FOUND OUTSIDE · BOOK SIX

I Left the Light On

The People Who Waited for Someone, and What They Did With the Waiting

STEVE FULTZ

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INTRODUCTION

Still in the Distance

At the end of the road, while he was still in the distance · Luke 15:20

The son was still a long way down the road when his father saw him.

That's how Luke tells it. *But while he was still in the distance, his father saw him and was filled with compassion.* The boy hadn't reached the gate. He hadn't said a word. He was a shape on the road, far enough off that most people wouldn't have known who it was.

His father knew.

You don't see someone in the distance unless you're looking down that road.

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The story starts with a man who had two sons, and the younger one wanted his share now. *Father, give me my share of the estate.* The text gives the father no speech in reply. No argument, no warning, no list of conditions. *So he divided his property between them.* A few days later the son packed everything and left for a distant country.

Then the father disappears from the story for seven verses.

Everything that happens next happens to the son, and it happens far away. The money runs out. A famine comes. He hires himself out to feed someone else's pigs and gets hungry enough to want what the pigs are eating. *But no one would give him a thing.* Then, in the field, with the smell of it on him, he comes to his senses and starts rehearsing what he'll say at home.

The father isn't in any of that. He doesn't show up in the far country. He doesn't send a servant with money or a letter. Nobody goes to get the boy. Whatever the son decided in that field, he decided without his father standing over him.

That's the part of the story that's hardest to sit with if you love someone who's gone. The father didn't go and drag him home. The text never says whether he wanted to. It only tells us where he was when the son came back: home, and close enough to see the road.

. . .

The King James has the distance a little differently, and it's the wording a lot of people grew up hearing: *when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him.* A great way off. Not at the door. Not halfway up the lane. Far enough that seeing him meant the father had been looking, and probably not for the first time. Luke never tells us how many evenings he'd stood there. It only says he saw.

Then he ran.

He ran to his son, embraced him, and kissed him. Before the speech. The son had it ready, and he started in on it. *Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.* He'd planned one more line, the one about being taken on as a hired hand. He never got to it. The father had already turned to the servants.

Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. A ring for his finger, sandals for his feet, the fattened calf. *For this son of mine was dead and is alive again! He was lost and is found!*

He didn't answer the speech. He answered the son.

Look at what was already in the house. A robe good enough to be called the best. A ring. Sandals. A calf that had been fed up for a feast. The text doesn't say who any of it was being kept for, and it would be too much to claim the father set it aside for this day. But when the day came, nobody had to go to market. Everything a homecoming needed was already there.

The son had walked all that way expecting less. He'd rehearsed a speech asking to be taken on as hired help, which tells you what he thought was waiting for him. What he found was a robe, a ring, and a father who was glad.

. . .

Rembrandt painted this scene near the end of his life, and the canvas hangs today in the Hermitage in St. Petersburg. The son is on his knees with his head pressed against his father. The father has both hands on the boy's back. You can't see the son's face, and you

can't see a speech. Off to the side stands a tall man watching, usually taken to be the older brother. He comes back at the end of this book.

. . .

So here is the one thing this book has to say, and it's the only time it will say it.

You can't bring them home. You can keep the light on.

The father couldn't make his son want to come back. Nobody could. What he could do was stay where the boy could find him, keep looking down the road, and turn toward him the moment he appeared. The light left on isn't a lecture taped to the window. It's a place that's still there and still warm, and a face that will turn toward them instead of away.

It isn't doing nothing, either. The father looked, and when he saw, he ran. Staying put and staying ready turned out to be two different things, and he did both. He just didn't do the one thing that wasn't his to do, which was the deciding.

. . .

If you're reading this, there's probably someone you're watching the road for.

A grown child who walked away from the faith you raised them in, or from the family, or who just stopped calling. A grandchild who thinks all of it is a joke. A husband or wife who stays home on Sunday while you go. A friend, a brother, someone you used to sit beside. You may have said the hard thing at the kitchen table, or said nothing at all for a long time. This book isn't going to grade any of that. And the one you're waiting for isn't a problem to be solved in these pages. Nobody in here is.

This is the third time this series has walked into Luke 15. *Bring the Baggage* took the son, on the road home with his speech. *Carried* took the sheep and the coin, the ones who were found without doing the walking. This book takes the father. He's the one standing where you stand.

. . .

A word about who's talking, once.

I spent years on church staffs. I left a long time ago, and I've been the one outside ever since. I'm not writing as an expert on waiting, and I'm not further along than you are. These are people from Scripture who have been good company, and I think they'll be good company for you.

. . .

Here's how the book works.

Each chapter is one person who waited for someone. Jacob, who was told his son was dead and believed it for years. Jochebed, who sealed a basket and set her baby among the reeds. Hannah, who left her young son to serve at Shiloh and made him a little robe every year. Rizpah, who sat on a rock through a whole season. David, whose story with his son Absalom does not end well, and the book doesn't pretend it does. Jairus, who stood on the road while help went to someone else first. Barnabas, who gave a young man a second chance when someone else wouldn't. And Mary, who once went to bring her son home and at the end simply stood near him.

Each chapter tells what happened, plainly, and says one true thing near the end of the story. Then a short section called *Where this meets your week*, with a few ordinary situations where that life and yours overlap. Then one small thing to do, the smallest move the person in the story made, something you can do this week, alone, without anyone's permission.

Every quotation is from the Berean Standard Bible, a modern translation anyone is free to use, checked word for word. Where the King James is used instead, the book says so. Where it reads between the lines, it says that too.

. . .

Tonight, turn on a real light.

The porch light, a lamp in the front window, the one over the kitchen sink. Turn it on and leave it on. It won't bring anyone up the road. It isn't supposed to. It's for you to see, every time you pass it, that the place is still here and that you're still looking.

Nobody else has to know why it's on. Don't post about it, and don't mention it to the one you're waiting for. If someone in the house asks, "I like it on" is a whole answer. Leave it on tomorrow night too, if you want. The point isn't the bulb. The point is that you keep looking down the road, the way he did, without needing the road to answer back.

The father in the story never said a word about the waiting. All we're told is what he did when it ended. *While he was still in the distance, his father saw him.*

Where these stories come from. Luke 15:11-24. Quoted: 15:12, 15:16, 15:20 (BSB and, once, KJV), 15:21, 15:22, 15:24. Background: the division of the estate and the distant country, 15:12-13; the famine and the pigs, 15:14-16; the rehearsed speech, 15:17-19, including the unsaid line about the hired servants; the ring, sandals and fattened calf, 15:22-23. The older son, glimpsed here, is 15:25-32 and the conclusion. Rembrandt's "The Return of the Prodigal Son" (about 1668, Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg) is the chapter's one outside fact.

CHAPTER 1 · JACOB

The Wagons at the Door

Canaan, through the years he thought it was over · Gen 37:34-35

The robe came home without him.

His brothers had already sold him. Now they needed a story for their father, so they killed a goat and dipped the robe in it. *Then they took Joseph's robe, slaughtered a young goat, and dipped the robe in its blood.* They didn't carry it in themselves. They sent it ahead with a message that was careful to say nothing false and nothing true. *We found this. Examine it to see whether it is your son's robe or not.*

Jacob didn't need long. *It is my son's robe! A vicious animal has devoured him.*

He knew it because he'd had it made. The same chapter had said so plainly, at its start. *Now Israel loved Joseph more than his other sons, because Joseph had been born to him in his old age; so he made him a robe of many colors.* The gift that marked the favorite son was the thing that came back to tell him the favorite son was gone.

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The record doesn't soften any of this, and it doesn't need to be softened. A father loved one boy more and let everybody see it. *When Joseph's brothers saw that their father loved him more than any of them, they hated him and could not speak a kind word to him.* The brothers did a terrible thing and then covered it with a lie. Both are written down. Neither is the whole story of anyone in it.

Jacob tore his clothes and put on sackcloth, *and mourned for his son many days.* Then comes the line this chapter turns on.

All his sons and daughters tried to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted.

Read who was in that room. The sons who sat beside him, trying to comfort him, were the same sons who knew. What that was like for them, the text never says. It only says they tried. And it says what he answered. *"No," he said. "I will go down to Sheol mourning for*

my son."

He meant it. He had decided the rest of his life would be spent grieving, and he said so to the children who were still there.

. . .

Then the book goes quiet on Jacob for years.

