

A close-up photograph of a person's hands and lower body. They are wearing a light teal, flowing dress and are kneeling on a sandy surface. They are holding a thin, dark, textured stick vertically, using it to draw a heart shape in the sand. The heart is partially completed, with the top half clearly visible. The background is a soft-focus view of the sand and the person's legs.

Tricia Lott Williford

and life comes back

A Wife's Story of *Love, Loss, and Hope* Reclaimed

"Tricia Lott Williford's book reminds us it often takes a thick darkness to make known the light. *And Life Comes Back* is a candle that will light your path."

— **Donald Miller**, *New York Times* Best-Selling Author of *Blue Like Jazz*

Praise for
And Life Comes Back

"I couldn't put *And Life Comes Back* down. As Tricia Lott Williford shared the heartbreaking death of her husband, her words spoke with piercing clarity to my own wife-heart. Holding nothing back, Tricia carried me through the pain, straight to what I know to be true about God—his faithfulness, goodness, strength, and peace, even in the midst of horrific loss. Of all the books you read this year, you can't miss this one! It's a journey that will leave you changed forever."

—SHERRY SURRETT, CEO and president,
MOPS International

"Tricia Lott Williford's book reminds us it often takes a thick darkness to make known the light. *And Life Comes Back* is a candle that will light your path."

—DONALD MILLER, *New York Times* best-selling
author of *Blue Like Jazz*

"Tricia Williford's brave, exquisitely wrought book is an act of stunning generosity. It is a story of grief, yes, but also of how love, language, and work can give us back to ourselves, even after enormous loss, and can push us out of brutal darkness into the glorious, ordinary light of every day."

—MARISA DE LOS SANTOS, *New York Times* best-selling
author of *Belong to Me* and *Falling Together*

“I read this book through the night, every word a singular step toward purity and grace. Tricia Lott Williford takes us to a place so tender in its loss and yet so full of life that we willingly go with her through the sorrow to the truth of what comes after the great darkness. *And Life Comes Back* is no magical thinking. It is a treasure for any who love ‘what death can touch.’ A stunning voice; her story and her sharing of it a unique and longed-for celebration of the human spirit.”

—JANE KIRKPATRICK, award-winning author
of *Where Lilacs Still Bloom*

“In the midst of devastating pain and the frailty of motherhood, Tricia narrates each scene with such poetic perfection about her own imperfection. Pages are woven with honesty, humor, doubt, and faith to reveal a woman’s unapologetic questioning of God, death, and grace. With bite-size lessons in friendship, marriage, and parenting, Tricia helps us capture the presence of God in both tragedy and in everyday dialogue.”

—DAVE SMITH, executive pastor, Willow Creek
Community Church (Crystal Lake Campus)

“Tricia’s story is profound and at the same time so simple. It’s tragic and at the same time so universal. It’s a story of deep grief and deep healing. It’s a story of hope for those of us who have been in the ditch and who pray we’ll find life again. It’s a story for you and me. You won’t want to miss this one.”

—ALLISON VESTERFELT, author of *Packing Light:
Thoughts on Living Life with Less Baggage*

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a wife's story of love, loss, and hope reclaimed

Tricia Lott Williford



WATERBROOK
P R E S S

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Details in some anecdotes and stories have been changed to protect the identities of the persons involved.

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For Tucker and Tyler



Contents

Prologue	1
<i>Part 1.</i> I Will Love You Forever	5
<i>Part 2.</i> Please, Just Fix This	35
<i>Part 3.</i> Once We Were a Wagon	47
<i>Part 4.</i> Let the Joy Come Out	69
<i>Part 5.</i> A Season of Pruning	81
<i>Part 6.</i> No Shame, No Regrets	103
<i>Part 7.</i> Just Not Today	135
<i>Part 8.</i> Only in Winter	163
<i>Part 9.</i> Go Do This Thing	187
<i>Part 10.</i> Now I've Got to Live	205
Epilogue	211
Acknowledgments	214

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Prologue

'Tis a fearful thing
To love what death can touch.
To love, to hope, to dream,
And oh, to lose.
A thing for fools, this, Love,
But a holy thing,
To love what death can touch.

For your life has lived in me;
Your laugh once lifted me;
Your word was a gift to me.

To remember this brings painful joy.

'Tis a human thing, love,
A holy thing,
To love what death can touch.

—Judah Halevi

October 2012

Gas tank: full. Cell phone: charged. iPod: stocked. I drive up I-70 toward the mountains. A decision of classic, spontaneous impulsion on my part. Once I've decided I want to do something, I want to do it today. This is no exception.

Robb and I weren't a perfect match. We were different in every way. But maybe the differences make the perfect match. He liked a planned agenda; I thrive on spontaneity. He was a filer. He put everything in its place. I am a piler, and I can't find anything once it leaves my hands. He liked to visit the same restaurants and order favorite dishes; I like to try new places and taste new things. He went to bed at the same time every night, just after the nightly weather report at 9:17 p.m.; I come alive at night, often thinking and writing and creating into the early morning hours. He was deeply invested in the decisions of the government and any election; I am apolitical and often handed him my ballot since it mattered so much more to him. He believed in the thrill of competition; I enjoy the commercials and believe in the gracious social merits of the game. I always have a book in my hands; he was nonliterate. Not illiterate, but nonliterate; he hated to read. We parented differently. I read books, conduct Internet research, post on parenting blogs, and study consequences based on love and logic. He wrestled on the floor, tickled and roughhoused, and earned respect by saying things like, "Dude, just obey. I've pooped bigger than you."

