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SEX AND THE  
CITY OF GOD

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*A Memoir of Love and Longing*

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## Chapter One

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# SAVED SEX

*Virtue and vice are not the same, even if  
they undergo the same torment.*

ST. AUGUSTINE

At the hospital, a nurse came out to find me in the waiting room. She then ushered me into one of the little rooms tucked along the hospital corridor leading away from the chaos of the ambulance entrance. Two signs decorated the door: the larger one read in bold letters, “**Private Consultation**” while the smaller one just below it stated in more demure script, “*Please knock before entering.*” The nurse took a key and unlocked the door, revealing a small, dark room. I looked into that darkness, so much starker against the bright lights of the busy hospital hall. While I welcomed a reprieve from the kind of bloody, groaning, and antiseptic commotion unique to a hospital emergency wing, I hesitated at the threshold like Dante at the lip of hell, with the words inscribed above: “Abandon all hope, ye who enter here.” Good news surely does not reach into overlooked spaces such as these. I took a deep breath and stepped inside.

“Would you like some water?” the nurse asked with compassion in her voice. I declined. She reached over and clicked on the single small lamp beside the door.

“Please, make yourself comfortable.” She patted my arm. “The doctor will be with you shortly.”

I am always amazed at the infinite capacity of nurses for caring (I tell you, sit me next to the nurses and the drummers in heaven). She left, pulling the door shut softly behind her.

Insulated within this little room that seemed to scream uncannily quiet, I could now pace out my impatience. *Where was that doctor? What would the next test say?* I couldn’t help but think of one of my dad’s favorite short prayers: *Lord give me patience, but hurry up!* I decided to sit after all. I pulled up one of the two chairs separated by a small table holding a telephone and scratchpad with pen. Some previous visitor to this room, most likely also awaiting heartbreaking news on a loved one, had printed a single word on the page in capital letters, underlining it so severely that the imprint scored through several pages: *WHY?*

Sometimes the *whys* tumble all together so fast and furiously that I cannot pull all the threads apart. They sting like a million arrows—like the etymology for the word *sin*—somehow all missing the mark. The *whys* of why things happen and the *whys* of why they don’t. The myriad of parallel lives that could have been all pointed to the life that should have been, underscoring all the more painfully what life was intended to be, but now (literally) falling short on this side of heaven.

I traced the line under the *WHY?* on the scratchpad with my finger. *Why now, when my father and I finally have such peace and unfettered love between us? Why now, when grandchildren gather about his knee and give him more joy than he had ever known over a lifetime of obstacles and isolation? Why now, when my father and I share our God and our*

*faith and a deeper line of communication, vulnerability, and trust? Why now, after years of heartbreak, when it was finally so sweet?*

In the last few years since my husband and I and our young family returned to my hometown, we had shared our faith with my father and watched him open up to it and grow in it too. Deep reconciliation happened, which had been such an immense blessing. And then having a surprise baby we named for him, and seeing his joy at such naming: I knew I should be grateful for any healing on this side of heaven—and I was—but I was still greedy for more. Is this a bad thing? This insatiable longing? I used to feel guilty about it, but I've grown to appreciate it, to even embrace it as only more indicative of our homesickness for God and his great overflowing of goodness for which we yearn. "My grace is sufficient," Jesus tells us. On some days, I reply "Amen." On others, I say, "Oh really?" And on others still, I somehow hold both together. This was one of those amen-with-a-question-mark sort of days.

Our pastor once preached about how the Bible teaches us not so much to ask, "Why?" when bad things happen, but instead, "What now?" I thought about his words as I stood up but resisted the urge to pace. I wished to be receptive to this strange peace settling around me in this suddenly holy space. In that darkling room, the epic poet John Milton's closing words to his sonnet on becoming blind as a writer came to me: "They also serve who only stand and wait."

And then, in accordance with the sign, the knock came.



Was it really all those years ago now when other knocks came? That day had been stormy too. The air hung limp with humidity and yet was electrified by the promise of lightning. Thunder rolled low across the ravine behind our house, where the Native American Archeology

Museum was reconstructing the original village from remnants se-  
creted within the earth.

An awful tempest mashed the air,  
The clouds were gaunt, and few;  
A black, as of a spectre's cloak,  
Hid heaven and earth from view.

It was my first birthday back home in Canada after beginning my studies at Oxford University and, incidentally, my first birthday as a Christian. I had spent the earlier part of the day celebrating with my mom and younger sister before they left for work. Now it was just the cat and me at home. We lay melted out on the back patio, me in the lawn chair and the cat underneath my shade, both of us too warm to do much else but listen to the distant thunder. I had a mountain of school reading to get to, but couldn't be bothered. Obviously, neither could my cat, as she gave a disgruntled sigh when I finally got up to refill my lemonade glass. I had just come in through the back patio door when I heard a knock at the front door. When I opened it, I was surprised to see my ex-fiancé standing there.