You can work out about how many from the text. Joseph was seventeen when he was sold. He was thirty when he stood before Pharaoh. Seven good years of harvest followed, and two years of famine had passed by the time he told his brothers who he was. That puts it somewhere around twenty-two years. Twenty-two harvests, every one of them lived by a man who was sure his son was dead.

When the story comes back to him, the famine has reached Canaan and his sons have been to Egypt for grain. They came home without Simeon, who was being held there, and with word that the man in charge wanted to see their youngest brother. Benjamin was Rachel's other son. She died giving birth to him.

Jacob's answer is hard to read.

You have deprived me of my sons. Joseph is gone and Simeon is no more. Now you want to take Benjamin. Everything is going against me!

Reuben offered his own two boys as a pledge. Jacob turned him down. *My son will not go down there with you, for his brother is dead, and he alone is left.*

He alone is left. He said it to nine grown sons standing in front of him.

It would be easy to throw that sentence back at him, and the chapter isn't going to. Grief does arithmetic like that. It counts the one who's missing so many times that the ones in the room stop adding up. Nobody chooses it. It happens a year at a time.

And notice what he said in the middle of it. *Everything is going against me.* At that moment, though he couldn't know it, everything was coming toward him. The son he'd buried in his heart was alive and running the grain of Egypt. The story wasn't finished.

He just couldn't see the next page.

. . .

The famine didn't let up, and in the end the choice was bread or nothing. Judah stepped forward. *I will guarantee his safety. You may hold me personally responsible.* Jacob let the boy go, and the way he said it sounds like a man who has run out of holding on. *As for me, if I am bereaved, I am bereaved.*

In Egypt, it went wrong. A silver cup was found in Benjamin's sack, and the governor said the boy would stay as his slave. Judah, the same brother who had once talked the others into selling Joseph instead of killing him, stood up and told the governor about his father. He repeated the old man's own words. *You know that my wife bore me two sons.* A son who was not one of those two said that out loud, to plead for the one who was. Then he asked to take the boy's place. *Now please let your servant stay here as my lord's slave in place of the boy.*

Something had happened in those twenty-two years at Jacob's table, even while Jacob mourned. The brothers who couldn't speak a kind word had become brothers who would give themselves up for the favorite's little brother. Jacob didn't see it happen. It happened anyway.

The governor couldn't hold back any longer. He sent everyone out and told them who he was.

. . .

The brothers went home. *"Joseph is still alive," they said, "and he is ruler over all the land of Egypt!" But Jacob was stunned, for he did not believe them.*

Twenty-two years of mourning do not come undone with one sentence. He didn't believe it. The text lets him not believe it, and doesn't scold him.

What reached him was the wagons. *However, when they relayed all that Joseph had told them, and when he saw the wagons that Joseph had sent to carry him back, the spirit of their father Jacob was revived.*

Words didn't do it. Wagons did. Something he could see from the door, sent by his son, to carry him the rest of the way.

"Enough!" declared Israel. "My son Joseph is still alive! I will go to see him before I die."

He went. Joseph harnessed his chariot and drove out to meet him, *embraced him, and wept profusely.* And the old man said, *Finally I can die, now that I have seen your face and know that you are still alive!*

He didn't die. He lived seventeen more years in Egypt, with every one of his sons around him. Waiting can run longer than you think you can stand, and the story still isn't finished. The grief for one is real, and it doesn't have to close the door on the ones still at your table. The record shows they were there the whole time, and some of them were changing.

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Where this meets your week

When something of theirs comes back to you. A photo in a drawer, a coat in the closet, a song in a store. Jacob knew the robe in a second because he'd had it made. Things like that can undo a whole day. Let it. Then put it somewhere you can find it again, and go do one ordinary thing in the next hour. You don't have to choose between keeping it and keeping going.

When people keep trying to comfort you. *All his sons and daughters tried to comfort him.* Maybe there are people around you who keep offering, and you keep turning them away because what they're offering isn't the one you're waiting for. It never will be. Say yes to one of them this week. A meal, a walk, a phone call you'd normally let ring. Comfort you accept doesn't mean you've stopped waiting.

When you catch yourself counting only one. *He alone is left,* said in front of nine sons. If there's someone at your table who has heard you talk about the one you're waiting for more than they've heard you ask about them, you're not a bad person. You're tired and

you love someone. Ask that person one real question about their own life, and let the answer be the whole conversation.

When you've stopped believing it can change. Jacob didn't believe the news when it came. Belief came later, with the wagons. You don't have to believe it will end well to keep from deciding it's over. Leave their number in your phone. Leave the door unlocked in your mind. That much doesn't require faith. It only requires not closing anything.

. . .

Sit with someone who is still at your table.

One of the people who are right here. A spouse, a friend, someone you see every week and maybe stopped seeing. Sit down with them on purpose, for an hour or for a cup of coffee, and don't bring up the one who's gone. Not once. Ask about them. Listen. Let them have the whole of you for that hour.

Judah stood in front of the most powerful man in Egypt and pleaded for a boy his father loved more than him. The ones at your table may be carrying more for you than you know.

. . .

Years later, when Jacob was old and nearly blind, Joseph brought his two sons to him. The old man held them and turned to the son he had mourned for twenty-two years. *I never expected to see your face again,* he said, *but now God has let me see your children as well.*

He had decided it was over. It wasn't. There was more than he had been waiting for.

Where these stories come from. Genesis 37 to 48. Quoted: 37:31, 37:32, 37:33, 37:3, 37:4, 37:34, 37:35 (twice), 42:36, 42:38, 43:9, 43:14, 44:27, 44:33, 45:26, 45:27, 45:28, 46:29, 46:30, 48:11. The years: Joseph was seventeen when sold (37:2) and thirty before Pharaoh (41:46); the seven years of abundance followed (41:47, 41:53); two years of famine had passed when he made himself known (45:6). Seventeen to thirty-nine is about twenty-two years, give or take months the text doesn't specify. Judah's plan to sell rather than kill, 37:26-27. The brothers' guilt years later, 42:21. Rachel died giving birth to Benjamin, 35:18-19. Simeon held, 42:24. The cup, 44:1-17. Jacob's seventeen years in Egypt, 47:28. His eyes

failing, 48:10. Read between the lines: what it was like for the brothers to comfort him (the text says only that they tried), and the claim that the brothers changed during the years Jacob mourned, which rests on comparing 37:4 with 44:18-34. No outside facts. No KJV.

CHAPTER 2 · JOCHEBED

Tar and Pitch

Among the reeds along the bank of the Nile · Ex 2:3

The order was for every Hebrew boy, and it went out to everyone.

Then Pharaoh commanded all his people: "Every son born to the Hebrews you must throw into the Nile, but every daughter you may allow to live." Not just the soldiers, or the midwives, who had been told once already and quietly refused. All his people. Any neighbor could do it.

The next verse goes inside one house. *Now a man of the house of Levi married a Levite woman, and she conceived and gave birth to a son.*

A boy, born into a country where the law said to drown him.

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The chapter never gives her a name. She is *a Levite woman*, then *the boy's mother*, and that's all. Her name turns up four chapters later, in a list of families. *And Amram married his father's sister Jochebed, and she bore him Aaron and Moses.* By then the story has long since moved on to her son.

She wasn't new at this. There was a daughter in the house old enough to be trusted at a riverbank, and the book says later that Aaron was three years older than Moses. So she had a small boy at home already, and a girl, and now a newborn the law said belonged in the river.

When she saw that he was a beautiful child, she hid him for three months.

The text doesn't say how. A baby doesn't hide well. He cries when he's hungry, and walls are thin, and every neighbor had been told what to do. Whatever it took, she did it for about ninety days.

Then the verse turns. *But when she could no longer hide him…*

. . .

There comes a day when the hiding stops working. Nothing in the verse explains that day, whether he got too loud or somebody started asking. It only says she couldn't anymore.

What she did next is the whole chapter.

She got him a papyrus basket and coated it with tar and pitch. Then she placed the child in the basket and set it among the reeds along the bank of the Nile.

Read the order. She didn't carry him to the river and figure it out there. She got the basket. She coated it, with two kinds of sealing, tar and pitch. Then she put him in. Before she let go of him, she made the thing that would hold him after she did.

The King James calls the basket something else. *She took for him an ark of bulrushes.* An ark. The Hebrew word there, *tevah*, shows up in only one other story in the Bible, the one about Noah. A box that floats, sealed against the water, with a life inside that couldn't be saved any other way.

