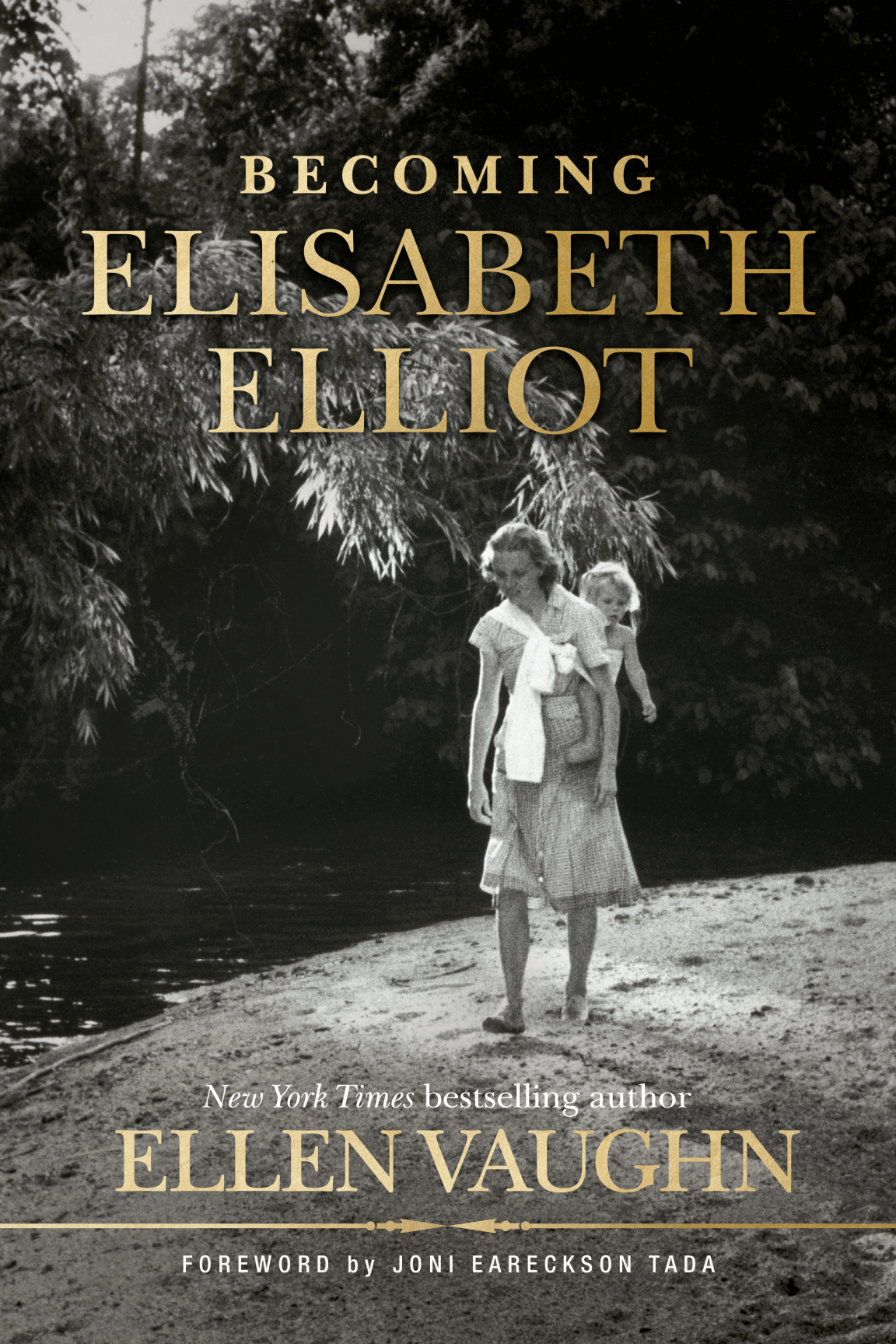
BECOMING
ELISABETH
ELLIOT
New York Times bestselling author
ELLEN VAUGHN
FOREWORD by JONI EARECKSON TADA

BECOMING ELISABETH ELLIOT

ELLEN VAUGHN

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"And Moses saw all the work, and behold, they had done it;
as the LORD had commanded, so had they done it."
Exodus 39:43 ESV

In honor of Mincaye,
whose memory makes me smile,
whose life represents the reality of Christ's transforming power,
and the hope that God's love and forgiveness
will flow to every unreached people group on the planet

soli Deo Gloria

Mincaye with Ellen Vaughn,
Amazon jungle, July 2019

Contents

Foreword

I was lying in a hotel bed late at night, paralyzed with crumpled sheets half-covering my useless limbs. It felt strange to welcome my heroine of the faith into the room. As she approached my bed, her Bible pressed to her chest, Elisabeth Elliot's commanding demeanor softened with her smile. I was twenty-six years old and seasoned by a decade of quadriplegia, but still, I was awestruck.