But we both loved road trips and loud music on the iPod. (I like mine louder than he preferred.) We loved having people in our home (although I could quickly and seamlessly add a chair to our dinner table while he preferred a guest list in advance). We both loved serving people; I would listen and learn their favorites and their fears, while he would grab his tool belt and fix any problem at hand.

Years ago I stopped trying to make us match—him the same as me, me the same as him. I learned that his relationships, although far less verbal, were in no way inferior to mine; they were just different. His experiences and his preferences were different from mine, but they were equally valuable. The ways he chose to love me were, in fact, loving me. The face of love depends on one's willingness to understand two vernaculars of the same language. We were not the same. We didn't always understand each other. And we made a great team.

In the passenger's seat is the white paper bag with handles. It looks like it could come from a candle shop or a quaint boutique. No one might guess that it holds the canister of my husband's ashes.

I drive on a two-lane road that becomes more winding, less crowded, and finally utterly secluded as I arrive at a lake just below the mountain's highest elevation. I turn off the car. I step out. The air is crisp and silent. I button my coat, grab the handles of the white bag, and click the remote to lock the car as I walk toward the water.

A decorative flourish consisting of a thick, dark grey line that curves from the left, loops around, and ends in a small swirl on the right. A thinner, lighter grey line follows a similar path, creating a layered effect.

Part 1

I Will Love You Forever

Life was rich. No matter what the future held, this was a marvelous moment.

—Madeleine L'Engle, *Two-Part Invention*

October 2009

As I scrambled with the many dishes on the stove and in the microwave, two-year-old Tyler cried because he wanted to sit in his chair, twenty-five minutes before it was time to eat. Four-year-old Tucker needed, needed, needed to be in the kitchen with me, standing at my feet, asking to help.

Please. Help. Please.

Tyler wanted to be held. Then Tyler wanted to wear his Superman shirt. It could not be found. He could not think of eating without it, so he organized a search party, looking high and low. When we found it, he didn't want to wear it. He put on a Power Ranger costume instead. Meanwhile, Tucker endlessly blew the pinwheel he had made at preschool, sending spit flying all over everything and everyone. That's fun, just before dinner.

The kitchen door opened from the garage, and the familiar jangle of car keys exploded into boisterous, joyful shouting. "Daddy! Daddy!" The boys tumbled over each other in their race to greet Robb, which became a fest of shoving and blaming and claiming. I stood by the stove, stirring the spanish rice to accompany the chicken enchiladas in the oven. I watched the greeting unfold, aware of two things: he was finally home to help referee such scenes, and we would have our own hello once the hubbub settled. I could leave them to their wrestling match. Sure enough, they dispersed as quickly as they had commenced, spinning and bouncing like pinballs.

"Hey, babe," he said as he came behind me, one hand on my

waist, one hand holding the mail. I gave him a quick kiss over my shoulder.

“Hi, love. Welcome home. How was work?”

“Eh, you know. Work.” He flipped through the mail, sorting the wheat from the chaff. “How was the day here?”

“Eh, you know. It was the day here.” I pulled the enchiladas out of the oven, balancing the casserole dish in one hand, clicking the beeping timer off with the other hand, and giving a quick, upward exhale to blow my bangs out of my eyes.

“Anything you need help with before dinner?”

“Yes, you can pour drinks and have them go potty and wash their hands.” (Perhaps in another life stage I won’t say “potty.” Lots of grownups say “bathroom”—so I’ve heard.)

“Boys! Go potty and wash your hands! Time for dinner!” He headed up the stairs and returned in a frayed T-shirt and athletic shorts. He wore shorts 350 days of the year, even when there was snow on the ground.

Robb and I had a silly joke between us. About trivets. Really, that’s what marriages are made of: silly little nothings that add up to a decade of important somethings. As you probably know, a trivet is the little doodad that goes under a hot plate or dish to keep the heat from scorching your table or countertop. Robb insisted on calling it a trinket. I insisted on calling it by its name, trivet.

I carried the hot dish to the table. “Could you hand me a trivet?”

“You mean a trinket?”

“No. I mean a trivet.”

“Sure, babe. Here you go. Here’s your trinket.”

“Thank you for the trivet.”

“Trinket.”

“Trivet.”

We did this, I kid you not, every single time one of us set the table for dinner. It was a nightly dialogue, a playful banter. The trinket/trivet debate. One night he said, “You know, when I’m dead and gone, you’ll look at that trinket and smile. You’ll remember me, and you’ll call it a trinket.”

“Doubt it.” Lower my vocabulary standards? Hard to wrap my mind around that.

The dinner scene unfolded with arguments over washing hands with soap and water versus sanitizer and whether dinnertime is an appropriate opportunity for such shortcuts. There were spilled drinks and excessive napkins. Any semblance of real conversation was replaced instead with interruptions and incomplete sentences. Someone wise once said, “Where two or more are gathered, someone will spill his milk.” I envisioned my family dinner table looking so much more collected than this.

