land, just like she had done almost thirty years ago with the then-toddler Jeremy.

Brian was slouched at the kitchen counter, eyes riveted on his cereal bowl, when Mara lumbered up the stairs. Rather than calling attention to their silent transaction, she picked up her cell phone and checked for messages: one from Abby, saying she wouldn't need her to take care of Madeleine that morning; one from Hannah, confirming their Sensible

Shoes Club meeting that evening at Charissa's house; and one from Tom (who had been instructed that he needed to communicate any change of plans directly to her, not to the boys), informing her that he would pick them up an hour later than usual. "Dad will pick you up at seven," she said, "and I'll be gone. I've got my group tonight."

Neither one of them acknowledged the news. She replied with "Happy to come another time" to Abby, "Looking forward to it" to Hannah, and "Okay" to Tom. Then she packed the boys' lunches in silence. Where was the line between picking the important battles and enabling them to take advantage of her? She would have to have another conversation with Dawn about that.

I am the one Jesus loves, she mentally declared to her reflection in the microwave as she spread mustard onto white bread. Come to think of it, she had totally neglected that spiritual practice the past couple of weeks. All the time she spent plucking whiskers in front of the magnifying mirror, and it still hadn't become a regular habit to declare God's love for her to herself. She was so focused on removing the offending hairs that she lost sight of the larger opportunity to see herself as God saw her. Beloved. Favored. Chosen.

As Hannah would say, *That'll preach.*

She would have to remember to share that image of the mirror with the group. They hadn't been together since Hannah's wedding, and they had a lot to catch up on.

Mara wiped her nose against her sleeve and slid Kevin's ham and cheese sandwich into a plastic bag. She could still see Meg sitting at the back corner table near an exit door at their first retreat session at New Hope, the hives of anxiety rising to her chin as she tried to decide whether to stay for the sacred journey or bolt. The growth and transformation Meg had experienced was remarkable, and in many ways, she was the kind and compassionate bond that had knit them all together. Though Hannah and Charissa hadn't said it aloud, Mara wondered if the thought had crossed their minds too: she wasn't sure how the Sensible Shoes Club would survive without Meg Crane.

"Did you make me ham and cheese?" Kevin asked.

That was the drill. Every day she made him ham and cheese on white bread with mustard on only one side. “Yep.”

“I’m kinda tired of ham and cheese.”

She inflated her cheeks and blew the air out slowly. “Then tell you what,” she said, fighting the temptation to toss the sandwich into the trash, “how about if you make your own lunch? Both of you. I think I’ll take the day off. And Brian?” He was actually making eye contact with her. “You’ll need to take your dog for a walk.”

Charissa

What was it about pregnant women, Charissa Sinclair wondered as she stood in line at the Kingsbury Public Library, that caused even strangers to lose all sense of propriety and violate personal boundaries? The next person who reached out to touch her belly would be slapped. Or maybe she would reach out and rub theirs like a genie lamp.

“When are you due?” the latest offender asked.

To prevent any further infringement, Charissa positioned her gardening books against her burgeoning abdomen. “July.”

“You look really good. You’ve got an advantage, being tall. I was ginormous. And then my doctor told me that I had—”

Here we go. Charissa fought the temptation to interrupt and tell her she wasn’t interested in her pregnancy complications or labor horror stories. If she was subjected to one more personal narrative or narrative about a friend of a friend or a second cousin once removed who ended up in some kind of childbirth emergency, she was going to scream. Or throw something.

“Next?” The library assistant summoned the woman to the counter, cutting her off just as she was getting to the good part. Charissa watched her deflate.

“Well, good luck to you,” she said over her shoulder, with a final appraising stare.

Charissa gave her a close-lipped smile.

Pregnancy was hard enough without strangers compounding the stress. There were women who exulted in being pregnant—Charissa was assaulted ad nauseam by their posts and photos on Facebook chronicling their “journeys”—but she wasn’t one of them. She had finally begun to accept that reality without heaping guilt on herself. “You know I love our Bethany,” she said to John when she got home, “but part of me wants to say, ‘Wake me up when it’s over.’”