We were both speaking at the same conference, and after my talk, Elisabeth had asked to meet with me. She wanted to hear more. She had said, "Is it all that extraordinary for others to see the 'stamp of Christ' on your life? If we feel it is, what shall we then say of the state of Christendom?"

I'm not all that extraordinary, I thought as Elisabeth smoothed her skirt and sat on the bed opposite me. But her comment did cut to the heart of things . . . and that's what I admired about her. I loved her matter-of-fact way of living by daily dying for Christ. It was a no-nonsense way of looking at things. Just pull-yourself-up by the grace of God, hoist your cross on your shoulder, and follow your Savior down the bloodstained path to Calvary. And don't complain about it.

I was first introduced to Elisabeth Elliot in 1965 when, in high school, I read her book *Through Gates of Splendor.* I was mesmerized by the haunting photo of the twenty-nine-year-old jungle missionary holding her baby and staring out a window through a cloud of grief. Her husband of less than three years had just been savagely speared to death by the very Stone-Age people he had tried to reach for Christ. What drove her to remain on the mission field, and then to bring the gospel to the very people who had murdered Jim and his colleagues? Was Jesus worth it?

I had a chance to ask myself the same question right after high school graduation, when a broken neck landed me in those dark valleys Elisabeth wrote about. Sitting in my wheelchair and turning pages with the eraser-tip end of a pencil, I worked my way through her second book, *Shadow of the Almighty*. In this woman, I knew I'd get the unvarnished truth about God and suffering. I wanted to know if Jesus was worth it. True to form, her writings did not skate the surface. I discovered that she unflinchingly believed her Savior to be ecstasy beyond compare. And after reading more of her books, I heard the Spirit of Jesus whisper in my heart, "Be like her."

So now, to have a private audience with my role model was an incredible treasure. In that hotel room, we talked of many things, but landed on the shared satisfaction that neither of us felt all that extraordinary. We were simply followers of Christ who had plumbed the depths of His joy by tasting His afflictions. Those afflictions had cut deep gashes in our hearts through which grace and joy had poured in, stretching and filling our souls with an abundance of our Lord. That night, we relished the loveliness of Jesus, convinced that He was more than worth it.

The hour drew late. Elisabeth was to speak at the conference the next morning, so she stood and gathered her things. But before she left, she turned and said with her chin high, "Suffering is never for nothing, Joni."

It's a different era now. Many young people I know don't recognize the name of Elisabeth Elliot. They live in an egalitarian culture where everyone's story is extraordinary, whether it has the stamp of Christ or not. The leaders they look up to lack heroic qualities. Courage is rare. Good character, rarer. Moral purity feels arcane. Suffering should be mitigated at all costs. And if it cannot be avoided, it must be drugged, divorced, escaped from, or prayed away.

The timing of this book couldn't be better. We may not know it, but in an age of antiheroes, our souls crave an authentic witness. We long to see a follower of Christ square off against sin and stand firm against the winds of adversity; one whose ironclad character cannot be dismantled. We want to see someone in whom living for Christ and dying for Him is indistinguishable. We crave a visceral story that has meat on it. A story that rises above the average. That soars and inspires.

Becoming Elisabeth Elliot is that story. And no one can tell it better than my old friend Ellen Vaughn. She excels in writing a biography—her meticulous research skills are coupled with an ability to write that is utterly matchless. The first time I read the book you hold in your hands, it blew me away, a little like the house that flew apart

when scientists first tested the atomic bomb. I was in awe of her masterly way with words, her intellect; here was a woman—though very different in personality from my hero—who wrote and thought like Elisabeth Elliot.

On the following pages, you will come to know the most remarkable Christian woman of the last century—what shaped her convictions, forged her faith, and honed an unyielding passion to win souls for Christ. To those who knew her well, she was Betty. To the world, she was Elisabeth, a captain and not a private in the army of God; a soldier among a gallery of heroes, all of them content to leave home and country in order to waste their lives in jungles and caves for the sake of gaining souls for the heavenly kingdom.

That is the husky stuff of which Elisabeth Elliot was made. This book is the story of how she became that way; Ellen's second volume will continue with the rest of her story. But what you'll read here shows clearly Elisabeth's *ordinariness*, how she was subject to the same temptations and distractions that plague us all, and what she embraced, through Christ, to become *extraordinary.*

Forty-five years have passed since my encounter with Elisabeth in that hotel room. After living long with paralysis, chronic pain, and cancer, I still gravitate to her example. At night, I often focus my faith by rereading her classic works. Tonight, in fact, my caregiver will sit cross-legged on the opposite bed and read aloud from *Shadow of the Almighty.* When the book is closed and I am turned in my bed, the lights out, her words will shimmer in my heart.

