

A man with short dark hair and a beard, wearing a dark, textured sweater, is shown in profile from the chest up. He is looking down and to the left. The background is a plain, light-colored wall. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting the contours of his face and sweater.

ERWIN RAPHAEL
McMANUS BEST-SELLING AUTHOR OF
THE BARBARIAN WAY

THE
LAST
ARROW

SAVE NOTHING FOR THE NEXT LIFE



THE LAST ARROW

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WATERBROOK

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Like arrows in the hands of a warrior are
children born in one's youth.

—PSALM 127:4



To my arrows: Aaron Christopher McManus, who has never backed down from a fight, and to Mariah McManus Goss, who is as fearless as she is fierce.

Long after I rest my bow and have struck my last arrow, there will still be arrows flying true: their names are Aaron and Mariah. The trajectories of their lives will take them far beyond the ground I have taken. If they were once my arrows, they are now my archers. I dedicate this book to them and the future they represent.

Aaron and Mariah: You are the tip of the spear. You are the future. This is your fight. I pulled the bow back as far as I could and gave you all the strength I had to send you into flight. Fly far and true. Cross enemy lines. Hit the mark. Set captives free. Keep striking until the battle's won.

—Dad

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Preface

THE BATTLE

It was Thursday, December 15, 2016, when I sat across from the desk of my doctor and heard him say the words we hope to never hear: “You have cancer.” The signs had been there for years, but the news was still unexpected. There just isn’t much you can do to prepare for that situation. The moment felt surreal to me. It was as if it were happening to someone else. I was an uncomfortable bystander awkwardly peering into someone else’s life.

What shook me into reality was to see the shock and pain in the eyes of my wife, Kim, as those words sank into her soul. Watching her made the reality of it all much too real. Sharing this news with our kids only made the pain deeper and the sorrow felt like oceans.

The doctor went on to explain that I would need an MRI and a bone scan to determine the extent of the cancer. It would need to be determined whether the cancer had spread to my bones and vital organs. The biopsy returned malignant in five of the eight areas that were tested. I was told it was important for us

to move quickly. The radiation specialists informed me that surgery was our best option. Afterward we would know the process and extent of treatment.

We love Christmas, and all this fell into our lives days before our favorite holiday. It was a heavy holiday season mixed with joy and sorrow. We were all too aware of the temporary nature of life and how precious every moment is that we are given.

It was on the same day that I learned my diagnosis that I opened my manuscript to finish my final edits of this book. It could not have been incidental that the very first line I read was one I had written nearly a year earlier: “Before you hear it from someone else, I need to tell you that I’m dying.”

I could not believe I was reading those words. I could not believe I wrote them. It was as if my words were written after that day’s news, not before. I had to wonder if my words were more prophetic than intended. It caused me to begin to read my manuscript with a deeper and greater clarity than when I wrote it.

It seems strange to say, but I was moved by the words I had written. I spoke of life and death and what it means to live without fear or regret. I spoke as a man who knew he was going to die. Now facing the prospect of death, I only felt these words more deeply. I am writing this preface of *The Last Arrow* to tell you just that: I mean every word I have written. Even in the face of death. Especially in the face of life.

I finished this book wondering if it would be my last arrow. I

know one thing for certain: I am not saving anything for the next life.

I am the pastor at Mosaic, and on the last Sunday before I went in for surgery, I gave a message that expressed my posture going forward. It was simply titled “Battle Ready.” I made a decision that while cancer may define how I die, it would not define how I live.

Life is a series of challenges, adventures, and yes, even battles. There will always be giants to subdue and dragons to slay. I have already decided to die with my sword in hand. There is more courage in us than danger ahead of us. You are strong enough for the battles ahead.

My intention for this book is that you would never surrender, that you would never settle, that you would save nothing for the next life.

May you die with your quivers empty.

May you die with your hearts full.

THE POINT OF NO RETURN

William Osborne McManus married my mom when I was about three years old. He wasn't my birth father, and he never legally adopted me or my brother, but for all intents and purposes, he was the only father I ever knew. We became close, and I imagine that in my childhood, I loved him as much as any son could love a father. When I was young I called him dad. Later in life I simply called him Bill.