Tyler didn’t want to eat at all; he simply wanted out of his chair. No dice, kiddo. You have to take the three obligatory “thank-you bites.” That’s the rule. And he could have his share of yogurt and grapes. I support the idea of children eating what the adults are having, but sometimes I don’t want to argue and negotiate every bite of the one meal we all eat together each day. Some might call me a short-order cook. I’m willing to risk the name calling. I prefer to describe myself as

a mom who doesn't want to argue incessantly and in the end throw away food that her son doesn't want to eat. Bring on the kid-friendly side dishes.

Tucker got in trouble for shouting potty words at the table. He didn't need to go. He just thinks he is hysterically funny. We try to discourage these syllables as appropriate dinner conversation, so he spent a few minutes in time-out.

Robb tossed in some adult humor for me—his teammate and captive audience. “Listen, Tucker. We need to redefine your mission statement. There is about to be some corporate restructuring around here, and I don't think you'll be pleased with your performance review.” I smile in spite of myself; I couldn't have said it better. Time for a disciplinary action plan, I'm pretty sure. We'll consult with the board.

Oh, wait. We are the board.

“Tuck, when you're ready to use polite words, you can come back.”

“Can I come back now?”

“Are you ready to use polite words?”

“No.”

“Then you can keep sitting on the steps.”

Tyler had no interest in dinner, his meal, his chair, or his life as he knew it. He wanted Mommy. In his whiniest, most tearful voice, he cried for me. Since I was enjoying my enchiladas, as much as I could in such an environment, Robb tried to encourage him to eat instead.

“Tyler, can you eat your chicken? This is Daddy's favorite chicken. Very favorite. Taste it.”

“No. Mommy. Mommy, mommy, mommy.” Cry, cry, cry.

Tucker announced from the living room: “I’m ready now.”

“Okay, come join us.”

He announced upon his arrival that he had to go potty now. Robb and I exchanged glances over the table: *to allow or not to allow?* We were still freshly out of the potty-training graduation ceremony, so we were reluctant to keep the boy from going when he said he had to go.

Go. Now. Quickly. Then eat. Now. Go.

Tucker yelled from the bathroom, “Soap! Soap! SSOOOAP!” It was hard to know if he was yelling at us or at the soap. Especially since he didn’t need a single bit of assistance when I arrived at his side to help him reach the soap. He was fine, thanks.

Tyler cried.

Enchiladas, anyone? Are you kidding me? Is it time for bed yet?

And then the negotiations started. Because try as I may, dinner almost always ends with a negotiation.

“Boys who eat their dinner can have a cookie.”

“I want a cookie!”

“Did you eat your dinner?”

“No.”

“Then no cookie.”

“But I want a cookie!”

“Eat your grapes or your chicken.”

“I want a cookie.”

“I want Mommy!”

I want a stiff drink.

Robb raised his voice above the din. “Boys, enough. Mommy

fixed this dinner for you. Stop complaining. Start eating.” What is it about the dad’s voice? It evokes a moment of trepidation, just enough to make them remember who’s boss. He is. And he says I am.

In an adult moment above it all, I whispered to him, nearly in pig Latin, “I made chocolate raspberry trifle for dessert. I’m not sure they’ve earned it. I’m pretty sure we have. After their baths and bedtime, let’s eat it. Just us.” In the end they didn’t eat their dinners, chicken and grapes notwithstanding, so they didn’t get their cookies. But we held the promise of delayed gratification: our dessert to come after bedtime. Everything tastes better after bedtime.

After dinner we took a family walk around the neighborhood, down the street and around the corner to the path with the mountain view. With four wheels and a handle, our sturdy Radio Flyer had a large capacity: jackets, sunscreen, water bottles, one boy or two climbing in and out, the ever-growing collection of rocks and pine cones, and alternating rhythms of whining and laughing. We put a lot of miles on those four wheels, one evening stroll at a time.

We arrived home once more, and after the choreographed tag team of baths (Robb handled the bubbles, soap, and shampoo while I handled the fluffy hooded towels and the jammies); after the good-night songs, the bedtime stories, and one hearty round of “I’m thankful for” (Robb was thankful for me, I was thankful for umbrellas, Tucker was thankful for his soccer ball, and Tyler was thankful for crinkly, wrinkly eyeballs); after the prayers and kisses and glasses of water and night-lights and more water and the list of just-one-more things, they were in bed.

I came slowly down the stairs, feeling spent and poured out, wish-

ing I could muster more energy to stay up late and maximize the remaining quiet moments of the day.

He unfolded his reclining chair and opened his arms. “Come here, baby girl.”

I climbed, knees first, into his chair, then turned myself to find the spot that had taken us a while to map out, the one I’ve now known for years—the nook-and-cranny puzzle pieces that fit the two of us into a chair made for one. He groaned as I sat down on his lap, as if the bulky weight of me were too much to hold. One of his favorite jokes.

“I really wish you wouldn’t do that when I sit on you.”

“I was just being funny.”

“Well, that’s not funny.”

“You’re grumpy,” he teased.

I craned my neck to look at him.