Then she set it among the reeds. Not out in the current. In the reeds, near the bank, where it wouldn't drift. That much the text says. What she was thinking, and whether she picked that stretch of bank because of who came down there to bathe, the text leaves open.

. . .

And his sister stood at a distance to see what would happen to him.

That's the waiting, in one sentence, and it isn't even the mother's. Her daughter, unnamed here too, stood far enough off not to look like she was guarding anything, and near enough to see. Nobody records whether her mother sent her or she went on her own, or where the mother was. Home, maybe, with Aaron. Maybe she couldn't stand to watch. The record leaves her out of that hour.

What the sister saw was a princess.

Soon the daughter of Pharaoh went down to bathe in the Nile… And when she saw the basket among the reeds, she sent her maidservant to retrieve it. She opened it. *And behold, the little boy was crying. So she had compassion on him.*

She knew what she was looking at. *This is one of the Hebrew children,* she said. Her father's order said where that child belonged. She had compassion instead. The text gives her that word and nothing against her, and so will this chapter.

Then the girl who'd been standing at a distance came forward. *Shall I go and call one of the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?* The princess said to go ahead. *And the girl went and called the boy's mother.*

. . .

So the mother came down to the river where she had left him, and was handed her own son.

Take this child and nurse him for me, and I will pay your wages.

Wages. She was paid to nurse her own baby, by the household of the man who had ordered him drowned. We aren't told whether Pharaoh's daughter knew whose child she was handing over. Nobody in the scene says a word about it. *So the woman took the boy and nursed him.*

She had let go of him on the river. He came back to her protected, with wages, and with a princess's name over him. For the first time in his life she didn't have to hide him.

That would be a good place to end. The next verse doesn't.

When the child had grown older, she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, and he became her son.

She brought him. The same woman, letting go of the same boy, a second time. Not into the water this time. Into a palace. The text doesn't say how old he was, or what that walk was like, or whether she saw him in the years after. It says *he became her son*, and it means the princess.

She let go twice. The first time she did it to save his life. The second time she did it because that was the arrangement, and the arrangement was what had saved his life. Both times she was the one who carried him to the handing over.

Here the chapter reads between the lines. She had him for those nursing years, however long they were, in her own house, among his own people. The next time the story picks him up, he's a grown man raised in the Egyptian court, and the first thing it says he did is this. *One day, after Moses had grown up, he went out to his own people and observed their hard labor.* His own people. The text doesn't say how he knew who they were. It never names his mother as the one who told him. But somebody had, and she was the one who had him when he was small enough to learn it.

You can't keep them safe by holding on. She tried, for three months, and she was right to try, and then the holding stopped working. What she could still do was build something that would hold him when her hands couldn't, and then let go of it. And letting go wasn't the end of her part. It was where her part came back to her, for a while, with wages.

. . .

Where this meets your week

When hiding stops working. For three months she kept him close and kept him quiet, and then she couldn't. Maybe there was a season when you could keep the one you're waiting for near: under your roof, on your plan, inside walls you could watch. That season ended. The text doesn't fault her for the day it ended, and it doesn't stop the story there either. Say it to one person you trust this week, out loud: I can't keep them safe anymore. It's the first true sentence on the way to building something that can.

When all you can do is watch from far off. His sister stood at a distance. Not in the river, and not gone. Close enough to see, far enough not to be in the way. You may have a window like that: a photo someone posts, news that comes through a cousin. Pick one way to keep track and keep it to that. Look once, then put the phone down. Standing at a distance is still standing there.

When someone else is holding them. A princess opened the basket, and her compassion is why he lived. Somebody else may be the one near the one you're waiting for now: a friend's family, a partner, a boss, a group you'd never have picked. The text gives the rescuer only kindness. This week, speak well of that person to someone, or thank them in one plain line if you can reach them. Leave out the advice.

When you get them back for a while. She was handed her son again, for a season, knowing how it would end. A visit, a few weeks after a hard break, a stretch when they need you for something practical. Don't spend it on the conversation about where they've been. Do the ordinary care in front of you, the way she nursed him. Cook the meal. Fix the thing. Let the season be what it is.

. . .

Seal one basket.

Write the one you're waiting for a letter you won't send. One page. Put in it only what you'd want them to have if you weren't around to say it. What you saw in them when they were small. That you're glad they were born. No requests. Nothing about coming back, or what they ought to do. Nothing they'd have to answer.

Seal it. Write their name on the front. Put it with your important papers, where it will be found, and tell one person where it is. Then leave it there. That's the tar and the pitch. It's for the day your hands can't reach them.

. . .

The last line of the story belongs to the woman who raised him. *She named him Moses and explained, "I drew him out of the water."*

She did. It was his mother who had made sure there would be something there to draw out.

Where these stories come from. Exodus 1:22 to 2:11; 6:20; 7:7. Quoted: Exodus 1:22; 2:1-2; 2:2; 2:3 (in two parts); 2:4; 2:5; 2:6 (twice); 2:7; 2:8; 2:9 (twice); 2:10 (twice); 2:11; 6:20. The mother is unnamed in

Exodus 2; her name comes from 6:20 (also Numbers 26:59, which names the sister as Miriam). Aaron's three years on Moses: 7:7. KJV once, named in the prose: 2:3, "she took for him an ark of bulrushes." **Outside fact, to verify before print:** the Hebrew *tevah* ("ark," BSB "basket") appears in the Hebrew Bible only in Exodus 2:3, 5 and for Noah's ark in Genesis 6 to 9. Read between the lines: how she hid him and what ended the hiding, which the text leaves out; whether she chose the spot where Pharaoh's daughter bathed; whether she sent the sister, and where she herself was; whether Pharaoh's daughter knew the nurse was the mother; the boy's age when he was brought to the palace; and the link between the nursing years and Moses knowing *his own people* in 2:11, which the text does not make.

CHAPTER 3 · HANNAH

A Little Robe Each Year

Shiloh, once a year, with a little robe · 1 Sam 2:19

Every year the family went up to Shiloh, and every year the meat was handed out the same way.

Elkanah had two wives. *And Peninnah had children, but Hannah had none.* When the sacrifice was made, he would give portions to Peninnah *and to all her sons and daughters.* Then he turned to Hannah. *But to Hannah he would give a double portion, for he loved her even though the LORD had closed her womb.*

Two plates for Hannah. One for each of the others. Everybody at that meal could count.

. . .

The text doesn't pretend the house was peaceful. *Because the LORD had closed Hannah's womb, her rival would provoke her viciously to taunt her. And this went on year after year.* The worst of it came on the trip itself. *Whenever Hannah went up to the house of the LORD, her rival taunted her until she wept and would not eat.*

The book calls Peninnah her rival and leaves it there. It doesn't give her side, and it's worth noticing what her side might have been. She was the wife with the children, watching her husband hand the double portion to someone else, year after year. The text doesn't say that's why. It's only fair to remember she lived in that house too.

Elkanah tried. *"Hannah, why are you crying?" her husband Elkanah asked. "Why won't you eat? Why is your heart so grieved? Am I not better to you than ten sons?"* He meant it kindly. He just couldn't be the thing she was waiting for, and nobody could talk her out of waiting for it.

So after the meal, Hannah stood up.

. . .

In her bitter distress, Hannah prayed to the LORD and wept with many tears. She made a vow. If she were given a son, she would give him back. *Then I will dedicate him to the LORD all the days of his life.*

Eli the priest was sitting by the doorpost, and he watched her. *Hannah was praying in her heart, and though her lips were moving, her voice could not be heard. So Eli thought she was drunk.*

He told her to put away her wine. It's an awful thing to say to a woman in the middle of the worst prayer of her life, and she answered him plainly. *No, my lord. I am a woman troubled in spirit. I have not had any wine or strong drink, but I have poured out my soul before the LORD.*

Eli got it wrong, and then he did something to his credit. He heard her, and he changed his answer on the spot. *Go in peace,* he said, *and may the God of Israel grant the petition you have asked of Him.*

Centuries later the rabbis took this scene as the pattern for how a person ought to pray: in the heart, lips moving, voice not heard. A woman a priest mistook for drunk became the model.

And then the text says something small. *Then she went on her way, and she began to eat, and her face was no longer downcast.* Nothing had changed yet. She had no child. She had a priest's blessing and a prayer she'd finally said out loud, or almost out loud. She ate anyway.