We had barely talked, let alone seen each other, since our breakup over Christmas. This was the first summer in years when we weren't an item. I froze in the doorway, caught in a swirl of thoughts and emotions. I barely managed a nod in return to his hello.

Simply put, we had broken up over God. I wanted to pursue a life of faith, and Ben wanted to pursue a life without it. He thought the two approaches were compatible and not a long-term concern; I saw them as distinct life views and didn't want to knowingly enter marriage on such uneven footing. In our breakup, we were amicable though mutually hurt. He had gone on to date someone else seriously—they were on the brink of moving in with each other but had decided to take a break, or so I heard from mutual friends.

In the meantime, I had enjoyed a season of growing closer to this God of my discovery. And, if I was honest, I had begun to realize my growing appreciation—and attraction—for a dear friend who had been the first to clearly and kindly not only articulate the gospel to me, but to model it as well.

My friends and I goofily referred to this man as “TDH,” meaning “Tall, Dark, and Handsome.” He was also an American studying at Oxford: smart, funny, and terribly sweet-hearted. Unaware of my growing feelings for him (I would rather die than let on), he had left England that summer for a job at a think tank in Washington, DC. I feared we’d never see each other again and tried to make peace with this reality, which, I congratulated myself, I had done quite nicely. I did this largely by concentrating on what irritated me about TDH: his steadfast obedience and love for God, which he somehow pulled off without being pious or phony (which initially had irritated me even more). And, oh yes, his darling obliviousness to how attractive other women found him, too, drawn to his gentility, which try as I might to discover otherwise, kept proving itself to be genuine. He occupied a category completely of its own: one I had hoped deep down inside existed, but dared not trusted to be so. No, his type didn’t exist in this world, not among many of the men I knew, nor from the experiences of my girlfriends, nor in the news or media—and certainly not in academia, where a man who loved God might be considered an unenlightened, constrictive conservative at best or a neo-Neanderthal at worst. Heaven forbid a man should open a door for you or pull back a chair from the dinner table . . . now that my categories were jumbled and my expectations raised, well, there seemed no going back, or below.

But that was then, and this was now. Very *now*. Suddenly Jesus and faith and TDH and other men like him seemed very far away as I

stood in that doorway looking at Ben's very real, gentle smile. Things had grown serious between Ben and me during our college years together because of our many points of common interest. We came from the same town and were both academics; we shared interests in music, food, travel, and hobbies. We respected each other. Ben was kind and easygoing, with a promising career ahead of him and a warm family. A real catch, as my mom liked to remind me. She still seemed convinced that our breakup was only temporary. Me leaving anyone for Jesus made her categorically nervous. And how could anyone outdo Ben? Successful, thoughtful, dependable Ben? For me now, however, something was missing for him, in him . . . just as it had been for and in me, too, and I longed for him to find and be found by it. I longed for him to have his life transformed by grace too.

And yet I stood in the doorway and said nothing.

Ben had liked to remind me that we don't need God to be good. I would reply that I definitely needed God to be good, and in fact I needed him to be the best there was, and is, and ever will be!

"Don't play syntax games with me," Ben would say, frowning. "You know what I mean. God isn't necessary for someone to act morally." It was like hanging out with Iris Murdoch-meets-Ernest Hemingway.

But I did need God for me to be good as much as I needed him to be exactly who he claimed to be. And even when I thought of all the "good" people I knew who didn't know God, something was missing there, too, as opposed to those whom I began to see had a living faith. The latter may make mistakes, like everyone else, but at least they had a frame of reference for how the human condition is a powerful paradox of humility and dignity. Without an understanding of sin, and particularly an acknowledgment of our own, and without the acceptance and extension of grace, how can anyone even approach being "good" past the conditional, fair weather, or even lucky? And

for those who were truly trying to be good, for whom their characters spoke of someone dependable, kind, and true, wasn't this approaching God anyway, and shouldn't they just throw in the towel and believe, if they didn't already, given their affinity? I mean really, if you can't beat them, why not join them? For if God is for us, indeed, who is against us?

Ben would argue, "Look at all the atrocities done in the name of religion!"

To which I would reply, "Look at all the atrocities done in the lack of religion!"

And it would be a draw. But somehow not the kind I could take easily to the marriage altar.

Must we recognize the source, actually *see* it and claim it for God's, for it to be God's? Or is God actually at work in and through such good, more often and more anonymously than we tend to give him credit? After all, everything that sings of the love of Christ testifies to the love of Christ: the hug of a friend (regardless of religious affiliation), the beauty in an act of empathy, the splendor of a sunrise, the goosebumps created by even a rock-and-roll song? Why not tether similar strands together, or recognize the strains without for the music within? Where there is smoke, there is indeed fire.

Speaking of fire . . .

"Can I come in?" Ben gave me a long look.

Still unable to speak, I nodded, stepping aside. Something seemed off, something askew. There was a time when he would have swept in and kissed me on the cheek as he passed by before throwing himself haphazardly on my couch. But now a formality had settled in between us, vined its way around our words and actions, so that we stood in the hallway like acquaintances rather than people who had once planned a life together.