This man was a contradiction in every way. He was warm and engaging, charismatic and winsome. At the same time, he was a con man for whom truth was simply material woven into whatever lies he needed to tell. I remember when the movie *Catch Me If You Can*, starring Leonardo DiCaprio, came out. My brother, Alex, called me up and said, "Have you seen the movie? It's Dad." I had the exact same thought when I sat in the theater watching the movie. If you want to understand my childhood, it's summarized for you in two hours.

Over the years, Bill caused my family deep pain, callously disregarding my mom and my two little sisters, the daughters he had fathered. By the time he left us, when I was seventeen years old, all the love I had felt for him had turned to disdain. That day, he must have seen what I was feeling and thinking when he looked into my eyes, because he moved toward me aggressively. And while my instincts made me want to step back in fear, my anger made me hold my ground. Standing face to face with me, he said, “Hit me. I know you want to. See if you are man enough.”

I looked at him and said, “You’re not worth the effort.”

He got in his car as my little sisters begged me to find a way to reconcile. I went outside to plead with him not to leave. My last memory of him from that day was seeing his face on the other side of the windshield when he clipped me with the front of the car as he drove away.

Even after that fateful day, we did find a way to reconcile and stay in touch by phone, although our contact was minimal. But there is truth to the adage that what has been torn cannot be mended. Eventually Bill remarried, and around that same time, I married as well. As if it were a script, his new wife and my wife, Kim, were pregnant at the same time. But for more reasons than I can explain, I made the hard decision of leaving my stepdad in the past and focusing on building a future for my family without Bill as part of our lives.

Before I knew it, fifteen years had passed—years in which

Bill and my son, Aaron, never met. Aaron was the first true McManus in our family. I had taken the name McManus from Bill without his ever legally becoming my father. And ironically, McManus wasn't even his name—it was an alias he assumed. He was the kind of person who was always running from his past, and his false identity was a part of that. Finally Aaron came by the name legitimately.

When Aaron was fifteen, he wanted to meet the man who gave me that name in the first place—the man I called my father. I felt I owed him that. So even though I hadn't spoken to my dad in fifteen years, I tracked him down as if he were a stranger I was trying to meet for the first time. We found him in a small town outside Charlotte, North Carolina, called Matthews. He was more than happy to see me and more than happy to meet my son. I think I had caused him great sadness by extricating myself from his life for the past fifteen years.

I didn't know what to expect, but the reunion went well enough—for a while. Then there were the last words I heard him say as we were leaving (not just the last words that day but forever, as he died not too long afterward). He said to my son in my presence, "I don't know what your dad has told you, but he was average. He was just average. His brother was exceptional, but your dad, he was just average."

Those words cut me like a knife. Please don't misunderstand me. What hurt most was not that those were the last words my father chose to say about me. Nor was I most hurt because my son

heard this judgment. What cut me deepest was a terrifying sense that Bill McManus was right, that I was just average.

Frankly, if you look back at my early life, those words would have to be categorized as an exaggeration toward the positive. I was, in fact, always below average. I wasn't the C student; I was a D student. I wasn't second string; I was, at best, third string. The painful truth is that "average" had always eluded me. I seemed to always be diving toward the bottom. I was never picked first, nor second, nor anywhere in the middle. I was always literally the last player picked.

And while I always hoped that one day there would be something special about me, the truth is, I made my home in the average, if not the below average. I found a strange solace and safety in my power of invisibility and made obscurity my residence.

I am in no small part indebted to that conversation with Bill for all the thoughts that follow in this book. I do not believe anyone is born average, but I do believe that many of us choose to live a life of mediocrity. I think there are more of us than not who are in danger of disappearing into the abyss of the ordinary. The great tragedy in this, of course, is that there is nothing really ordinary about us. We might not be convinced of this, but our souls already know it's true, which is why we find ourselves tormented when we choose lives beneath our capacities and callings.