“Yes, it’s possible that I am. You’ve been here for slightly more than one hour of this day, thank you very much, and I have spent the entire day navigating an obstacle course in which I am Public Enemy Number One. What you saw tonight was only one of today’s meals. At lunch today Tyler was angry because he didn’t want me to cut his spaghetti noodles. But he doesn’t know how to eat them otherwise, so then he was also angry because he was hungry. During the same meal Tucker was just as angry. I don’t really know why; it’s hard to keep track. At naptime Tucker was angry again because I wouldn’t let him jump on the bed. Simultaneously, Tyler was irate because he couldn’t wear his shoes to bed. I found both of them running across the length of the coffee table and launching themselves into my chair.

Olympic training, right here.” I pointed to the coffee table, their running track.

“Do you know something else? At one point I actually heard myself tell Tyler that I didn’t like him very much today. I told him I didn’t like him! For crying out loud, who was the adult in that situation, anyway? ‘I don’t like you,’ I said. My mom coached me through that one. She said, ‘He doesn’t understand yet. You’ll want to change that sentence by the time he’s five. For now, it bounces right off.’ Apparently her own mother used to say she was going to give her back to the Indians. So I guess it’s all relative. Still, I earned no points for Mother of the Year today. This day had angry written all over it. So, yes, perhaps I am grumpy. And by the way, you didn’t exactly keep your cool at the dinner table tonight, either.”

He pulled my shoulder gently into the crook of his arm, softening me. He rested his scruffy chin on my head. We fit so perfectly. My voice quieted. “I’m pretty sure they will be disappointed tomorrow when they wake up to learn I am still their mom and I still live here.”

With my ear against his chest, I listened to the vibrations of his voice. “Well, I’m glad you live here. You’re stuck with me. And them.”

“Thank you. You’re not allowed out of this.”

“Neither are you, baby girl.” He poked my knee for emphasis and then rested his hand on the curve of my worn, gray sweatpants. “They’re in bed now anyway. At the end of the day, they always go to bed.”

“In bed” is relative. I could still hear Tucker making that silly clicking sound in his throat, which he had just discovered and was abundantly proud of. “In bed” is not asleep. But it is a step in the right direction.

“Can we just be quiet, please?” I asked Robb, immune to the irony that I had been the one doing all the talking in that most recent tirade.

“Can I watch baseball?”

“Can I read my book?”

“Yes.”

“Deal.”

“Dessert?”

“Um...yes.” Isn’t that what we’ve all been waiting for?

With dessert served in the deep ice cream bowls we found on clearance at Kohl’s, I moved back to my own chair—the oversized, comfier, more realistic place for me to sit for the duration of the night. Several chapters and innings later, it was time for the weather segment of the evening news—9:17 every night. Robb moonlighted as a closet meteorologist. He had installed two weather stations in our home, apps on his phone, and updates on his desktop. He was routinely one click away from the five-day forecast. I found this nicely helpful in my decisions about shoes and cute cardigans, since I would otherwise pay no attention to the weather until I was uncomfortable enough to notice it.

My goodness. Sometimes we seem so old. What happened to the two who watched movies late into the night and boasted the occasional 2 a.m. run to Taco Bell? We used to have more to say to each other. Dinner conversations, chats on that walk around the neighborhood, pillow talk late at night—we always had a few more things to say. Where have those conversations gone? Are we too comfortable? Are we too familiar? Maybe we’re just too tired.

He followed his meticulous routine of locking every door, turning off each light, then double-checking that each door was locked. Leaving him all the practical tasks, I checked on the sleeping little boys. I straightened this one's blanket and found that one's teddy bear. I stroked the tall one's head; I rubbed the small one's back. I kissed this one's fingers, that one's eyelids.

I breathed a prayer over them. "God, arm them with strength. Make their way perfect."

Little do they know that I love nothing more than them. They are as big as I love.



December 2010

Three days before Christmas I was balancing several writing deadlines, as often happened at the end of the month, the end of the semester, or the end of the year. All three factors were simultaneously upon me, and like a madwoman I was typing, editing, revising, and rewriting other people's words. I sat at a Starbucks table, my fingers clicking on the keyboard, one foot resting in the chair across from me, and writing manuals spread on the table space around my laptop.

Robb's parents had arrived in town that morning, and we would meet for dinner that evening, so I had a number of hours to write as fast as I could. I had set aside holiday cheer, except for the faithful red label of my Starbucks cup, and I wrapped my mind around Kate Turabian's rules for annotated footnotes of a secondary reference. I'm pretty sure if Kate Turabian were alive, we would not be friends. She was one finicky gal.

My phone buzzed—incoming message.

R: *Can't stop shaking. Sinus cavities ache.*

I glanced at Robb's text and sent off a quick reply with my text-savvy thumbs. An average of more than fifteen hundred texts a month builds a speedy wpm ratio. And also carpal tunnel syndrome.

T: *Bummer, love. Need me to come home?*

R: *No. Just wanted you to know. I think I'm sick. Fever.*

I frowned sympathetically at the screen of my phone. *Well, that's unfortunate*, I thought. *Nobody wants to be sick at Christmas.* My mind wandered vaguely to the ramifications of a sick husband during the holidays, but I didn't linger there long. I had work to do. He told me he was fine and I didn't need to come home, and I reasoned that if I finished my deadlines now, I could take better care of him when I got home.