“Would you like something cold to drink?” I offered him, unsure of what to do.

“That’d be great,” he said quickly, seeming equally uneasy. Having lost her main source of shade, my cat had followed me into the kitchen, wrapping herself around my leg. Ben and I stood at the counter and drank our lemonades in silence.

“I wondered if you’d like to go for a drive?” he finally said softly. “You know, for old times’ sake?”

We always used to take a drive on my birthday, usually to the lake along some scenic route.

“Well . . .” I stiffened, drawing circles in the condensation on my empty, cold glass.

“Sorry,” he shrugged, turning away. “Habit.”

I didn’t say anything.

“I should go.” He walked toward the door.

“No, wait.” I felt badly. I missed him. Or, I missed the idea of him. Or perhaps I missed the idea of me? Who was I, exactly? Home now with a new faith in an old life? In the world and not of it? How much easier it would be *not* to be a Christian! Not to be, well . . . *good*.

The inner chastising began too: Why, I reasoned, should I flinch at the idea of going for a simple ride with a man who only a few months ago I thought I was going to marry? It is my birthday after all—I had celebrated every birthday for the last several years in the exact same way with this exact same person. It made sense to take one last ride together too. I owed him that much, regardless of the tension between us. And what was this “tension,” really? That Ben didn’t believe in God, and I now did? Maybe he had a point: Was that really such a big difference after all? Ben was kind, funny, dear. He was no monster atheist—in fact, he was more loving than some who seemed to proclaim a love for Christ appeared to be. Ben made it very

clear that he considered faith a crutch for the weak, that he didn't believe in anything or anyone but himself. I had felt that way, too, or at least close to it, but now I wasn't so sure anymore if not believing wasn't some kind of faith as well?

And besides all that, Ben owned a really cool vintage truck. *Oh, I am incorrigible*, I scolded myself. Here at home, I was involved with a man who had no faith in God, and at Oxford, I was drawn to a man who did. Was I unsettled by both of these men, or maybe—just maybe—was it God, whether through his (seeming) absence or his presence, that disturbed me most?

Ben looked at me uncertainly, awaiting my answer. Then he held out a hand, a gesture of peace. I took it in mine, moved by its familiar calloused feel from working the fields during his summer break. It was the first time we had touched in a very long time, this man who had been my college sweetheart. Tanned from his work on the farm, his hair had lightened almost to white blond. I wanted to smooth his wayward cowlick like I used to do, but forced myself not to move a muscle. He smelled like good earth and meadow air, I noticed as he stepped closer, slipping his other hand around my waist. *Those Amish romance novels sell at a clip for a reason*, I thought to myself. “Men who make do undo me,” declares Joan Anderson. Indeed.

Why is it those infamous opening notes of Lynnyrd Skynnyrd's “Sweet Home Alabama” always seem to rise up in the back of your mind whenever you are about to kiss your ex from your hometown? And oh, for a moment as long as longing itself, how I longed to kiss him. Standing there wearing his familiar khakis and button-down shirt, he seemed so much more real than Jesus. How familiar it would be, reassuring: the tactile reality of someone who did love me, rather than the distant consideration of a God who might.

Who *might*?

But wait, *wait* . . .

I pulled back and grabbed his keys off the counter. “Let’s go!” I called as I sprinted for the door, tossing the keys to him over my shoulder like salt in the devil’s eye.



The sun sat low on the dashboard as we continued driving toward the lake. The old truck rattled and hummed along the country roads. By the time we pulled up at the little cottage from my youth, the air hung thick with cricket song. Once on the front porch, I ran my hands above the door, feeling for the hidden key on the hook. Not exactly the most original of hiding places, but then again, there was nothing worth stealing in the century-old place anyway.

The cottage consisted of essentially one large room, with two small bedrooms (if you could call them that) cordoned off from the main space by curtains, not doors. A tiny galley kitchen, with a two-burner stove and a sloping floor, ran the length of the back wall. When you opened the refrigerator door, you had to be careful to hold it steady or else it would slam against the cupboard with all the force of inclined gravity. You had to shut it tight, too, and double check, or else it would slowly creak back open and you’d return to your goods stored there at dismal room temperature with a puddle of water at your feet. Electricity had been put in years after the cottage was built, and so the exposed wiring unapologetically veined the walls. The tiny bathroom with running water had been an afterthought too. As a result, a compact shower, sink, and toilet sat haphazardly off the kitchen with a flimsy cardboard door propped open by a large stone from the beach that you scraped heavily along the floor to use as a doorstop or a lock, whichever was required.

We hastily unlatched a few windows to ward off the musty smell. Now that all the grandchildren were grown and many of them gone,

my family rarely came here. Walking in brought a rush of memories, particularly of childhood birthdays past, as I was the only one besides my father with the midsummer birthday.

I didn't see the kiss coming. The room grew dim; the world seemed to recede away from us. A dark tide swirled around my ankles. Ben, who always did love Matthew Arnold, whispered the poet's closing lines from "Dover Beach" in my ear: "Ah, love, let us be true to one another . . ."