. . .

In time she had a son. *She named him Samuel, saying, "Because I have asked for him from the LORD."*

The next year, when the family went up to Shiloh, Hannah stayed home. *After the boy is weaned,* she said, *I will take him to appear before the LORD and to stay there permanently.* Elkanah told her to do what she thought best. *So Hannah stayed and nursed her son until she had weaned him.*

The text doesn't say how long that was, or what those years were like for her. It only says she stayed. Every day of them she knew how they would end, because she had promised it herself.

Then she took him. A bull, flour, a skin of wine, and the boy. *Though the boy was still young, she brought him to the house of the LORD at Shiloh.* She found Eli and reminded him who she was. *I am the woman who stood here beside you praying to the LORD. I prayed for this boy, and since the LORD has granted me what I asked of Him, I now dedicate the boy to the LORD.*

The King James has a word for it there that the newer translations don't keep. *I have lent him to the LORD.* Lent. Not lost, not given away for good. The Hebrew word is the same one in his name, the asking word. She asked for him, and she gave him back on the same terms.

Then Elkanah went home to Ramah, but the boy began ministering to the LORD before Eli the priest.

She went home without him.

. . .

Most people stop there. The vow kept, the boy in the temple, the song she sang. The book keeps going, and a few verses later it gives one sentence about what she did with the rest of her love.

Now Samuel was ministering before the LORD, a boy wearing a linen ephod. Each year his mother would make him a little robe and bring it to him when she went with her husband to offer the annual sacrifice.

Each year. She made it. She brought it.

She didn't come up to Shiloh to take him back. She didn't come to tell him how to do his work or remind him what he owed her. She came once a year, on the trip the family was making anyway, and she brought something she'd made with her own hands to keep him covered.

Here the chapter reads between the lines, and you can decide if it holds. She made that robe at home, in Ramah, without him there. She had to guess how much he'd grown. Every year she cut it a little bigger than the last one, for a boy she hadn't seen since the year before. The text doesn't say any of that. It only says *a little robe,* every year. But anybody who has ever bought clothes for a child who lives somewhere else knows what that guessing is like.

That was the whole of it. A robe, once a year, no conditions. It went to a boy who belonged to somebody else's work now, in a house she didn't run.

Then the text gives her the rest of her life. *And Eli would bless Elkanah and his wife, saying, "May the LORD give you children by this woman in place of the one she dedicated to the LORD."* The old priest who had once called her drunk was now blessing her every year. *So the LORD attended to Hannah, and she conceived and gave birth to three sons and two daughters. Meanwhile, the boy Samuel grew up in the presence of the LORD.*

Meanwhile. Two lives going on at once, in two towns, with a robe going back and forth between them once a year.

Letting go and keeping on loving turn out to be the same act. She didn't stop being his mother when she left him at Shiloh. She just stopped being the one who decided what happened next. The robe was how she kept on.

. . .

Where this meets your week

When the gatherings are the hard part. For Hannah it was the trip to Shiloh, the same meal every year, the portions handed out where everyone could count. Holidays can be like that, a table where somebody's chair is empty and everyone's careful not to look at it. She went anyway, and one year she got up from the table and said the true thing in private. If a gathering is coming, plan five minutes alone in it: a walk to the car, a back porch. Say the honest sentence there, so you can sit back down and eat.

When someone gets you wrong. Eli looked at her pain and saw something else. Maybe someone has looked at the way you're waiting and called it something it isn't: too much, too little, foolish. Hannah didn't argue for long. She said what was true in two plain sentences and let it stand. Write your two sentences down this week, so you have them ready if it happens again.

When you've already let go, and it still hurts. Hannah walked back to Ramah with her husband and without her son. She had chosen it, and choosing didn't make the road shorter. If the one you're waiting for is living a life you didn't pick for them, in a place you don't run, you're allowed to grieve and still mean the letting go. Mark a day on the calendar, months from now, as your day to send something. Then go home and live the meanwhile.

When you don't know what they need anymore. She had to guess his size. You may not know what the one you're waiting for likes now, what they wear, what they'd want. Guess anyway. A little big is fine. The point of the robe was never the fit.

. . .

Make the year's small robe.

One gift. Something you make, or pick out with care, for the one you're waiting for. Something that keeps them covered in some small way: a scarf, a pair of good socks, a book you think they'd like. No card that says what you hope for them. No message tucked inside. Nothing in it they'd have to answer.

Send it, or bring it if you're welcome to, and then go home. Do it again next year.

. . .

The verse doesn't end with the robe. It ends with the trip home, every year, the same way.

Then they would go home.

Where these stories come from. 1 Samuel 1:1 to 2:21. Quoted: 1:2, 1:4, 1:5, 1:6-7, 1:7, 1:8, 1:10, 1:11, 1:13, 1:15, 1:17, 1:18, 1:20, 1:22, 1:23, 1:24, 1:26-28, 2:11, 2:18-19, 2:20 (twice), 2:21. KJV once, named in the prose: 1:28, "I have lent him to the LORD." The Hebrew verb behind "asked" (1:20, 1:27) and "lent" or "dedicate" (1:28) is the same root, *sha'al*; the BSB renders it "dedicate." Hannah's song, 2:1-10. The one outside fact: the Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 31a-b, draws the rules of silent prayer from Hannah's prayer in 1:13. Read between the lines: Peninnah's side of the household, which the text never gives; the years of nursing, whose length the text doesn't state; and Hannah guessing the boy's size each year, which the text does not say.

CHAPTER 4 · RIZPAH

From the Harvest Until the Rain

On a rock, from the harvest until the rain · 2 Sam 21:10

She spread a piece of sackcloth on a rock and sat down.

And Rizpah the daughter of Aiah took sackcloth and spread it out for herself on a rock. That's the whole description of her camp. Sackcloth was the rough cloth people wore when they mourned. She laid it on the stone the way you'd lay a blanket somewhere you meant to stay.

Near her, on the hill, were the bodies of her two sons. Nobody had taken them down.

She stayed until the rain.

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To understand how she got to that rock, you have to go back a few years, and it isn't a pleasant road.

Rizpah first appears in one verse, as a name in an argument between two men. *Now Saul had a concubine named Rizpah, the daughter of Aiah.* A concubine was a wife of lower standing, without a wife's full protection. After Saul died, his son Ish-bosheth accused the army commander Abner of sleeping with her. Abner was furious, and the quarrel helped finish off what was left of Saul's house. Nobody asked Rizpah anything. She doesn't say a word in that story. She doesn't say a word in this one either.

Then, in David's time, came a famine, three years running. David asked God why, and the answer pointed back to Saul. Generations earlier, Israel had sworn an oath to let a people called the Gibeonites live. Saul broke it and tried to wipe them out. The Bible doesn't tell that part anywhere else. It only says it happened, and that the blood was still on the land.

So David asked the Gibeonites what would set it right. They didn't want money. They asked for seven of Saul's male descendants, to put to death *before the LORD* in Saul's own hometown. David agreed. He spared Jonathan's son because of the oath he had made to

Jonathan. He handed over seven others: five grandsons of Saul through his daughter Merab, and Rizpah's two sons, Armoni and Mephibosheth. (Not the Mephibosheth most readers remember. The name was used twice in Saul's family.)

So all seven of them fell together; they were put to death in the first days of the harvest, at the beginning of the barley harvest.

The text doesn't stop to explain itself, and this chapter won't try to defend it or put anyone on trial for it. People have argued over this passage for a very long time. Rizpah didn't get to argue. She got two sons on a hill.

. . .

Then she did the one thing left to do.

From the beginning of the harvest until the rain from heaven poured down on the bodies, she did not allow the birds of the air to rest on them by day, nor the beasts of the field by night.

Read that slowly. By day, birds. By night, animals. She had to be awake for both. The text doesn't say whether anyone helped her or brought her food or tried to talk her into going home. It doesn't say how she slept, or whether she did. It gives one woman, one rock, and two shifts that didn't end.

The barley harvest came in the spring. The rain could mean the regular rains that return in the fall, months later, or a storm that came sooner. The text doesn't count the days. It says she was there from the one to the other.

She couldn't bring them back. She couldn't undo what had been done. She couldn't even get them buried. The only thing in her power was to keep them from being torn apart and forgotten in the open. So she did that, every hour, for as long as it took.

That was the whole vigil. No speech. No plan. A mother on a rock, keeping the birds off.