An hour later I packed up my computer and my books, put on my scarf and mittens, and headed home. I flipped on the local radio station that had played a loop of holiday favorites for six solid weeks. The announcers were between songs, debating the weather. With two days left for varying temperature and precipitation, would our Christmas be white? December had been unseasonably warm, and their sources voted no. I tapped my fingers on the steering wheel, driving the four miles home. *Give me some music. C'mon. You can squeeze a quick carol into this commute.*

Finally they launched into "another fifty minutes of uninterrupted holiday favorites" just as I pulled into the garage. I schlepped all my stuff into the house and unloaded on the kitchen island. As I mindlessly looped my car keys on the hook by the door, I noticed the

otherwise spotless kitchen. Robb and his mom planned a lasagna bakeoff for the Christmas feast, and he had made his famous, secret-recipe marinara that morning. The scents of basil, oregano, tomatoes, and bay leaves wafted through the house. Oh, how nice to have my husband home for the week. He was far better at housekeeping than I.

“Hellooo, boys,” I sang to the three of them.

Tucker and Tyler ran into the kitchen, cheering my name with delight. Every homecoming should be so sweet. I rounded the corner into the living room, expecting to see football on the TV and the slightly, uncomfortably ill Robb relaxing in his recliner with a bottle of Gatorade. However, instead of football there was an animated Rudolph, snacks strewn on the floor where the children had sprawled, and my husband under a pile of blankets, shaking uncontrollably. Things looked a little worse than I expected. Several remote controls lay on top of Robb’s blankets, and I saw Tucker’s small stool next to the bookcase. How helpful he had been to retrieve all those remotes when his daddy couldn’t get up from his chair.

I came to Robb’s side. “Hey, babe,” I whispered. I leaned close, unlooping my scarf from around my neck. I kissed his forehead, assessing a fever against my face. He didn’t have a fever. He had no runny nose, no cough. No nothing. Just these awful, horrible shakes. I touched the trembling lump that was his hand, bundled under the blankets. His body writhed under my hands.

“I need you. I needed you to come home. I can’t do this by myself.” His teeth chattered.

“I’m here, love. I’m here now.” And why didn’t I come sooner?
“I’m here now.”

Standing and watching closely, I pulled my cell phone out of my pocket and dialed his dad. I intended to tell him that we needed to tweak the evening plans, that Robb surely couldn't come, that I should probably stay with him. *Probably*, I was going to say. Still optimistic, still holding loosely to the party plans. More than anybody else, Robb loved Christmas. Surely he wouldn't want to miss it. Probably a good dose of ibuprofen could kick this thing and all our Christmas plans could still come together. Probably.

But my voice sounded different than I meant it to; I betrayed my own optimism. The truth was, I had never seen Robb like this before. He was in some kind of horrible shock.

"You need to take him to the ER. I'll meet you there," his dad said. "I'm on my way." Brief and urgent, he knew what I needed to do. To the ER.

I sprang into action. I called my mom, gave her a quick and simple update, asking her to come and watch the boys. "Something's up. I need your help." She arrived moments later while the children were still firmly planted in front of Rudolph. The boys barely glanced my way as I kissed them good-bye on the heels of our hello; such a wonder, the distraction of the TV.

Robb and I worked as a team to mobilize his trembling body, keeping a trash can close since every move brought a wave of nausea. He could barely stand. I surrounded him as he walked, kidding myself that I could keep him from falling if gravity took hold. In college Robb had played trombone in the Ohio State marching band, but my husband could have been a linebacker for the football team. He was a solid, gentle giant.

With Robb safely in the passenger's seat, I could pick up my pace. I zipped through the neighborhood, praying for green lights and no pedestrians. Robb begged me to go quickly. "Please hurry, please hurry," he said, holding the empty trash can in his lap.

As we arrived at the ER entrance, I opened my car door even before I had turned off the ignition. I left my car in the yellow no-parking zone, daring the policemen in my mind. Together we staggered into the waiting area, and I got him seated in the first chair. I approached the counter, asking for help. "Please, my husband is very, very ill."

"Yes, ma'am, please sign him in here. We'll need your ID and insurance card." She handed me a clipboard with seemingly triplicate copies to sign and initial. I remembered when I was in false labor with Tuck, which felt anything but false. I had leaned on a similar counter, gasping with the strangling grip of contractions, and still they had handed us the pile of paperwork. Always the paperwork.

Robb's dad came in the automatic doors with a gust of December air. Relief swept over me as I saw the softer, grayer version of the man I'd married. Help had arrived, although it felt so strange for our holiday reunion to happen in a hospital waiting room. I stood to hug him, comforted already by his strong, confident presence. He sat down next to Robb. "Hey, bud," putting his hand on his shoulder. "Not doing so good, are ya?"

"Hey, Dad. This isn't good." I could hear the relief in Robb's voice. There's nothing like a dad.

"I know, Son. We'll get you up and running again." Three pats on the back, the signature trademark for the men in his family. They bantered in their usual way about football scores, and Robb referred

to the friendly competition of the lasagnas, a Christmas Day battle to decide once and for all whose lasagna was better: Robb's or his mom's. Robb weakly pointed in my direction and raised his eyebrows. "You better vote for me."

"I will if yours is the best," I teased him.

A nurse approached with a wheelchair. "Mr. Williford?"

"Yes. Yes, please." He responded to his name with a plea for wellness. He moved unsteadily to the wheelchair and then to the gurney in the exam room, our hands steadying him from all sides. The nurse began that familiar choreography of triage: the blood-pressure cuff, the stethoscope, the thermometer. My father-in-law and I stood by, carefully watching.