So unfair! How was I to withstand such effrontery? Poetic words undo me about as much as calloused hands from honest work: put them together, and . . . oh I would have been lost indeed had an Irish lilt or Scottish brogue come into the mix as well!

*But Arnold's poem is forlorn*, I found myself countering . . . a warning! Alas, the tide, velvet and warm, rose higher still, shaking my knees, dashing my hips . . . my eyes began to close. Oh my. It is a hard thing indeed to concentrate with another's lips at the pulse of your throat.

*Wait, what does Jesus say about kissing your former fiancé?*

But there seemed no time to think. All the time in the world for desire, but none at all to think. Time and desire became one, and thinking was the last of my concerns.

Ben took my hands and pulled me gently into the backroom with the old brass bed, the bed I had spent every summer in as a child through my teenage years. It still wore the same bedspread, white as a bride's dress, and quilted with rosebuds, now faded but pretty still. We lay down together, Ben's face so close I could see the tears glistening in his eyes. He brushed back my hair as he kissed me. Suddenly, the tide rushed my heart.

"Who will know?" he whispered into the gush of floodgates opening.

"Yes, who will know?" I echoed.

*Who will know?*

I sat up straight, almost toppling Ben off the bed.

*I will know.*

*God will know.*

*Oh, that sounds so Gothic*, I scolded myself. So . . . *heavy*. Just the words themselves seemed engraved in rock. Like someone had tossed me a stone tablet and I lay crushed underneath. How relevant could such a truth possibly be?

But ay, there's the rub! And indeed sometimes it rubs right up against you: the truth may not be convenient, but it is always relevant. It knows of no other way to be.

"Surely this breaks no commandment?" Ben said with such eerie resonance I jumped. He reached over and started rubbing my shoulders, easing me backward toward him.

I didn't say anything. We weren't married to other people, after all, and we obviously still cared for each other. We had a history, the perfect opportunity yawned before us . . . and indeed, who would know? I hesitated, though Ben did not seem to notice. Was it guilt? Was it shame? Was it fear? Lynyrd Skynyrd's lyrics rose up: *Lord, I'm coming home to you . . .*

No, it ran deeper than those self-judgmental and cultural knee jerks. Somehow, the answer felt, well, more *intimate*. More intimate, even, than what was happening all around me and to me. Something so intimate as to come deep from within, from something stronger and surer than bodily fluids or even wandering thoughts.

*You shall have no other Gods before me.*

The words flashed before me in my absence of thought like the swing of a double-edged sword. And then they were gone.

I didn't yet know much Scripture by heart; in fact, with an older brother as a disc jockey I knew way more rock lyrics than holy verses. I was new to this faith, a latecomer to the Bible, unchurched and still streaming cynicism behind me at times. But these words, this first

commandment, rose up before me for some crazy reason at the most inopportune time. I have since learned that Scripture has a way of doing that. Beware. It makes no ordinary sense. It reads like no pedestrian prose, no mundane poetry. It is, indeed, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer claims, in a class all its own. Holy? I used to wonder at the adjective that appeared in front of the simple title on my Bible. *Holy!* Then I realized that they should put an exclamation mark after it. The echo left my body taut, as though I was straining to hear something I could not quite hear. Unaware, Ben kept on kissing my throat, my collarbone, his hands moving deftly down the buttons of my summer blouse.

All of the sudden, there came a knock at the door. Quietly at first. I wasn't even certain if I had heard it. I craned my neck further from the bed, which Ben mistook for ecstasy and so returned to kissing it again more fervently.

That didn't help. I closed my eyes. Surely I was mistaken?

No, there it was again. *Bang. Bang. Bang.*

My eyes shot wide open. I peered over Ben's shoulder, as though sharpening my focus would help me hear better.

"Ben," I whispered. "Stop. Someone's at the door."

"That's crazy," he replied in a muffled voice between kisses. "This place is in the middle of nowhere. No one even knows we're here." He went back to determinedly wrestling with an equally determinedly stuck button.

The knock came again, louder still. This time we both jumped at the sound. There was no denying it; even Ben paused and raised his head.

"The place is virtually abandoned, for Christ's sake!" he said angrily, standing up and tucking his shirt into his pants. I, too, virtually abandoned, lay half-dressed and half dazed on the bed. His outburst grated me like it hadn't before.

"You shouldn't take the Lord's name in vain," I half-joked at him. Everything seemed at halves.

Ben tossed me a fed-up look.

“That’s a commandment, you know,” I added lamely. I had commandments on the brain now too.

The knocking reverberated even more loudly this time: *BANG! BANG! BANG!* Jumping up, Ben and I stared at each other. “It’s like the knocking at the gate of *Macbeth!*” I cried, filled with mock doom.

“What?” whispered Ben, looking at me like I had lost my mind. He was an economist, I reminded myself, not an English major. I had been living among literary geeks who tend to speak a language of allusion, to advantage and disadvantage.