Go back to the sackcloth for a moment. The text says she spread it out *for herself*. It wasn't a covering for the bodies, and it wasn't a tent. It was a place for one person to sit, on stone, for as long as the watch would take. The text doesn't say what she was thinking. The cloth says she wasn't leaving.

. . .

The story turns on the next line, and it's only half a sentence.

When David was told what Saul's concubine Rizpah, daughter of Aiah, had done,

Somebody told the king. Someone saw her out there, day after day, and carried it back to the palace. The text doesn't say who. It doesn't say she sent word or asked for anything. In the whole record she never asks for anything at all. She kept watch, somebody noticed, and the noticing traveled.

And it moved David to do something he hadn't done. The bones of Saul and Jonathan had been lying far off in Jabesh-gilead ever since the Philistines killed them at Gilboa and hung their bodies in the square at Beth-shan, until men from Jabesh stole them back. David sent for them. *So David had the bones of Saul and his son Jonathan brought from there, and they also gathered the bones of those who had been hanged.*

Her sons were gathered up with Saul, father to two of them and grandfather to the rest, and with Jonathan, the prince who had been David's dearest friend. *And they buried the bones of Saul and his son Jonathan in Zela in the land of Benjamin, in the tomb of Saul's father Kish.* A family tomb. The text names it as Saul and Jonathan's burial and says the bones of the seven were gathered with theirs. The plain reading is that her sons went into the ground with their family. They were not left on the hill.

Then one more line, and it matters where it falls. *After they had done everything the king had commanded, God answered their prayers for the land.* Not after the hanging. After the burial. The text doesn't explain that order. It just puts it there, after the rain, after the rock, after a mother's watch had been seen.

Rizpah got nothing back. Her sons stayed dead. Nobody wrote down a word she said, because she never said one. But what she did reached the king, and it changed what happened to the ones she loved after they were gone. That's as far as the record goes, and it doesn't pretend it goes further.

Love that keeps watch is seen, even when it can't change the ending.

. . .

Where this meets your week

When the ending is already written. Some waiting has a known end. A diagnosis. A sentence handed down by a court. A choice the one you're waiting for has made and keeps making. Rizpah knew her sons were not getting up, and she kept watch anyway, because keeping watch was what was left. If you're there, stop grading your love by whether it changes the outcome. Do one faithful thing today on behalf of the one you're waiting for, something that has nothing to do with fixing anything.

When nobody asks anymore. She sat out there through a whole season, and the text never records anyone asking her how she was holding up. Waiting goes that way. People ask the first month and then stop. You don't need their questions to keep going, but you don't have to be invisible either. Tell one person this week, plainly, that you're still waiting. You're not asking them to solve it. You're letting it be known, the way someone once let it be known about her.

When you're tired of both shifts. Birds by day, beasts by night. Some waiting has no off hours: the worry at noon, the phone you check at two in the morning. The text says she kept both shifts. It says nothing about how she held up, and it never asks her to be a hero. If you're worn through, pick one hour this week and let someone you trust hold the watch for it while you sleep.

When they're already gone. Some readers are waiting at a window no one will walk up to again. If that's you, there's nothing here to fix and nothing to blame yourself for. Rizpah's watch was for sons who had already died, and it still counted, and it was still seen. A name said out loud at the table, a grave tended, a photo kept where it belongs: that is the same work she did on that rock. Keep doing it as gently as you need to.

. . .

Keep one small vigil this week that nobody will ever hear about.

Choose the one you're waiting for, and choose one quiet act that belongs only to them. A candle lit at the kitchen table for ten minutes. A prayer at the same hour each night. A slow drive past a place that was theirs. Don't post it. Don't mention it. Don't tell them you did it.

The text never says Rizpah sent word to the palace. Someone else carried it. Keep your watch, and leave the noticing to whoever does the noticing.

. . .

Her name, Rizpah, is a Hebrew word that can mean a hot stone or a glowing coal.

She sat on a rock in the open with the dead, *from the beginning of the harvest until the rain*, and kept it lit.

Where these stories come from. 2 Samuel 3:7; 21:1-14. Quoted: 3:7, 21:6 ("before the LORD"), 21:9, 21:10 (twice), 21:11, 21:13, 21:14. Background: Abner's anger and the fall of Saul's house, 3:8-11 and chapters 3-4; the famine and the Gibeonites, 21:1-5; the oath to the Gibeonites, Joshua 9:15; Jonathan's son spared, 21:7, and David's oath to Jonathan, 1 Samuel 20:42; the seven named, 21:8; Saul and Jonathan's bodies at Beth-shan and the men of Jabesh, 21:12 and 1 Samuel 31:8-13. Saul's attack on the Gibeonites is recorded nowhere else. Length of the vigil (estimate, not in the text): the barley harvest in that land began around April; if "the rain" means the regular autumn rains, around October, the watch could have run as long as about six months; some readers take it as an unseasonal rain that came sooner. Reading between the lines: that her sons were laid in Kish's tomb with Saul and Jonathan (21:13-14 names the gathering, then the burial of Saul and Jonathan; it does not name the seven's grave separately). Outside fact: the name Rizpah is the Hebrew word for a hot stone or glowing coal; the same word is the "glowing coal" of Isaiah 6:6 (word meaning from standard Hebrew lexicons; worth a check before print).

He Must Not See My Face

Jerusalem, two years without seeing his face · 2 Sam 14:28

After three years away, the king's son was coming home.

So Joab got up, went to Geshur, and brought Absalom to Jerusalem. The king had said yes. The exile was over. Absalom was back in the same city as his father, under the same sky, inside the same walls.

Then the king added one sentence.

He may return to his house, but he must not see my face.

The door was open. The face was turned away.

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Absalom had run because he killed his brother. The reason sits in the chapter before, and it should be said once, carefully, and left with the one it happened to.

Their half brother Amnon raped Absalom's sister Tamar. Afterward, the text says, *Tamar lived as a desolate woman in the house of her brother Absalom.* When David heard, *he was furious.* The record doesn't say he did anything more. Two years later Absalom had Amnon killed at a feast, then fled to his mother's father, the king of Geshur, and stayed there three years.

What happened to Tamar belongs to her. It isn't a lesson, and this chapter won't use it as one. It's here only because nothing that follows makes sense without it. Years later Absalom named his own daughter Tamar. The text gives that one line and moves on.

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The record is honest about what David felt while his son was gone. *And King David longed to go to Absalom.*

He longed to go. He didn't go. Three years passed that way.

His general, Joab, saw it, and sent a woman from Tekoa to the king with a made-up story about a son of her own. Inside the story she put a sentence about God that was really about the king's house. *Yet God does not take away a life, but He devises ways that the banished one may not be cast out from Him.*

David saw what she was doing and gave in. *Go, bring back the young man Absalom.*

So Absalom came back. To the city. To his own house. Not to his father.

Now Absalom lived in Jerusalem two years without seeing the face of the king.

Two years. In the same city. The record never gives the distance between the two houses, and it doesn't need to. Whatever the distance in streets, the father had drawn the real one himself, and it was the width of a face.

. . .

Absalom tried to get through it. He sent for Joab to carry a message to the king. Joab didn't come. He sent a second time. Joab still didn't come. So Absalom had his servants set Joab's barley field on fire. That got him a visit.

What he said when Joab arrived is the most direct sentence in the whole story. *So now, let me see the king's face, and if there is iniquity in me, let him kill me.*

He was asking for a face, not a pardon. He said he'd take the verdict, whatever it was, if he could just have his father look at him.

Joab went to the king. *David summoned Absalom, who came to him and bowed facedown before him. Then the king kissed Absalom.*

That's all of it. A bow and a kiss. The text records no word from either of them. After five years, three away and two across town, the reunion takes one verse, and nobody in it speaks.

The very next chapter opens with Absalom out at the city gate early in the mornings. Whenever someone came with a complaint for the king, he'd tell them their claim was good and nobody at the palace would hear it. *Also, when anyone approached to bow down to him, Absalom would reach out his hand, take hold of him, and kiss him.*

The kiss he got from his father once, he now gave to everyone who came through the gate. The text doesn't connect those two kisses. It only puts them a few lines apart, and leaves the reader to notice. *In this way he stole the hearts of the men of Israel.*

Four years later he raised a rebellion from Hebron. *Then a messenger came to David and reported, "The hearts of the men of Israel are with Absalom."* David left Jerusalem in a hurry, to keep the city from being put to the sword.