There are two ways of hearing the indictment "You are just average." One way of hearing this is as a statement of essence,

that you're cut from an average cloth. The second is subtly, but significantly, different. The statement can be about character—that you have chosen a path of least resistance, that you have not aspired to the greatness that is within your grasp. Here is the painful reality: we will find ourselves defined by the average if we do not choose to defy the odds. Odds are that you and I will fall at the average. That's why it's called the average. It's where most of us live. To be above average demands a choice. It requires that we defy the odds. You have no control of whether you have been endowed with above-average talent or intelligence or physical attributes. What you can control is whether you choose to live your life defined and determined by the status quo. Even when the law of averages works against you, you can still defy the odds.

Bill's was a statement of outcome and actions. I walked away from his house that day with a clear resolve that although I have no control over whatever talent has been placed inside of me—no control over the level of my intelligence or whatever other advantages or disadvantages my genetic composition might have brought me—I will take absolute control over my personal responsibility to develop and maximize whatever potential God has given me for the good of others. The journey of *The Last Arrow* begins when you raise the bar. We need to raise the bar of our standards of our faith, of our sacrifice, of our expectations of ourselves, of our belief of the goodness and generosity of God.

We can refuse to be average. We *must* refuse to be average.

We must war against the temptation to settle for less. Average is always a safe choice, and it is the most dangerous choice we can make. Average protects us from the risk of failure, and it also separates us from futures of greatness. *The Last Arrow* is for those who decide they will never settle.

I am not talking about an uncompromising rigidity to your own expectations and standards. In fact, a huge part of the process we are about to enter into is learning how to let go of those things that don't really matter and even of those things that do not matter most. This book is not about holding others to the standards you have set. This book is about not underestimating how much God intends for your life.

I have never found a way around failure and so I cannot teach you how not to fail, but I can guide you to the place where you will never quit. Even here I feel a need to clarify. You may be doing things today that you needed to quit yesterday. There may not be anything worse than winning a battle you never should have fought. I am convinced, though, that every human being has a unique calling on his or her life—that each of us was created with intention and purpose. And I am equally certain that most of us underestimate how much God actually wants to do in our lives and through our lives. *The Last Arrow* is about leaving nothing undone that was ours to do. It is squeezing the marrow out of life. This journey is about ensuring that when we come to the end of our lives, we will arrive at our final moments with no regret.

DON'T STOP UNTIL YOU ARE FINISHED

The concept of *The Last Arrow* came to me when I was reflecting on a story from the life of the prophet Elisha in the Hebrew Scriptures. It's an obscure moment and could easily be missed, yet it is both poetic and profound. It is also, I am convinced, a window into how God works in the world and how we either open ourselves to his bigger future or ensure that we make the future smaller than he intends for us.

In this story, Jehoash is the king of Israel when the kingdoms of Israel and Judah are divided and at war against one another. His kingdom is being threatened by the armies of Amaziah, king of Judah. The one great advantage Jehoash has is that the prophet Elisha is with them, but now Elisha is suffering from an illness that will lead to his death. Jehoash goes and weeps over him, less because of his sorrow for the loss of the prophet and more because of his fear of the loss of Elisha's protection.

Jehoash calls out to Elisha, who has been a symbol and source of God's strength and power, but now is clearly at the end of his life.

Elisha then gives him a somewhat unusual series of instructions. Elisha says, "Get a bow and some arrows," and he does so. Then he tells him, "Take the bow in your hands." When Elisha commands Jehoash to do this, the king immediately complies. When the king raises the bow and arrow, Elisha puts his hands on the king's hands.

“Open the east window,” he says, and the king opens it. “Shoot!” Elisha says, and Jehoash shoots. “The LORD’s arrow of victory, the arrow of victory over Aram!” Elisha declares. “You will completely destroy the Arameans at Aphek.”

Then he says, “Take the arrows,” and the king takes them. Elisha tells him, “Strike the ground.” He strikes it three times and stops. Then the Scriptures tell us something that is quite unexpected: “The man of God was angry with him and said, ‘You should have struck the ground five or six times; then you would have defeated Aram and completely destroyed it. But now you will defeat it only three times.’” Right after he says this, the story tells us, “Elisha died and was buried.”¹

Much of what happens here doesn’t make any sense to our modern minds. How could the king’s future be so affected by whether he struck an arrow three times or five or six times? Why didn’t Elisha explain to him what was required before holding him to its consequences? How could the king have known that six is the magic number and that three would leave him wanting? Up to that moment, he had done everything Elisha instructed him. But when Elisha told him to strike the ground with the arrows, the prophet left the instruction open ended.