“You better go answer it,” Ben prodded me. “It’s your cottage, you know.”

“It’s not *my* cottage,” I hissed. “It’s technically my grandmother’s.”

Ben stared at me. I realized what I just said made what we were just doing even worse.

*Now we all did what we could do.*

“What if it’s a crazy derelict?” I cried again. The only other time someone uninvited knocked on this door was years ago when I was up late playing cards with my sister. He proved to be a drunk trying to find his way home from the beachside pub.

“I’ll be right behind you,” Ben insisted.

*So much for chivalry*, I thought to myself as I haphazardly fastened my buttons and threw my hair back in a ponytail. The inner tide ebbed as I straightened my clothes.

“Carolyn, come on, maybe one of our friends figured out we came here for your birthday? I can’t let them see me here. They’ll tell Rebecca. I better stay back until we know who it is.”

Now it was my turn to stare at him, every drop of attraction evaporating fast.

*Does your conscience bother you? Tell the truth.*

“I thought you said you two were taking a break?” I finally managed to croak. The tide was clearly out now: no sign of it, land ho!

“We’re still sleeping together, whenever she comes home from college, we’re just not, well, *serious* . . .” he paused.

“Sex seems pretty serious to me,” I replied flatly. Anger tendrilled up between us.

“Oh, you . . . *Christians!*” he spat the word at me. “Making such mountains out of every molehill.”

I forced myself not to look at the undone zipper of his pants with a cynical air. Irritated beyond belief, or perhaps irritated back into it now, I bolstered myself, inwardly preparing for what all English majors will recognize as *the* Jane Eyre speech.

I adored Jane Eyre’s famous speech to Rochester, the one she gives when he wants her to be his mistress but she stands firm in her God-given dignity. No regular pre-suffrage lady’s speech. No swooning woman there. Three hurrahs for Jane!

Why then was I, so modern and well, so *Christian*, now so wobbly-kneed and foggy-headed? Alas, however, try as I might, I couldn’t get my footing. The familiarity, the still being wanted, the, well, *feeling* . . . it all seemed so unfair! If I couldn’t muster Jesus, it seemed, at least I could muster Jane.

But just before the fury crackling between us blew into full flame, Ben closed his eyes. In spite of everything, I felt my heart twist. The earthquake, the fire, and then . . . the small, still voice.

“I’m sorry,” Ben said gently. “I meant,” he stammered, “Rebecca and I aren’t serious . . . like you and I were . . . well, before . . .” he put his hands to his face and said in a muffled voice, “before God got in the way.”

I had to admit, he had a point. For Christ’s sake, literally, and all of ours, I felt my eyes tear up too. Why is life so messy?

Ben rubbed his eyes. Suddenly I realized how tired he looked. I felt tired too.

“I’m just, oh I don’t know, Caro . . . confused. I don’t know what I feel anymore.” Ben spoke so guilelessly, I didn’t know whether to slap him or hug him. I had proven I couldn’t yet be trusted hugging him, and I figured that slapping him didn’t convincingly represent the faith I wanted to model to him, which, I had to admit, I hadn’t done very well at so far. So instead, I just sat down heavily on the edge of the bed, tracing with my finger the circlet of roses along the wedding dress quilt.

By grace go each of us. By small circles of grace, over and over again.

“I’m sorry too,” I replied. I had the feeling we were both apologizing for different things, but trusted the intersection had us covered.

Unsure now what to do with his hands, Ben put them in his pockets. He gave me a weak smile and said, “I’ll get the door.”

“I’ve got it,” I said, smiling back and getting up. “You stay here. I’ll call out if he’s armed and dangerous. There’s a good-sized cast iron pan in the kitchen if we need it.”

The knocking had continuously grown stronger, rattling the old screen door against the flimsy inner wooden one. I feared the antique cottage would come down if I didn’t get to it soon.

When I opened the door, sure enough, a crazy-looking derelict met my gaze through the locked screen door. There stood an unkempt man with tousled hair sticking out every which way from under a golf hat and wearing a full-length very wrinkled beige raincoat, although it was sweltering outside. He held a large box in front of him. He had been banging against the door with his foot. I noticed his boots didn’t match.

It was my father.

“What took you so long?” he gruffed a greeting to me. He didn’t wait for an explanation.

“This is heavy. Let me in.”

I shook off my stunned disbelief and unlatched the screen door, opening it wide so I could help maneuver the box from his hands and set it down on the indoor woven rug. It was indeed heavy.

“What is in here, Dad?” I asked. “A body?”

My father shot me an unsure look. A little unsure myself, given my dad’s colorful history, I tried a small laugh.

“You’ll see soon enough,” my dad smiled shyly at me, like a young boy.