With his head on the pillow, Robb rattled off his medical history as if he were reading a grocery list. Free of concern. "Oh, where do you want me to start?" he quipped. "Let's see. Tonsils and adenoids removed when I was a kid, spleen removed after a sledding accident when I was in high school, a couple of bowel obstructions after my intestines were manhandled in that surgery, three surgeries on the left knee, and I have sleep apnea and high cholesterol. But I'm working on that last one."

Well, look at him, I thought. So lucid, so clear. Even cracking jokes. He'll be okay. We'll be all right.

They ran tests, drew blood, and studied his symptoms under the umbrella of his history. We waited for answers, but they gave us few. His vitals were fine. Pulse ox: fine. Heart rate: fine. Breath sounds: fine. A quick nose swab confirmed influenza type A, the only name for the dark cloud above us. The doctor said, "Well, I'm sorry to tell

you, your holidays won't be much fun. Robb, the worst of this will last about four days, and the whole virus takes ten to fourteen days to run its course. You won't die, but you'll feel like you're going to."

Oh, those ten words.

They sent us home with instructions and prescriptions. He was highly at risk, highly contagious, and strictly quarantined. "Lock him in the bedroom, let nobody near him, and ride out the storm. He'll be better by New Year's. Promise. The absence of his spleen puts him at greater risk for complications, so keep a close eye on him. If he seems worse, bring him back, and if he has any trouble breathing, call 911. But really, he should be fine."

And they dismissed us with a "Merry Christmas." His dad took him home while I went to the grocery store to fill the prescriptions and stock up on comfort foods and Gatorade.

Influenza. The flu. Quarantine. Isn't that so 1800s? Isn't there something they can do to get him better by Christmas? I cried in the pharmacy department, amid the cold and flu meds. I'm a party girl, and we had big plans for a big holiday. Cancellations fell into place, plans fell to the floor, and my heart fell with disappointment. I suddenly came face to face with the core of traditions. The meaning of Christmas runs deep and immutable, but it manifests itself in the traditions of a family. When you take those away—well, for better or worse, traditions and meaning are closely wed. I cried over the confusion of it all.

I got home to find him just where we had planned: safely in our bed, snuggled on his side. He lay perfectly still in the dim room, rest-

ing in the glow from the football game on TV. I came beside him to give him some meds. He wouldn't let his fingers touch mine.

"No, no, baby girl. Stay away—you can't get this. It's the worst pain of my life... I can't explain how horrible it is. Please sleep downstairs. I'll call you if I need you." His last living act toward me: protection.

Let me tell you this little secret: twelve years ago, when we first wrapped our hearts around this consuming love we fell hard into, we established an I-love-you code. Three hand squeezes: I. Love. You. Two hand squeezes: You. Too. Way back then I remember thinking, *This may come in handy if ever he cannot speak. I can still tell him. Somehow I'll still tell him.*

I checked on him throughout the evening, with more meds and water, but he never, ever opened his eyes. Once, as he sensed me near him, he weakly lifted his right hand and patted the bed three times: I. Love. You.

My breath caught in my throat.

"I love you too, baby. I always will," I whispered in the dark stillness of our bedroom. "You'll call me if you need me?"

"Yes," he promised, in a nearly inaudible whisper.

"Sleep well, my love."

I closed the bedroom door as if it were made of glass. I visited the boys' bedroom one more time. They were so peacefully asleep. I gathered a fleece blanket and pillow from the closet for my night on the couch, and I cozied up beside the twinkling Christmas lights, taking in the sight of the four stockings on the mantel and my favorite ornaments

on the tree. I placed my phone on the coffee table beside me, within arm's reach. I prayed us both to sleep.

Close to five in the morning, I woke to the familiar country song that was Robb's caller ID ringtone. I bolted upright and raced up the stairs, skipping them three at a time as I answered the phone. "Hello? Babe?"

"I...I need you." He spoke in a breathless, panicked whisper.

I burst through the bedroom door and found him sitting upright on the side of the bed. "I can't... I can't... I can't...slow down. I can't slow down...my...breathing... I can't..."

The doctor's voice flashed like lightning in my mind: *"If he has any trouble breathing, call 911. But really, he should be fine."*

"Oh, God. Oh, God. I'll call 911. I'm calling 911, baby. It's okay. It's okay."

I speed dialed my mom. "Mom. I'm calling 911. Come for the boys. Fast."

I dialed 911.

"Nine-one-one. What is your emergency?"

"My husband. My husband. He has influenza A, and he cannot breathe. Please send help. Please send help. Please help me."

My mind flooded with a million details in stride with the acute panic. Time crawled as my mind raced.

"Please help me. Please help us."

I need to get dressed.

Hospitals are cold.

Choose layers.

Long sleeves and short sleeves, one on top of the other.

“Please help us.”

Not those socks—they have a hole in the toe.

We could be at the hospital for a long time.

Choose the black yoga pants.

“Of course, ma’am. What is your address?”

There was a pounding thud as he fell off the bed, onto the floor. The sound still echoes in my mind, like two hundred potatoes crashing to the ground. In an instant I was at his side, half-dressed in the yoga pants and a bra. I screamed to him, to her, to God. “Please! Please help me! He’s not conscious! Please help me now!”