. . .

Even then, with an army coming after him, David's order to his commanders was about his son. *Treat the young man Absalom gently for my sake.* The text makes a point of saying everyone heard it.

It didn't matter. In the battle, Absalom rode his mule under a big oak, his head caught fast in the branches, and the mule kept going. One of David's soldiers found him hanging there and wouldn't touch him, because he had heard the king's order. Joab didn't wait. He took three spears and drove them into Absalom while he was still alive in the tree, and ten of Joab's young men finished it. They threw him into a pit in the forest and piled stones on top.

Meanwhile the king sat between the two gates of a city, waiting. A watchman on the wall saw a runner coming. Then another. David had one question for them, and it wasn't about the battle. *Is the young man Absalom all right?*

When he understood the answer, he climbed to the room over the gate.

The king was shaken and went up to the chamber over the gate and wept. And as he walked, he cried out, "O my son Absalom! My son, my son Absalom! If only I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!"

A little later the text adds, *But the king covered his face.*

This is reading between the lines, and the text doesn't draw the line itself. The man who once said *he must not see my face* ends the story with his face covered, and no son left to see it.

. . .

It did not end well, and this book won't pretend it did. There's no scene where the two of them sit down and talk it through. The bow and the kiss in Jerusalem are the closest they ever came.

No stones at either of them. David loved his son. Everything he says about his son proves it: he longed for him for three years, ordered him treated gently in the middle of a war, and wanted to die in his place. Absalom wanted his father's face badly enough to burn a field for it, and then went a hard way when he got only a kiss. The love was never in question. The face was.

A door that's open while the face stays turned away isn't a light left on.

. . .

Where this meets your week

Let back in, but not seen. Maybe the one you're waiting for can come home now. There's a place at the holidays, maybe a key. David opened his city and his son's own house, and for two years Absalom never saw his father's face. Next time they're in the room with you, turn and look at them while they talk. Keep looking until they're finished.

The message under the fire. Absalom sent for Joab twice and got silence, so he burned a field. Not every loud thing someone does is a message. Some are. If the one you're waiting for has done something lately that's hard to make sense of, ask yourself whether part of it might be a way of saying *see me*. You don't have to like the fire. Answer the part underneath it.

The kiss with no words. Maybe there's been a reunion of sorts. A hug at a funeral. A handshake at a wedding. Then nothing. A kiss without words isn't nothing, but it isn't a conversation either, and in this story it wasn't enough. Write down the sentence that your last embrace left out. Then find a way to say it.

Gentle, from a distance. David cared enough to order his son treated gently, and he sent other men to carry the order. If your love for them mostly travels through other people, a message through a brother or sister, a word to a friend, a check in the mail, carry one piece of it yourself this week.

. . .

Turn your face.

One warm sentence to the one you're waiting for, with no conditions in it. Not "when you're ready." Not "if you would just." Not a question they have to answer. Something like "I think about you, and I'm glad you're in the world," in your own words. Say it out loud, or write it and send it.

This is the move the text never shows David making while there was still time. You can make it this week.

. . .

The woman from Tekoa said it to the king's face, years before the gate. God *devises ways that the banished one may not be cast out from Him.*

David found a way to bring his son back to the city. He never found the way back to his face.

Where these stories come from. 2 Samuel 13:37-39; 14:21-33; 15:1-14; 18:5, 9-15, 33. Quoted: 13:20, 13:21, 13:39, 14:14 (twice), 14:21, 14:23, 14:24 (twice), 14:28, 14:32, 14:33, 15:5, 15:6, 15:13, 18:5, 18:32, 18:33, 19:4. Background: Amnon and Tamar, 13:1-22; Amnon killed "two years later," 13:23-29; Absalom's flight and three years in Geshur, 13:37-38; his mother Maacah, daughter of King Talmai of Geshur, 3:3; Joab and the woman of Tekoa, 14:1-20; Absalom's daughter Tamar, 14:27; the field set on

fire, 14:29-31; the gate, 15:2-4; “after four years” and Hebron, 15:7-12; David’s flight, 15:14; the soldier who refused, 18:10-13; the pit and the stones, 18:17; David between the two gates and the runners, 18:24-32. Reading between the lines: the covered face at 19:4 set against “he must not see my face” at 14:24, and the two kisses at 14:33 and 15:5, are the chapter’s connections, not the text’s. “Five years” is the three of 13:38 plus the two of 14:28. “Deal gently,” the familiar wording of 18:5, is the King James; the BSB reads “Treat the young man Absalom gently.” No outside facts.

CHAPTER 6 · JAIRUS

While He Was Still Speaking

On the road, while help went to someone else first · Mark 5:35

The whole shore had been waiting for him.

Luke says it plainly. *When Jesus returned, the crowd welcomed Him, for they had all been waiting for Him.* Every one of them had a reason to be there. Some had come to watch. Some had come for help. One of them had a little girl at home who was dying.

His name was Jairus, and he led a synagogue. In his town that made him somebody. On the shore that day he went down on the ground in front of all of them. *A synagogue leader named Jairus arrived, and seeing Jesus, he fell at His feet and pleaded with Him urgently, "My little daughter is near death. Please come and place Your hands on her, so that she will be healed and live."*

Luke adds that she was *his only daughter, who was about twelve.*

So Jesus went with him.

That's the whole answer. No questions, no conditions. He turned and started walking toward the house, and the crowd went with them, pressing in on every side.

Then, on the way, he stopped.

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Someone in the crowd had touched his cloak. A woman, sick for years, who had spent everything she had on doctors and only gotten worse. She was healed the moment she touched him, and he knew it, and he would not move on until he found her. *But He kept looking around to see who had done this.* She came forward, shaking, and told him the whole story in front of everybody. He listened to all of it. Her story belongs to her, and it was worth every minute he gave it.

But this chapter is standing a few feet away, next to the father.

The text doesn't say a word about what Jairus did while he waited. It doesn't say whether he spoke, or kept his peace, or looked back toward the house. It only puts him there, beside the man who had agreed to come, while a crowd stood still and a stranger told her story. Anyone who has ever sat in a waiting room can fill in what those minutes are like. The text leaves it unfilled, and so will this.

What can be said is this. Jesus kept him close. He didn't send Jairus home to wait. He didn't say he'd come by later. He stopped with Jairus still at his side.

. . .

While He was still speaking, messengers from the house of Jairus arrived and said, "Your daughter is dead; why bother the Teacher anymore?"

It's the sentence every person who has ever waited for someone is afraid of. It came on the road, in public, from people who knew the house.

It's worth being fair to the men who brought it. They had walked out from a house full of grief to find their master in a crowd. They had seen what they had seen. And their question, *why bother the Teacher anymore,* sounds less like a sneer than like people trying to spare everyone a trip that could no longer do any good. They thought it was over, and they said so to the one man who most needed to know.

Then comes the line the whole chapter turns on.

But Jesus overheard their conversation and said to Jairus, "Do not be afraid; just believe."

He overheard it. The message wasn't brought to him. It was brought to the father, and Jesus heard it because he was standing right there. The stop on the road hadn't sent him somewhere else. When the worst news of Jairus's life arrived, the one he'd been waiting on was close enough to hear it at the same moment he did, and he spoke straight to the father.

Mark never gives Jairus's answer. He only shows where Jairus went next. He kept walking toward the house.

Mark gives that walk no lines at all. This is reading between them: it was the same road, with the crowd now sent back, toward a house where, by every account he'd just been given, there was nothing left to do. He went anyway, and the one who had said *just believe* went with him.

. . .

Jesus let only three of his friends come the rest of the way: Peter, James, and John. At the house the mourners had already started. *Jesus saw the commotion and the people weeping and wailing loudly.*

He went in and asked why they were weeping. *The child is not dead, but asleep.*

And they laughed at Him.

That laughter is easy to judge, and there's no need to. Luke explains it in a few words. They laughed, *knowing that she was dead.* These were people who had been in the room. They had seen her stop breathing. Their grief was real, and it had already moved on to what grief does next, the wailing, the arrangements. A stranger at the door saying she was only asleep sounded like a man who didn't understand what had happened.

He didn't argue with them. *After He had put them all outside, He took the child's father and mother and His own companions, and went in to see the child.*

A handful of people and a little girl in a quiet room.

Taking her by the hand, Jesus said, "Talitha koum!" which means, "Little girl, I say to you, get up!"