It is not insignificant that the text says, “The man of God was angry with him.” Clearly much more was happening here than meets the eye. This was no small mistake. The king began with the promise of a complete victory and afterward was the recipient of much less. And it all centers around one decision: he struck the

ground three times and then stopped. Putting it another way: he quit. The Bible doesn't tell us why he quit. Maybe he was tired, maybe he felt ridiculous, maybe he thought it was beneath him, or perhaps he sensed it was an act of futility. But it is clear that, for Elisha, the fact that the king stopped striking the arrow was connected to his determination to receive the full measure of God's intention for him. He quit and the victory was lost. He just didn't want it badly enough.

I wonder how many victories are lost before the battle has even begun. I wonder how much more good God desires to usher into the world that has been thwarted by our own lack of ambition. I wonder how many times in my own life I thought I failed but actually the only thing that happened was that I quit.

What is it about us that stops before we're finished, that mistakes quitting for failure, that settles for less? I see too much of myself in this—can identify too many times when I have prayed too little, expected too little, and done too little. Have you become the kind of person who is always looking for the least you can do, trying to do only what is required? Or are you the kind of person who has given up not only on life but also on yourself? When you come to the end of your life, will you be able to say, "I gave everything I had," or will you have a hollow feeling inside of your soul that you quit too soon, that you expected too little, that you did not strike the last arrow?

I think many of us hear God say, "Take your arrows and shoot," but, much like the king, we never hear the command,

“Stop striking the ground.” We simply stop before we’re finished. We stop before God is finished.

There is a posture toward life that separates those who end their lives with their quivers full of untapped potential and unseized opportunities and those who die with their quivers empty. Arrows are not meant for decor; they are meant for battle. The question each of us must answer is this: *Am I the kind of person who strikes three times and then stops, or am I the kind of person who, when commanded to strike my arrows, keeps striking and striking and striking until there are no arrows left?*

It is curious that Elisha had the king shoot the first arrow through the window and then instructed him to grab the remaining arrows and begin to strike them. We may never know the full implication of why he had him do it this way. Perhaps the arrow he shot through the window was a symbol of how God would take the victory far beyond the hand of the king. That’s the way an arrow would be expected to be used. The odd command was to take the arrow and strike it instead of shoot it. It seems to imply that the focus was on what God had placed in the king’s hand.

This, by the way, is the paradox of how God works in our lives. We must shoot the arrow and recognize that there are things outside our control, and we must strike the arrow and take responsibility for what is in our control. We are to shoot and strike, but what we are not to do is stop.

Most of us live our lives as if the arrows are too valuable to

shoot. They look so nice inside the quiver. We may even take extra time each day to organize our arrows and make sure that they are in perfect condition. What I love about arrows, in contrast to other ancient weapons, is that while you may use a sword, it never leaves your hand, but the arrow only has value if you release it and it travels where you have not gone yourself. The arrow extends your range of impact and only fulfills its purpose when it is set into flight. We are not supposed to die with our quivers full. In fact, our greatest aspiration should be to die with our quiver empty. Those who never settle have the mind-set that they are saving nothing for the next life.

THE POINT OF NO RETURN

In 1997 I walked into a movie theater and watched an obscure film called *Gattaca*.² At that time, its stars (Jude Law, Ethan Hawke, and Uma Thurman) were all relatively unknown, and for most, this movie came and went without notice. But its message impacted me while I sat there in that theater, and its message has never let me go. I suspect that films have the greatest influence on us not when they pull us into their stories but when they invade our own stories.

Gattaca is the story of two brothers, Vincent and Anton. The setting is in some future time when children are genetically manipulated to be born perfect and flawless. There are, against society's best efforts, still occasionally children born called "natural

babies.” They are classified as invalid. The theory, of course, is that the natural human cannot compete with the one who is a result of genetic refinement.