“Ma’am, please stop shouting. Please listen to me.” Her voice was calm and firm.

“Tell me what to do! God help me! Help me! He’s not breathing!” I knelt over him, screaming, touching his face, shaking his shoulders, trying anything to break into his unconsciousness. For a moment he opened his eyes. In a valiant effort he pushed himself to a sitting position. He leaned against the wall. His head lolled to the side, and he found me with his eyes.

Kneeling on the floor in front of him, I grasped at his T-shirt, grasping for life. “Robb, please. Please. Please breathe. Please, baby. I love you. I love you. Please.” His eyes held mine. I watched the color drain from his face. His skin turned a deep gray. His gaze fell from mine, and his eyes rolled back. “No! No! Robb! No! Please God, no!” I held his face in my hands. He exhaled a long, hard breath, as

if something were pushing the air out of his lungs. That would be the last sound I would hear from him: his final breath.

When I remember those moments, as I look back on them, I wonder if he felt conflicted. I wonder if he knew he was dying. When did he think, *This is it...*? Did he fight it? Did he try to stay? I know he tried at least once, valiantly. He sat up straight, one more time. I wonder if an angel, a handsome, gritty man whom Robb would trust, came to him and said, "Hey, buddy. It's okay. She's okay. The boys are okay. Everyone is strong, and it's time." I wonder if he looked over his shoulder as he left, if he watched me, kneeling before the shell of him, screaming his name. I wonder if he had any second thoughts, if he tried to come back. I wonder what he saw, what he knew, how long he was with me before he was present with the Lord. I wonder. I hope he had a moment to know that he was going.

On our bedroom floor I kept fighting for him. I screamed for help. The woman in my ear told me to lay him down, and I tried—I really tried. But he was a big man, that husband of mine. I laid him down as best I could. She told me to clear his airway, to make sure nothing blocked it. Just as I had learned in eighth-grade health class, I cleared his airway with two fingers. He bit me.

I pulled my fingers free, still screaming for help. Screaming, screaming.

"Feel for air from his nose." I felt only stillness.

"Feel for a pulse." His neck was a stone.

"Begin chest compressions." I pounded on his chest with everything in me. He was gray and unmoving. Still, I pounded.

My mom flew into my bedroom to find me kneeling over him, pounding. I later learned that she and my dad had bolted awake and raced out of the house in record time. They lived four blocks from us, and no more than four minutes passed between my five-second frantic phone call and their arrival at my house. My parents entered to the sound of blazing sirens as the paramedics arrived seconds behind them. Dad stayed in the driveway to direct the medics into our home, and Mom raced into the house, expecting to see lights on and a flurry of activity. Instead, she found the kitchen black with sleeping stillness. Even the dog was unmoving. My screams pierced the stillness.

She flipped on lights as she ran up the stairs and into the bedroom.

I looked up at her as I pounded on my husband's cold, hard chest. "I think he's gone, Mom... I think he died..."

"No. No. Don't say that. The paramedics are here. In here, gentlemen, in here." Her rushed, frightened voice betrayed her confidence. The paramedics had followed her up the stairs, and they entered the bedroom with a fury. In seconds the room filled with at least six—maybe eight—men on a mission.

I continued the chest compressions until a trained professional placed his hands over mine and continued with a stronger rhythm than the one I had begun. I jumped out of the way and across the bed. "Please fix him. Please fix him. Oh, God, please fix him."

"Ma'am, you need to leave the room please." I spotted the two shirts I had pulled from the drawer moments ago, the long-sleeved white and short-sleeved orange, and I put them on as the men ushered

me down the stairs and safely out of their way. With shaking hands I slipped into socks and shoes, remaining hopeful they would find signs of life and tell me to follow them to the hospital.

I sat in Robb's chair at the dinner table. I watched my parents pace in the kitchen. I listened to their phone calls. They called Robb's parents: "Please come quickly. There's an emergency with Robb." They called a friend who lives a few blocks away: "Please come and get the boys." Their phone calls awakened family all over the country: "Please pray. The paramedics are working on him now. We don't know. We don't know. We don't know."

Two years earlier I had started at the beginning of the book of Psalms, reading each day until I found something I should think more about. I collected passages, verses, and phrases on a stack of three-by-five cards that I carried in a Ziploc bag in my purse. *Spiritual discipline* has become a buzzword in the Christian culture, but I can't say I set out to do anything disciplinary. I just wanted wisdom. And a little more knowledge of the Bible. So I began writing things down in manageable chunks, one thought at a time. I'm no theologian, but maybe that's all there is to a spiritual discipline: wanting to be better and taking small steps to claim it. Maybe it's not about training for your best time on a marathon. Maybe it's about taking a walk today, and tomorrow, and the next day. Meditative moments come in small snatches for the mother of young children, and I learned to make the most of fleeting opportunities. I read my cards at stoplights, in the waiting room at the dentist, or in line at the post office. On that early morning as my life came undone, I read them at my kitchen table. My mind was numb with shock; my brain was empty. I leaned only on the

practice of reading the words. I did not meditate on them; I merely said them to myself again and again.

I lift my eyes toward the mountains.
Where will my help come from?
My help comes from the LORD,
the Maker of heaven and earth.