“I know,” he said. “How many babies would be born if men had to be pregnant?”

“None. You guys are wimps.” She set her books down on the console table and hung up the key to Meg’s car, which Becca had loaned to her. *No point in it just sitting in the driveway while I’m in London*, Becca had said while they were changing into their bridesmaids’ gowns for Hannah’s wedding. Charissa needed to send her an email, see how she was coping with everything.

“Jeremy and I are going to get something to eat and then head to Home Depot while you have your group,” John said. “He wants to show me what he’s thinking for the bathroom remodel.”

“Just keep in mind your wife is pregnant, okay? And we’ve only got one toilet.”

“I know. It’s just some cosmetic updates. Nothing major.”

“And budget, remember?” She glanced out the front window at the sound of Jeremy’s loud muffler. “We’re on a budget, John.”

“I know. He knows that, he’s good about that. Look what he’s already saved us! We’re running way under.”

John was right about that. Mara’s son had been a godsend. In the five weeks since they closed on the house, Jeremy had restored hardwood floors, reinvigorated kitchen cabinets, and helped them paint the interior, including the soft seashell pink walls of the room that would be their daughter’s. Jeremy often voiced how grateful he was for the work. With his own new baby and reduced hours at the construction company, he and Abby were strapped for cash. He was hoping work would pick up again in the spring, counting on it. In the meantime, he was making himself available for all kinds of handyman projects.

John opened the front door to greet his new friend. “C’mon in!”

Jeremy wiped his work boots on the welcome mat and grasped John’s extended hand, his shy smile revealing the gap between his front teeth. Mara had once confided to Charissa that she regretted never having the money to pay for braces for him. *He used to get teased because of his teeth*, Mara said. *Kids can be so cruel, can’t they?*

Yes. They could. Though she hated to admit it, Charissa had once been one of them. Lately she had become quicker to recognize her critical and judgmental impulses, hard as it was to be honest about them.

Progress, not perfection. That was her new motto, far easier most days to declare than to live.

She greeted Jeremy and then said, “Is Abby off tonight?”

“Yeah.”

“How’s she doing, being back at work? How’s Madeleine?”

“Good. Both good, thanks.” He cracked his knuckles and turned toward John. “You ready to go?”

“Gimme just a sec.” John jogged down the hallway to their bedroom.

Charissa pressed on the small of her back. She didn’t yet know Jeremy and Abby well enough to initiate any prying conversations about money or stress. “Your mom’s coming over tonight. We’ve got our Sensible Shoes group.”

“Yeah, she told me. She always looks forward to that.”

“Yes, it’s always a good time together. For prayer and reflection, that is. I mean, it’s not a ‘good time’ like most people think of when they hear the words ‘good time.’”

He chuckled. “No, I guess you’re right about that. These days, ‘good time’ for us means getting a few hours of uninterrupted sleep.”

“I’m sure that will be the same for us in a few months.” Charissa wasn’t looking forward to that part. When she didn’t get her six to eight hours, she became a thunderhead of irritability. There was a reason why sleep deprivation was a common method of torture.

Jeremy pointed with his chin toward the gardening books. “Gonna do some landscaping?”

“No, not so much landscaping; it’s all pretty well laid out already. But I’m noticing lots of green things starting to poke up in the flower beds, and I don’t have a clue what any of them are.” She wondered how many of the plants Meg and Jim had tended when they lived in the house twenty years ago. She had planned on asking Meg about the flowers come spring and summer, but—

“Abby’s always dreamed of having a flower garden,” Jeremy said. “She does these pots of flowers for the patio at the apartment—real pretty—but I don’t know what any of it is. Red and pink and white. That’s all I know about flowers.”

“I’m not much better than that. John’s mom is a master gardener, and I’m hoping she’ll be able to identify what’s in the beds and give me some tips when they come down to visit.”

“What about Mom?” John asked as he returned with his wallet and phone.

“I was saying she’s got a green thumb.”

“For sure. Mom can make anything grow. As for me, I look at plants, and they die.”

“Well, don’t you start killing things off before they even have a chance,” Charissa said. “We’ll have the prettiest garden on the block, just you wait.”