As you read Ellen's story of Elisabeth's early years, I hope you'll breathe in a fresh sense of God's grace and utter reality in a weak and distracted world. I hope you'll be convinced that the same grace which sustained a young Betty Elliot to become a captain in God's army will in fact whisper to your soul, "Be like her."

Joni Eareckson Tada
Joni and Friends International Disability Center
2020

PART ONE

Beginning

CHAPTER 1

Death in the Afternoon

*I*t was April 11, 1948, in Wheaton, Illinois, thirty miles west of Chicago. Jim Elliot was a junior at Wheaton College, a star wrestler, Greek major, poet, and jokester. He and three friends—another Jim, Walt, and Hobey—laughed and kidded one another as they piled into Hobey's 1946 Nash, a classic mid-century American car with big rounded bumpers and a three-speed manual transmission. They were headed to a local hospital to visit patients and tell any who cared to hear about Christ.

The Nash arrived at the President Street train crossing near Wheaton's campus. The Chicago and North Western Railway served area commuters, as well as hauling tons of produce from the west through Chicago, the gateway to the east.

The signal lights flashed; the boys could see that the heavy freight train was at least a block and a half away. Like twenty-year-olds everywhere, they went for it. The train watchman ran out of his shack at the crossing and down onto the tracks, yelling and waving them back. Hobey jolted to a stop in the middle of the tracks to avoid hitting him.

Trying to get off the tracks, Hobey panicked and stalled the Nash. He could not get the clutch to engage. Jim, Walt, and Jim threw open their doors, leapt out, and rolled to safety, yelling for their friend to follow. Hobey tried to start the car again.

As the watchman and the boys screamed, there was the added shriek of metal on metal as the freight train's engineer tried desperately to brake. In the last second before impact, Hobey threw open his car door and jumped clear.

The enormous freight train hit the Nash on the right rear fender, spinning the sturdy car so fast that it hit again on the left front fender, crushing it like a soda can. Instead of sudden death on a Sunday

afternoon, their blood blotting the railroad tracks, the boys were merely "spun and sobered," as Jim Elliot wrote to his parents later.

It was a "narrow escape," he said. "The details are fairly accurate in the papers, but newspapermen know nothing about the ministering spirits sent by the Maker of the universe" to protect His people.

"It sobered me considerably to think that the Lord kept me from harm in this," Jim concluded. "*Certainly He has a work that He wants me in somewhere.*"[1]

JANUARY 5, 1956

Missionary Jim Elliot, now twenty-eight, stands ankle deep in the Curaray River, somewhere in the mysterious green rainforest of eastern Ecuador. He has found the work for which God saved his life on those Wheaton train tracks eight years earlier.

Clad only in his underwear because of the heat, phrasebook in one hand, he's shouting out expressions of friendship and good cheer, the equivalent of "we come in peace." The four missionaries with him—Nate, Ed, Pete, and Roger—laugh as Jim bellows his heart out to the unresponsive jungle, slapping at a million gnats as he does so.

Jim preaching to the jungle, January 1956

This extreme camping trip is the culmination of years of prayers, hopes, and planning. Each of these missionaries, already working with other indigenous tribes, has developed an unlikely attraction to an unreached people group known as the Aucas, or *naked savages*, who had lived in Stone Age isolation for generations, killing all outsiders who attempted to enter their territory.

The tribe would later be known by their actual name, the Waodani,[2] or *the People*. "Auca," used many years ago in Ecuador, is now understood as an offensive term.*

These five young missionaries believe that the violent Waodani story can change. For years, they've dreamed of introducing the love of Jesus to the tribe. They've made their benign intentions known for the past thirteen weeks, using an ingenious bucket-drop system to send gifts from pilot Nate Saint's low-flying airplane down to a small Waodani settlement deep in the jungle. The Waodani soon responded enthusiastically, sending their own gifts—smoked monkey tail, pottery, a parrot—back up to the airplane, via the bucket.

Now, with their overtures of friendship established and reciprocated, the missionaries believe the time has come to meet in person.

They've established a campsite near the Waodani settlement, and christened it "Palm Beach." They've built a tree house so they can sleep in safety. They communicate with their wives back at the mission stations by radio (using code since the channel is shared by other missionaries in the area). Due to the sensational reputation of the violent tribe, their mission to the Waodani is top secret. For now.