Mark keeps the words in the language Jesus actually spoke, Aramaic, the everyday tongue of Galilee, and then translates them for readers who didn't know it. He did that only a handful of times in his whole book. It's the closest a reader gets to hearing the sound of his voice, and what it says is *little girl.*

Immediately the girl got up and began to walk around. Her parents were beside themselves. And then Jesus gave one more instruction, the last thing he says in the story.

He told them to give her something to eat.

Not a speech about what had happened. Not an explanation. A plate.

. . .

This book has already told the stories of two people whose waiting did not end like this one. Rizpah kept watch over sons who never got up. David cried out over a son he never saw again. Plenty of people reading this have sat in a quiet room and nobody stood up. This chapter doesn't promise anyone a miracle, and it would be wrong to.

What the record does show is something smaller, and it holds even when the ending is different.

A delay on the road is not the end of the road. When the bad news came, Jairus wasn't alone with it. The one he'd been waiting on was still walking beside him.

. . .

Where this meets your week

When help goes to someone else first. Maybe it feels like every prayer gets answered but yours. A friend's child came home. A neighbor's marriage mended. Jesus stopped on the road for someone else, and nothing in the story says he had forgotten the man standing next to him. If someone else's good news has been hard to hear lately, send them one honest line this week saying you're glad. You can be glad for them and still be waiting.

When the news comes on the road. A phone call. A message from someone who knows them. Things are worse, and someone kindly suggests it may be time to stop hoping out loud. The messengers meant well, and Jesus answered with a few plain words to the father, not a rebuttal to them. Before you decide what the news means, don't turn around. Do the next ordinary thing you were already going to do for the one you're waiting for.

When the people at the house have stopped hoping. Some of the people closest to you have grieved already, and when you talk as if the story isn't over, they look at you the way the mourners looked at the stranger at the door. You don't have to argue them out of it.

Jesus didn't. Choose the two or three people you can be honest with about your hope, and keep it with them.

. . .

Have something ready to eat.

When Jesus finally gave an instruction about the girl, it wasn't to talk with her about where she'd been. It was to feed her. Should the one you're waiting for ever walk in, the first thing they need from you may be the same. This week, find out or remember the thing they always liked to eat, and keep it in the house. A box of their cereal, the coffee they drink, the ingredients for the one dish they used to ask for. Don't tell anybody why it's there.

If the door opens, you won't have to think about what to say first. You'll have something to put in front of them.

. . .

He took the girl by the hand and spoke to her in the language of her own kitchen. *Little girl, I say to you, get up!*

Then, while her parents were still standing there astonished, he turned to them and told them to give her something to eat.

Where these stories come from. Mark 5:21-43, with Luke 8:40-42 and 8:49-56. Quoted: Luke 8:40, 8:42, 8:53; Mark 5:22-23, 5:24, 5:32, 5:35, 5:36, 5:38, 5:39, 5:40 (twice), 5:41, 5:42, 5:43. Background: the woman and the stop, Mark 5:25-34 (told in full in *Carried*); the three disciples, 5:37; Luke 8:51 names the same three and the parents; "her parents were astounded," Luke 8:56. Reading between the lines: the text says nothing of what Jairus said, felt or did while Jesus stopped, or how he answered the messengers; the chapter says so and fills in only that he went on to the house, which 5:38-40 shows. The kind reading of the messengers' question is the chapter's, not the text's. Not used here, on purpose: the two twelves (5:25, 5:42) and "Daughter" (5:34) set against "Your daughter is dead" (5:35), since *Carried* builds on both. **Outside fact:** "Talitha koum" is Aramaic, the everyday language of first-century Galilee; Mark preserves a few Aramaic sayings of Jesus (also 7:34, 14:36, 15:34). Check the claim "a handful of times" before print.

CHAPTER 7 · BARNABAS AND JOHN MARK

He Is Useful to Me

Cyprus, with the one who left · Acts 15:39

The ship came in at Perga, on the south coast of what is now Turkey, and one of the three men on it went home.

Luke gives it one sentence. *After setting sail from Paphos, Paul and his companions came to Perga in Pamphylia, where John left them to return to Jerusalem.*

No reason. No scene at the dock. No word about what anyone said. The young man had come along as their helper, and partway through the trip he turned around.

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His name was John, *also called Mark*. His mother had a house in Jerusalem big enough for a crowd to pray in. His cousin was Barnabas, one of the two men he was traveling with. The other was Paul.

Barnabas is worth knowing before the story goes any further. His real name was Joseph. The apostles gave him a nickname, and Luke stops to translate it. *Barnabas (meaning Son of Encouragement).* The first thing he does in the record is sell a field and lay the money down for people who needed it. Later Luke calls him *a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith.*

And the most important thing he ever did, he did for Paul.

When Paul first came to Jerusalem after his turn on the Damascus road, the church there wanted nothing to do with him. They had good reason. He had spent the last stretch of his life hunting them. *They were all afraid of him, not believing that he was a disciple.* Every door was shut, and every one of them was shut for a sensible reason.

Then Barnabas brought him to the apostles. He stood up and told the story for him: what Paul had seen, what had been said to him, how he had spoken in Damascus. He vouched for the man nobody would vouch for. He put his own name next to Paul's when Paul's

name was the last one anybody wanted.

So when Mark got off the ship at Perga and went home, Barnabas was the one person in that party who knew exactly what it looks like when everyone gives up on someone.

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The trip went on without him. It was hard. The record of it includes being run out of town and Paul being stoned and left for dead. Then the two men came back, and some time passed.

Some time later Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us go back and visit the brothers in every town where we proclaimed the word of the Lord, to see how they are doing."

Barnabas said yes, and he said one more thing. He wanted to take Mark.

Paul said no. *But Paul thought it best not to take him, because he had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not accompanied them in the work.*

It's worth slowing down here before taking a side, because the text doesn't take one. Paul wasn't being petty. He had just come through a trip where people tried to kill him. He needed someone who would be there on the bad day, and the last time the bad days started, Mark wasn't. That's a reasonable judgment. Plenty of good people would make it.

Barnabas made a different one. He had once been the only man in a room who would stand next to someone with a bad record. He wasn't going to stop now, and this time it was family.

Their disagreement was so sharp that they parted company. Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus, but Paul chose Silas and left, commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord.

Two good men, who had been through everything together, split up over a young man who quit. The text doesn't make either of them the villain. Paul goes one way and strengthens churches. Barnabas goes another, back to Cyprus, the island he was from. He took the young man home with him, and kept him in the work.

That's the last time Barnabas appears in the story Luke is telling. He sails off the page with Mark beside him.

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The rest of it happens years later, in other books.

Paul wrote letters. Some of them were written from prison. In one of them, to the church at Colossae, he sends greetings from the men who are with him, and one of the names is Mark. *Mark the cousin of Barnabas. You have already received instructions about him: If he comes to you, welcome him.*

Paul, of all people, is telling a church to make room for Mark. In another short letter, to a man named Philemon, Mark's name is on a list Paul calls *my fellow workers.*

And then the last letter Paul ever wrote, by most accounts, near the end of his life. He's in chains. Most of his people have gone. He writes to Timothy, and near the end there's a short, plain line.

Only Luke is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, because he is useful to me in the ministry.

Get Mark. The young man who once left them at the dock is the one Paul asks for at the end.

The text never tells us what happened in between. It doesn't say how Mark changed, or whether he changed at all, or whether he and Paul ever talked about Perga. It doesn't say whether Paul and Barnabas made it up. All it shows is the two ends. At one end, Paul won't take him. At the other, Paul sends for him by name. In between are the years Barnabas kept him close, when there was no promise it would come to anything.

Paul mentions Barnabas once more, too, in a letter to Corinth, and he puts their two names side by side. *Or are Barnabas and I the only apostles who must work for a living?* Whatever the split cost them, it didn't turn into a feud on the page.

Barnabas never got to see the letter to Timothy, as far as the record shows. He kept believing in Mark during the part of the story where believing was the unpopular position, and he didn't live in the book long enough to be proven right.

Someone who left once is not someone who leaves. Barnabas seems to have known that from the day he walked Paul into a room full of frightened people. He knew it again on the day he sailed for Cyprus with a cousin nobody else would take.

. . .