I noticed from the corner of my eye that Ben remained partially hidden behind the little curtain to the bedroom, in my line of vision but not my father’s. I could tell he was unsure of the terrain, too, and hesitating as to whether to make his presence known or not. I mouthed at him to stay put. My dad could be mentally confused in many ways, but I knew he could do life math: one look at my former boyfriend and me here together all alone in an isolated location on a late summer afternoon, and he’d be able to add things up pretty fast. After all, he was my father—fathers, even intermittent ones, still tend to own such uncanny calculation when it comes to their daughters. Moreover, my dad, technically, was at times what you might gently call “unstable.” All this made for a particularly loaded combination when it came to finding daughters alone with suitors. Through the crack in the curtain, poor Ben looked as surprised—and alarmed—as I felt.

“How did you know I was here?” I stuttered accusingly at my dad. I still couldn’t believe he was standing in front of me. At that time in my life, I rarely saw my father; his comings and goings were random indeed. There was never any rhyme or reason to his visits, and if he did visit, it was usually late at night at the home I shared with my mom and younger sister or sometimes at a special event at school, where he appeared without warning and embarrassed us. How I

envied the other kids with fathers who showed up in normal cars, with normal clothes, and who held normal conversations! Fathers who didn't rant and rave, or bring along chums from the shelter who slurred their words. Fathers who didn't wear Salvation Army motleys and drive a van rusted through the floorboards with a caged dog barking nonstop in the back. I never understood how my friends could roll their eyes and call their dads "embarrassing" when they ate their birthday dinners together in comfortable restaurants, or joked around after their fathers dropped them off at the school dance with the announcement of when they would be back to pick them up. In the handful of times I agreed to meet my father at a restaurant for some special occasion, it never ended well. A waiter would be insulted, or a table overturned, or a bill left for a struggling teenager daughter to pay after a fit of paranoia caused her father to flee. An ocean of difference rolls between mere embarrassment and humiliation, and I often found myself floundering in a riptide when it came to my father's unpredictable moods. I ached for someone to merely "embarrass" me by calling out he would be back for me at the end of the dance. In more ways than one, it seemed I had to make my way to and from everywhere alone, and usually in the dark.

As a general rule, my father didn't remember birthdays, and holidays weren't on his radar. Christmas was to be avoided in particular as it was a season that pained him ever since his own drunken father had beaten his mother to a pulp and left his young sons on Christmas Eve. I had birthdays pass without receiving so much as a card, but then some years an extravagant gift would come when I least expected it: a black Raleigh bike when I was ten; a fistful of lira just before I went to study art in Italy when I turned seventeen. And now this: my own bodyweight in a nondescript brown box. What could it be? And how did he know to find me here, of all

places? Considering almost two decades of coming to this little cottage, I only owned a small handful of memories of him ever joining us here, but that was long before *The Divorce*. The discomfort between us only grew worse after his breakdown by the chasm caused by mental illness.

“Well, go ahead,” he urged me, hesitantly radiant. “Open it!”

Typical of my dad, I thought at the time, the box was not only taped shut, it was taped all over. It looked like a square ball of transparent yarn. It took me some time just to saw through the sticky bondage with a butter knife from the small remnant of kitchen utensils. Later, I realized he was probably terrified of any of its contents getting ruined. But at the time, I just thought it was plain crazy. Perhaps growing in grace helps us withhold judgment so as to see the layers of precious within the precious. Nacred, we are, in such insights; like a pearl beyond price, the kingdom within sheens.

A distinct smell met me as soon as I opened the box. I shuddered. And then I saw it . . .

Or, I should say, *them* . . .

Old books! That matchless scent of old books wafted over me . . . a beloved smell, so familiar and comforting. The smell of wisdom, of minds in endless conversation. The smell of civility and imagination and information and insight. The fragrance of *humanitas*, the scent of what it means to be truly humane.

Goosebumps of the best kind ran up my arms and down my legs as I kneeled down and gently pulled each book from its nestling in straw. With every extraction, I gasped in awe. Book after book emerged, each a rare one. By the time I emptied the box, I could barely breathe. Fanned out around me were a dozen books bound in leather or with ancient marbled cover, some with gilded spines and pages, others with embossed titles or bright illustrations. All were

collectors' editions, each representative of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the literary period I was studying.

Oh wait! The bounty proved a baker's dozen, however, for out of his inner coat pocket my father pulled one more. *Jane Eyre!* I clasped it to my chest like a long lost friend.

"I couldn't get that last one to fit in the box," my father admitted.

I sat back on my heels, shellshocked by such generosity and unsure of which one to revisit first. My father chuckled at my obvious glee.

"How did you know?" I stammered, letting my hands run over the beloved friends, afraid that if I left contact with them, they might vanish. That my dad might vanish with them.

"I have my ways," my father shrugged. He often used this phrase when we asked where he came up with an unexpected provision, like the old car with its back doors permanently locked for my sister when she began college, or the hermit crabs he produced complete with an aquarium when we wanted a pet, or the beautiful hand towels marked "funeral home" when we needed dorm supplies. We learned not to ask any more questions when he used this phrase. My father didn't specialize so much in child support as he did in surprise support. This birthday, he looked particularly delighted at my delight.