“Says the woman who for our whole married life has insisted she couldn’t bear the responsibility of a house plant.”

“Go,” she said, bopping him on the shoulder as he flashed his boyish grin. “You can go now. And keep an eye on him, Jeremy. Don’t let him convince you that I’ve given him permission to buy anything other than what you recommend for the bathroom. Budget, John. Keep to the budget.” This she said for the benefit of both of them.

John gave a mock salute, Jeremy a slight nod, and they were out the door.

Charissa kicked off her shoes, sank into an overstuffed armchair facing the fireplace, and put her feet up on an ottoman. She had hoped to vacuum the rugs again before Hannah and Mara arrived, but she didn’t have the energy. The bathroom, at least, was clean. Good enough for today.

Though she had never been one to count down the days to the end of the semester, she was ticking them off her calendar with zeal: seven more weeks. Managing her own doctoral course load on top of teaching a section of freshman writing would have been challenging enough without sharing the inside of her body. But Charissa wasn’t complaining. Or trying not to, anyway. Recently she had been pondering the idea of her body as “sacred space,” a place where new life grew and took shape. She didn’t yet fathom what that life would become, but she was trusting the process. Or rather, she was trusting God with the process. Or trying to.

Maybe that's why she felt compelled to garden. Given all of the deaths she had observed the past few months, spiritual and emotional ones as well as the death of a new friend, the miracle of green shoots emerging from the earth after the harshness of winter spoke to her.

At twenty-six she'd had very little exposure to death: her paternal grandmother when she was in first grade, a friend's father when she was in middle school, and a college classmate—a girl she knew only by name and sight—when they were juniors. As someone whose life had not been shaped by trauma or tragedy, Charissa hadn't given much thought to resurrection. Resurrection was merely a doctrine of faith she had always affirmed without hesitating, ever since she memorized the Apostle's Creed as a third-grader: The third day he rose again from the dead. Period. Or rather, exclamation point.

Words from Meg's funeral still pursued her. Hymns, Scripture, the pastor's homily—all of it quickened her to a promise she'd never had to cling to before. *We are Easter people*, Meg's pastor had declared, *practicing our hope*. In the midst of death. In the midst of change. In the midst of sorrow. In the midst of uncertainty.

The third day he rose again from the dead.

In a few weeks they would sing their alleluias again on Easter morning. Easter, which had never meant much more to Charissa than trumpet fanfares, lilies, and ribboned baskets filled with chocolate, had taken on new significance, not as a historical event to be commemorated once a year but as an ongoing reality to be lived daily.

The third day he rose again from the dead.

Meg's death had awakened in her a profound sense of vulnerability. Meg had been younger than Charissa when she buried her husband, younger than Charissa when she gave birth to their only child, the child who should have had two parents bring her home to the front room they had lovingly prepared for her.

Charissa glanced toward the room that now awaited Bethany.

She wasn't superstitious. But no matter how hard she tried to shake it, the cloud of morbidity that had descended on the house after Meg's cancer diagnosis would not dissipate. Even with all of Jeremy's remodeling

of the space, Charissa couldn't stop thinking about the dreams that had been birthed, cherished, and shattered here.

She had suggested that the group gather and pray for one another instead of using one of the prayer exercises from their notebook. But maybe what each of them needed was a focal point for faith. For hope.

I am the resurrection and the life. That was one of the verses from Meg's funeral that pursued her, and it seemed a good text to ponder. Charissa checked her watch: forty-five minutes before Hannah and Mara arrived. Time enough to compose a short lesson plan. Or rather, an invitation for prayer and conversation.

MEDITATION ON JOHN 11:17-44
Resurrection and Life

When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world."

When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, "The Teacher is here and is calling for you." And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there. When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." Jesus began to weep. So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"

Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days." Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, "Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me." When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."

For prayer and conversation:

1. Which sister do you identify with? Why?
2. Try to pretend you don't know the end of the story as you imagine yourself as that sister. How do you feel when you hear the news that Jesus has finally arrived?
3. What surprises you about Jesus?
4. What does it mean for you to know Jesus as the resurrection and the life right now?

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