He will not allow your foot to slip;
your Protector will not slumber.
Indeed, the Protector of Israel
does not slumber or sleep.

The LORD protects you;
the LORD is a shelter right by your side.
The sun will not strike you by day
or the moon by night.

The LORD will protect you from all harm;
He will protect your life.
The LORD will protect your coming and going
both now and forever.

—Psalm 121 (HCSB)

An officer entered the kitchen. He said, “Are you his wife?”
I looked up from my cards. “I am.”
“Ma’am, we’ve been working for forty minutes, and we’re doing

all we can. But there is no heartbeat or breath sounds, and there have not been any. We're going to need to tell you he has passed."

We're going to need to tell you. As in, *not yet, but soon we'll need to?* I have since learned that they said it this way to ease the news. Just in case I fell to the floor and they would have a second patient on their hands, they wanted to break it gently. *We're going to need to tell you.*

My wise and brave mom has been down this road before, the path to the door of death. She asked him, "Is that the final word? Is he gone?"

The officer looked to me. "Yes, ma'am. I'm so very sorry. He's gone."

Have you ever wondered what you might say if a police officer tells you your husband has died? I never imagined it this way, but I simply said, "Okay."

I looked again at the handwritten card I held.

I lift my eyes toward the mountains.

Where will my help come from?

My help comes from the LORD,
the Maker of heaven and earth.

He is gone.

Okay.

My help comes from the Lord.

As fervently as I prayed for Robb's life, I prayed for the boys to stay soundly asleep. I knew I would have a journey to help them through

this loss that was not yet confirmed; I could not fathom the damage of any memories of the scene they would carry. I truly believe angels covered their ears as their world shattered violently outside their bedroom door.

One of the officers came downstairs amid the frantic efforts. "Excuse me, ma'am, but I believe there may be a child awake upstairs."

Oh, God. It's Tyler.

I jumped from my chair. "My son—I'll get him."

With great authority he pointed one finger at me. A forceful "No. No, ma'am. Not you." Slowly I lowered myself into the wooden kitchen chair.

My mom said, "Let me. Someone must get that baby." Nobody could let my three-year-old wander out into the hallway, awakened by foreign sounds, to find his daddy.

"Yes, ma'am. You may go."

She quickly climbed the stairs to the bedrooms. Several men stood in the doorway, shoulder to shoulder, an impenetrable wall of blue, holding the emergency inside my bedroom. She retrieved a groggy Tyler, my dad lifted a sleeping Tucker, and they carried them down the stairs without a single glimpse of the medical scene. There were no cracks in this fortress of men; they would not be moved.

As long as my children were in the house, my mind was conflicted: I felt torn between fierce protectiveness of the boys against the sights and sounds of this trauma and the need to make some impossible decisions. When a friend arrived to take them for a pajama day at her house, my dad and I carried my boys—shoeless, sleeping, and unaware—into the light of the early dawn, through the flashing lights

in the street, to her van parked on the other side of the mayhem. I kissed both of my sons, pressing my cheek against their foreheads, holding their hands in mine. I whispered to them, “Mommy will come get you later today, loveys. I love you so much. You are safe.” *Oh, my precious children, you don’t know how everything has fallen apart.* I watched her van drive away, her taillights blending with Christmas lights in the neighborhood. With my children in safe hands, I could be fully wife. I needed to grieve my husband.

The sounds of mourning echo in my mind. The heaving sobs from Robb’s mom. Robb’s father crying out to the policemen blocking his path, “That’s my son... That’s my son...” The keening wail of Robb’s brother when he heard the news. We wept, together and alone. There are no words to describe the hollow, piercing ache.

The officer came to me. “You may see him now, ma’am. You don’t have to if you don’t wish to, but you may if you would like. And I must tell you, this is your last chance.” Of course, I will see him. His dad traveled the stairs with me, and together we entered my bedroom, now littered with remnants of urgency, panic, and medical intervention. My bed was wrecked; pillows were strewn all over. The carpet was wet. Medical paraphernalia was scattered. In the midst of the mess, there lay my husband, intubated, with our bed sheet covering all but his face, his shoulders, and his left arm. Robb’s dad held me and whispered, “I’m so sorry, sweetheart. I’m so sorry, sweetheart.”

I knelt over Robb, and I wept. I cried for many things: for his life, for his death, for his sons, for his wife, for his dreams and mine. I cried for things yet unknown to me then. Robb’s face of death looked so different, so absent and cold. But his eyes held the same gaze as when

they had locked with mine. He had died with me before help ever arrived. He had died in my arms. I touched his prickly head, the shaved cut I loved so much. And I thought to myself, *Remember this. Remember this. Remember this.* I held his hand. His fingers were cold and white; his fingernails were purple. But it was his hand, the very hand I held on our first date, on our wedding day, as we prayed over each meal together, as we sat together in church, as our sons were born. I kissed his palm. I slipped his wedding ring off his finger and onto my thumb.

I kissed his forehead. My tears spilled onto his ashen face.

“I will love you forever, Robb Williford. I will love you forever.”



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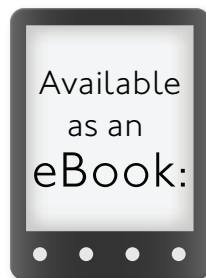
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