And delighted I was—all aight I was! Shelley, Byron, Keats, Longfellow, Wordsworth, Blake, Tennyson . . . Coleridge, too, I realized with a swallow. So many dear old friends sitting resplendently expectant in front of me. I was amazed my father even knew which authors I was reading. With patient impatience, I previously had tried explaining to him several times just what I was studying while away at school. He always seemed distracted, patiently impatient himself.

I now realized he had been paying attention and had done a little research. Uneducated himself, he felt intimidated by schooling, although he was impressively self-taught in many areas prior to his

dissolution. A new appreciation for his resourcefulness and for such sheer generosity washed over me. Perhaps he was just as uncomfortable by our discomfort as I?

“How did you know I was here, Dad?” I stood up to hug him. He moved away instinctively at first. My father was not a big hugger. I stepped in closer and kissed his cheek. He blushed.

“What do you mean, honey?” he stepped further back, shyly.

The old panic in me began to rise, with the usual drag of suspicious fear whenever my father began to not make sense. This might prove tricky territory to navigate.

*How could he ask that? I thought to myself. I mean, isn't it obvious? He treks out here to a small lakeside port where he hasn't seen us since we were children—and even then, memories of him at birthdays are few and very far between. I have barely seen him since returning from school, even in my own home! And I certainly didn't tell him about any plans to come here today of all days—I myself didn't even anticipate coming here until just this afternoon. No one knows we're here—literally not a single soul. Why is he here? How is he here?*

My father stood fiddling with his hat in his hands, seemingly oblivious to my question. Again I asked him, clearly and carefully, how he found me here?

In reply, my father produced from his trench coat pocket a creased photo of me at the little cottage celebrating my birthday. It was my seventh birthday, as I can tell by the Pink Panther candle on the birthday cake.

“I've always carried it, honey.” He reached out to stroke my hair. “I've always been with you on your birthday.”

Instinctively I wanted to dodge his preening, and started opening my mouth in the habit of protest: *What? You were never there! You have never been there!* I wanted to argue with him, to set

the record straight. Dissention can become habit too; the default of comfortable discomfort.

But then I looked at the books circled around my feet. Standing at the center of a gift of words, something gave me pause, so I stopped my own words as gift in response—always a good move when in doubt, or even better as I am learning, when in faith.

I thought about the wider way in which my father may have meant this statement. Being a Christian was slowly opening up to me how to receive grace, and how to give it—how, indeed, to live by it. How circles of it ripple out whenever we toss it out and reel it in. *Real* it in and the truth will set you free. “I will make you fishers of men,” Jesus calls to his followers. By land or sea, grace goggles do indeed allow us to see into the depths—even the murkiest ones—a little better. I realized I had never thought this way about my father before. There he stood, saggy golf hat literally in hand, a little nervous perhaps, about how his now-gone-away-and-educated daughter might receive him and receive his gift. There we stood together, surprised too by our mutual delight—a little afraid it might crack or give way, but trusting it still. Three cords indeed are not easily broken. Him, and me, and Christ makes three.

“I believed I would find you here,” he finally said, simply.

Ever since my father’s nervous breakdown, his memories would conflate; he often forgot my birthday or felt uncomfortable about coming by during festivities. Yet this year he remembered and, for some reason, drove out to the cottage in his battered old blue van believing he would find me there. And he did. Faith proves a powerful GPS indeed.

Except for his incessant knocking, or perhaps I should say, kicking, at the cottage door that day, my father was remarkably gentle his entire visit. No outbursts, no demands. No complaints or raging

against someone for some injustice, imagined or otherwise. And I did a pretty good job, if I do say so myself, of not picking any fights, or judging, or finding fault. Not because of me but because of Christ in me. Because Jesus' example spoke to me of being available and loving. And because, healed in him, and continuing on this side of heaven to heal in him, he had bid me go in peace.

Around that gifting of books, my father and I sat together and passed the peace between us while Ben remained cloistered in the bedroom. I believe he didn't dare breathe. I don't know what kept him the most still—fear of my father or fear of The Peace. For if Ben had emerged and joined us, he might have been forced to join such peace, and a forced peace is no peace at all.

I offered to return the photograph but my dad had me keep it. So I slipped it into one of the volumes, the collection of Victorian poets. I spied so many beloved names in the table of contents, and then my eyes fell on Christina Rossetti, whose very name itself sounds like poetry. Given the occasion, I opened the book up to Rossetti's poem, "A Birthday," and read it aloud to my dad:

My heart is like a singing bird  
Whose nest is in a water'd shoot;  
My heart is like an apple-tree  
Whose boughs are bent with thick-set fruit;  
My heart is like a rainbow shell  
That paddles in a halcyon sea;  
My heart is gladder than all these  
Because my love is come to me.  
Raise me a dais of silk and down;  
Hang it with vair and purple dyes;  
Carve it in doves and pomegranates,

And peacocks with a hundred eyes;  
Work it in gold and silver grapes,  
In leaves and silver fleurs-de-lys;  
Because the birthday of my life  
Is come, my love is come to me.

“What does *that* mean?” my dad asked with joking seriousness.