This hits way too close to home for me. My brother, Alex, was always my contrast growing up. By the time we were in sixth grade, he was one of the fastest kids in the United States. By the time we were in high school, he was the starting and star quarterback at our school, breaking all the conference passing records. He didn’t even have the decency to be a dumb jock. Instead, he did me the disservice of having an IQ that is off the scales and a natural leadership acumen that made him a general in a world of civilians. To make it easier to manage us, my mother put us both in the first grade at the same time. He was seven and I was five, and so from first grade until we graduated from high school, I operated as if I were the inferior twin.

So *Gattaca* felt like my story, the story of two brothers—one the picture of perfection, and the other a constant reminder of our flawed humanity. There is no world in which Vincent will ever surpass Anton. Anton possesses one characteristic all of us in our deepest longings wish we had as well—the absence of all of our flaws, the absence of our weaknesses, the absence of our humanity. Vincent, on the other hand, is the downgraded model of what it means to be human. He is a natural baby, and in contrast his brother is supernatural.

In the movie, the dilemma is that although Vincent is infe-

rior, his dreams and aspirations are not limited or defined by his imperfections. His dilemma is the one all of us face. We aspire for those things that seem beyond us. Our souls seem to play a cruel joke on us, causing us to want things that seem to be impossibilities. Wouldn't it be better for all of us if we were incapable of knowing that there's more? How often is our greatest torment, that haunting thought, that the lives we long to live are not the lives we were created to live?

Yet all around us, we find hopeful reminders that seemingly ordinary people have found their way to living extraordinary lives. We know their stories; they inspire us and light afresh a flame of hope in us that we, too, might become more—that we might break through the gravitational pull of mediocrity and transcend the status quo, living a life that is uniquely our own. There does seem to be a break point, a defining moment, a moment of truth when a person decides that he or she will not settle for less, that less is no longer an option. We see this moment powerfully illustrated in the lives of these two brothers, Vincent and Anton.

Vincent has taken on an alias and is also known as Jerome. In his world, he must become someone else to become who he is. (There is no small irony in this for me, because I have lived my life with a handed-down alias, always struggling to discover who I really am.) We find the two brothers in the middle of the ocean competing to see who can swim farther. Anton is now struggling, unable to keep up with his inferior brother.

ANTON

How are you doing this, Vincent? How have you done any of this?

VINCENT

Now is your chance to find out.

(Vincent swims away a second time. Anton is forced to follow once again. Angry now, gritting his teeth, Anton calls upon the same determination we have witnessed during his constant swimming in the pool. He puts on a spurt, slowly reeling in Vincent.

Anton gradually draws alongside Vincent, certain that this effort will demoralize his older brother. But Vincent has been foxing—waiting for him to catch up. Vincent smiles at Anton. With almost a trace of sympathy, he forges ahead again. Anton is forced to go with him. They swim again for a long distance.

It is Anton who gradually becomes demoralized—his strokes weaken, his will draining away. Anton pulls up, exhausted and fearful. Vincent also pulls up. How-

ever, his face displays none of Anton's anxiety.

They tread water several yards apart. The ocean is choppier now. The view of the lights on the shore is obscured by the peaks of the waves.)

ANTON

(panic starting to show)

**Vincent, where's the shore? We're too far out.
We have to go back!**

VINCENT

(calling back)

**Too late for that. We're closer to the other side.
(Anton looks toward the empty horizon.)**

ANTON

**What other side? How far do you want to go?
Do you want to drown us both?**

(becoming hysterical)

How are we going to get back?!

(Vincent merely smiles back at his younger brother, a disturbingly serene smile.)

VINCENT

(eerily calm)

You want to know how I did it. That's how I did it, Anton. I never saved anything for the swim back.

These are haunting words from a person who had nothing to lose. Maybe those of us most aware of our imperfections and flaws are best suited for this journey. After all, what do we have to lose? We were never supposed to amount to anything. If failure is our inevitable future, then let's fail boldly and fail forward. But whatever happens, let's not hide behind the excuse that we didn't give it everything we had. Perhaps the life we long for is beyond the point of no return.

That thought has never left me: that he never saved anything for the way back. This mind-set, I am convinced, is the fundamental difference between those who strike the arrow three times and those who strike until they've used the last arrow. They leave nothing for the way back. They save nothing for the next life.