"Biti miti punimupa!" Jim shouts cheerfully, his broad shoulders and back to his friends, his face set toward the jungle. *I like you; I want to be your friend. "Biti winki pungi amupa!" We want to see you!*

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*I've chosen to call the tribe "Waodani" throughout this book, both in my own writing and in my quotes of others' words from the time period when that slur was routinely—and innocently—used. If I were a historian, anthropologist, or linguist, I might not have come to this decision. Missionaries, journalists, laypeople, and everyone else used "Auca" routinely in the 1950s and '60s. The 1956 outreach to the tribe, for example, was historically known as "Operation Auca." Calling it "Operation Waodani" would be an anachronism. But it is hard, with a twenty-first-century mind-set, to read a racial, ethnic, disability-related, or any other slur and not recoil with negativity toward those who uttered it. If the missionaries or journalists I've quoted in this book who used "Auca" long ago had meant it as an insult, I would in fact have retained its use, in order to be faithful to their original *intent*. But they used it without prejudice and most often, in the missionaries' cases, with great love.

What Jim does not know is that the Waodani are a kinship-based society that has no corresponding word in their unique language for "friend." His phrases are corrupted, taught to him by a native Waodani speaker who'd fled the tribe years earlier. Living among the Quichua people, she'd forgotten much of her mother tongue, and had unintentionally mixed in phonetics that would not be intelligible to the Waodani.

So there is no response from the jungle. But Jim and the other guys have a sense that the Waodani—who are masters of concealment—are watching them.

About forty miles northwest of Jim Elliot's heartfelt orations, his young wife sits at her wooden desk in Shandia, the missions station where she and Jim work with a community of Quichua Indians. Elisabeth Elliot is tall, slender, and blue-eyed, with light brown hair, dimples, and a distinctive gap between her front teeth. Her face is full of intelligence and curiosity. She is in the right place, as there are many curiosities in the jungle.

Elisabeth has taken advantage of her ten-month-old daughter's naptime to write in her small black journal. She uses a fountain pen, her fluid prose flowing in bright teal ink on the smooth white pages.

"Jim is gone to the Waodani now," she writes. "My heart longs and yearns for him. I sensed a great gulf between us in this last month, and longed to bridge it somehow . . . I can hardly restrain myself from pouring out my love for him, telling him how I love him and live for him."[3]

But she's excited about the Waodani project, sharing the same desire as her husband and fellow missionaries that this people group have the chance to hear the gospel. She had argued that she and baby Valerie should be the ones to go with Jim, reasoning that the tribe would be far less likely to attack a family unit than they would a group of five men.

Uncharacteristically, this was an argument that she lost.

So now she waits, a woman at home.

FRIDAY, JANUARY 6, 1956

Back at Palm Beach, Jim and company were preparing for another long day of communing with insects and preaching to the trees when two women silently stepped out of the jungle on the opposite side of the river from the camp. They were naked, with the distinctive stretched earlobes and waist-strings of the Waodani.

Jim Elliot plunged into the river, took their hands, and ushered them across. Nate, Ed, Roger, and Pete welcomed them with much nodding, smiling, and vigorous cheerful pantomimes. Seeing that the

reception was welcoming, a Waodani man emerged from the foliage as well.

The rest of the day passed in a friendly clash of cultures. The tribespeople had no idea what the North Americans were saying, and vice versa. But the visitors peered at the men's cameras, magazines, airplane, and gear, tried some insect repellent, ate a hamburger, and drank some lemonade. The man even went for a spin with Nate in his plane; as they skimmed over the Waodani village, he leaned far out from the Piper, shouting and waving at his astonished tribesmen below.

Later in the afternoon, the young woman got up and abruptly headed into the jungle. The man followed her. The older woman stayed with the missionaries, chatting away. She slept by the campfire that night when the missionaries climbed up into their tree house, thirty-five feet off the ground.

Buzzing with excitement, the missionaries could hardly sleep. It was the first friendly contact with this untouched, violent tribe. They prayed it would be the beginning of a great new frontier for the gospel.

SUNDAY, JANUARY 8, 1956

At her home in Shandia, Elisabeth Elliot bathed little Valerie and tidied up. She prayed for Jim, Nate, Ed, Pete, and Roger.

Back at Palm Beach, the long, hot day before had passed without a follow-up visit from the Waodani. But on this Sunday morning, January 8, when Nate Saint flew out over the jungle canopy, he spotted a group of naked people fording the river, moving in the direction of Palm Beach.

He buzzed back to the camp. "This is it," he shouted to Jim, Pete, Ed, and Roger when he landed. "They're on their way!"

Nate radioed his wife with an update at 12:30 p.m. He told her of spotting the group of Waodani. "Pray for us," he said. "This is the day! Will contact you next at 4:30."

The event that some say galvanized the Christian mission movement for the second half of the twentieth century took less than fifteen minutes. Days later, the search and recovery party found the carnage. When they fished Nate's bloody body out of the Curaray River, his watch had stopped at 3:12 p.m.