In typical annoying literature student fashion, I took a deep breath, preparing myself to explain how Rossetti frequently refers to the second coming of Christ as the ultimate “birthday” in her work, and how this symbolizes the new kingdom replacing the old earth, an idea that is mirrored in the spiritual rebirth of the individual as well (hence, being made a “new creation” in Christ) . . . and how . . . but I stopped.

“She’s happy because of the rebirth that love brings,” I said instead.

“Oh,” my dad replied. “And the love that rebirth brings too?”

“Yes, true,” I happily agreed, surprised. I loved this rebirthing myself. I had never really “talked” literature with my dad before. I took his hand but only held it briefly. He often got uncomfortable when touched, and pulled away.

“She seems happy she was born, this poet?” he asked solemnly, sitting on his hands now.

“Yes, and reborn, I would say.” Instead of being hurt at his pulling away, as I always had been, I decided to meet him where he was at, just as Jesus meets all of us, just as he met and meets me, often at our deepest hurt and at our sharpest pulling away. Sitting there with my dad, I handed our handlessness to God.

“It sure is pretty, honey.” He smiled.

“Yeah,” I agreed. “It sure is.”

We sat together quietly for some time. Eventually my dad broke the silence.

“Who is the love of your life?” he asked with a sweet simplicity that took me by surprise—so many surprises—truly a surprise birthday party that day!

I looked at him. Was this a trick question? The old panic rose up again. He will expect me to say it is him, in his fiery Lear-like fashion. I found myself coiling tight inside. My own hands folded protectively across my chest.

And it *is* a trick question, but not in the usual sleight of hand amid our fallen emotions, scars, and hurts. Rather, it is a revelatory question: one that anchors in hope as it lifts you up. One that lays you open as the truth rushes in—a fearsome truth that fills all the voids and overflows our understanding, so that we may “have life, and have it to the full.” I took a breath and prepared myself for sharing such a choosing: for speaking the name that ultimately divides. Or unites.

“God,” I finally replied.

And I meant it. The clarity of my own voice surprising (again) even me.

“Now it is God, Dad.”

I waited for his hurt look, for his voice to change and thunder, for his demand that I love him first. I had even started at the force of my assertion. It was as though scales fell from my eyes and suddenly I felt my heart hurt at all I had almost given away, a sordid boon.

My dad turned to me and said with a gentle earnestness, “Good girl.”

I slowly let out my breath. Is he being facetious? Condescending? Is it the crazy part of him talking? Or—perhaps, just perhaps—is it his truth meeting mine? There was a time when the feminist in me would have gone on the attack. But since becoming a Christian, I had been learning to wait, to listen for the sound behind the words, for the multiple ways of reading them in God’s script for me and for all of us. Bane or blessing? Like the wrestling Jacob, I grasped at the blessing and refused to let go.

Is there not, at the heart of every wish, a desire to be loved unconditionally? A twisting, a turning, in some way, to be blessed? When we purse our lips to blow out our birthday candles, someone has already breathed us into being. The same spirit passes through all bodies, across all geographies, into all time and space. This is the overt truth secreted within each of us: our birthright, our death rite, and our being made right again in the rich grace of being redeemed rather than revoked, removed or replaced.

Yes. Good, girl.

My father touched my cheek gently before reaching for the door. I moved toward him, so that my cheek met his hand.

“Give Ben my regards.” He looked directly into my eyes, his own eyes dancing.

I started at Ben’s name. Before I could stop myself, my head swung in the direction of the little bedroom. I could barely make out Ben’s shadow behind the curtain as the last of the day’s light faded. In the shared treat of my father’s gift, I had actually forgotten he was there. What was worse, I had almost forgotten my dad didn’t know he was there!

Or did he? For at that same moment I looked down at my blouse and was mortified to see that the buttons were done up at odds. I felt my face go hot.

Poised in the doorway, my dad nodded toward the side drive. “Nice truck.”

I breathed a sigh of partial relief. Hopefully it was only the old Ford that gave it away. Regardless, the opportune knock, I had to admit, seemed a *Coitus Interruptus de Spiritu Sancto*. For then my dad asked rather loudly, it seemed, given I was still right in front of him: “How is that tall American fellow you mentioned? You know, the one you talked about sharing God with you?”

I felt my face grow even hotter. My dad winked. It would seem he listened more than I gave him credit for. *Honor thy father and thy mother*. I was slowly but surely learning that these commandments made more sense than I gave them credit for, as well.

“Give your mother my love, will you?” my dad said with his usual refrain. “I never stopped loving her you know.”

And with that, he stepped outside and off the rickety porch with an easy athleticism that displayed itself at times in spite of his aging frame. I closed the screen door, and then, for good measure, also the old wooden door behind him. Weighed by the realization of my close call, I sunk down into the worn floral-patterned armchair.

“Is it safe to come out?” Ben asked at the click of the lock, emerging from the curtain like the assistant to a magician whose trick has just been foiled.

*Safe?*

Out of the box, I wondered what Jane would have had to say about that.

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