Where this meets your week

When they quit in the middle. A program, a marriage, a job, a faith, a plan the two of you made together. The one you're waiting for got partway in and turned around, and you don't know why. Luke doesn't say why Mark left. Nobody ever recorded his reason, and Barnabas took him back without one. If you've been waiting for an explanation before you let yourself hope again, set that condition down this week. Write one line to them about something that has nothing to do with what they left.

When the people around you have given up. Somebody you respect thinks you're foolish for still believing in them. Maybe they have a point, the way Paul had a point. You don't have to win that argument, and you don't have to make the other person wrong. Barnabas and Paul went separate ways and both kept working. The next time someone says the one you're waiting for will never change, don't defend them and don't fight. Just say, "I'm not done with them," and leave it there.

When you can't prove you're right. There may be years where nothing you do looks like it's working. Barnabas sailed off the page before Paul ever wrote *get Mark.* He didn't get the ending. He just kept the young man in the work. Find one small, ordinary way to keep the one you're waiting for in your life this week: a seat saved, a recipe sent, a name kept on the list.

When they're the one in the room nobody trusts. Every family has one. The one whose name makes everybody tense. Barnabas once walked into a room where everyone was afraid of the man beside him, and he told that man's story out loud. At the next gathering

where their name comes up, say one true, good thing about them, and stop.

. . .

Tell one person who quit something that you still think they're useful.

Not a speech about potential. Not a reminder of what they walked away from. One sentence, the kind Paul finally wrote: you're useful to me. Say what for, if you can. Help with the garden, the way they explain things, the way the kids light up when they come. Send it this week. Then don't ask for anything back.

. . .

The apostles gave Joseph his nickname, and Luke stopped the story to translate it. *Son of Encouragement.*

He took Mark and sailed for Cyprus. Years later, from a prison, the other man asked for Mark by name.

Where these stories come from. Acts 4:36-37; 9:26-27; 11:24; 12:12, 25; 13:4-5, 13; 15:36-41; Colossians 4:10; Philemon 24; 1 Corinthians 9:6; 2 Timothy 4:11. Quoted: Acts 4:36, 9:26, 9:27, 11:24, 12:25, 13:13, 15:36, 15:38, 15:39-40; Colossians 4:10; Philemon 24; 1 Corinthians 9:6; 2 Timothy 4:11. Paul's stoning at Lystra is Acts 14:19. That 2 Timothy is Paul's last letter is the common view, not settled; the prose says "by most accounts." The text never says why Mark left, how he changed, or whether Paul and Barnabas reconciled; the chapter says so. **Outside fact:** Perga lies near modern Antalya on the south coast of Turkey; standard maps of Paul's journeys show it.

CHAPTER 8 · MARY

She Stood Near

Near the cross · John 19:25

The house was so full that nobody inside could eat.

That's how Mark sets it up. *Then Jesus went home, and once again a crowd gathered, so that He and His disciples could not even eat.* People pressing in, people being healed, people arguing. Word got out the way it does in a small country, and it reached his family.

When His family heard about this, they went out to take custody of Him, saying, "He is out of His mind."

His own family set out to bring him home.

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A few verses later they arrive. *Then Jesus' mother and brothers came and stood outside. They sent someone in to summon Him.*

That second scene is commonly read as the end of the first trip, the family reaching the house they set out for, though the text doesn't say what Mary herself thought of any of it, or whether the words about his mind were hers.

What it does say is where she was. Outside. She didn't push through the crowd. She sent word in. Someone carried the message to him: *Your mother and brothers are outside, asking for You.*

His answer is hard to read if you've ever been the one at the door. *Who are My mother and My brothers?* He looked at the people sitting around him and said these were his family, whoever does the will of God. It isn't a cruel sentence, and it isn't really about her. But she was the one standing outside when it was said.

The text doesn't tell us whether the message came back out to her, or how long she stood there, or whether she went home without him. Mark moves on. That's all we get.

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She had been warned, long before that day.

When he was a baby, she and Joseph carried him into the temple, and an old man named Simeon took him in his arms. Simeon said things about the child that made both parents wonder. Then he turned and said one thing to her alone.

Behold, this Child is appointed to cause the rise and fall of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed, and a sword will pierce your soul as well.

A sword will pierce your soul as well. That was said to a young mother holding her firstborn. Luke says more than once that she kept things like this. *But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart.* He doesn't say what she made of them. He says she held on to them.

So by the day she stood outside that crowded house, she had been carrying that sentence for about thirty years. Reading between the lines, it isn't hard to see why a mother who'd been told that would want to get her son somewhere safe. The text doesn't say that was her reason. It's only a mother's reason, and she was a mother.

. . .

The next time the Gospels put her in a scene that matters, it's the worst day of her life.

Near the cross of Jesus stood His mother and her sister, as well as Mary the wife of Clopas and Mary Magdalene.

Look at the verb. In Mark she *stood outside*. Here she stood near. Same woman, same posture, a different distance.

She couldn't bring him home this time. There was nothing to take custody of. No message to send in, no crowd to wait out, no argument that would change anything. Most of the men who had followed him were gone. She was there.

And he saw her.

When Jesus saw His mother and the disciple whom He loved standing nearby, He said to His mother, "Woman, here is your son." Then He said to the disciple, "Here is your mother." So from that hour, this disciple took her into his home.

"Woman" sounds cold in English. It wasn't a cold word then; it was a respectful way to address a woman, and he used it while he was making sure she'd have a roof. In the middle of dying, he looked down, saw his mother, and saw to her. He gave her a son to go home with.

She had once come to bring him home. At the end, he sent her home, with someone to take care of her.

People have been looking at this one verse for a long time. A Latin hymn from the Middle Ages, called the *Stabat Mater*, opens on her standing there: the title means "the mother was standing." Composers from Pergolesi to Dvořák have set it to music. Centuries of people found that one word worth singing.

. . .

There's one more place she appears, and it's only a list of names.

After he was gone and, as the disciples tell it, risen, they gathered in an upstairs room in Jerusalem to pray. Luke lists who was there. *With one accord they all continued in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brothers.*

His brothers. The same family that once set out to bring him home. John says plainly that at one point *even His own brothers did not believe in Him.* Now they're in the room, and she's with them.

The text doesn't explain how they got from that door to this room. It doesn't give her a speech, or tell us what she said to her sons along the way. It just puts her there, near again, with the people who had once stood outside with her.

Once she went to bring him home. At the end she stood near. Standing near is what's left when you can't fix it, and it was enough. He saw her from the cross. That's all standing near ever promised to do, and it did it.

. . .

Where this meets your week

When you went to get them and it went wrong. Maybe you drove over, or called, or said the thing you'd rehearsed, and it landed badly. You meant to bring them home, and it came out like taking custody. The text records that Mary's family went out once. It also records that she was there at the end, and that he saw her. One trip to the door doesn't end the story. This week, don't go to fix anything. Send one ordinary message that asks for nothing.

When you've been standing outside. You can hear the life they're living in there, and you're on the wrong side of the door. Mary stood outside and sent word in, and the answer that came back wasn't the one a mother would want. She didn't stop being his mother. If the one you're waiting for answered you in a way that hurt, don't send the hurt back. Let it be what was said that day, not the last word.

When there's nothing left to do. A diagnosis. A sentence. A loss you can't undo for them. You want a task, because a task would be easier. At the cross, Mary had no task. She stood there. If the one you're waiting for is going through something you can't change, find out where they'll be and be there. Bring nothing to say.

When they finally come into the room. It might be a holiday. It might be a funeral. The ones who once doubted are suddenly in the same room with you. Acts doesn't record anyone settling old scores in that upper room. They prayed, and she was with them. If they come in, let them come in. Don't make the first conversation the one about where they've been.

. . .

Go and stand near this week, in person if you can, with nothing to say.

Not to talk them into anything. Not to fix it. Sit in the waiting room. Go to the game. Show up at the hospital, the court date, the new apartment, the place they work. If you can't be there in body, be as near as the distance lets you. Then stay a while, and let your

being there be the whole message.

. . .

John only gives her one line of standing, and he puts it first, before anyone else's name. *Near the cross of Jesus stood His mother.*

Then he wrote that from that hour, someone took her home.

Where these stories come from. Luke 2:19, 33-35; Mark 3:20-21, 31-35; John 7:5; 19:25-27; Acts 1:14. Quoted: Luke 2:19, 2:34-35; Mark 3:20, 3:21, 3:31, 3:32, 3:33; John 7:5; 19:25, 19:26-27; Acts 1:14. Mark 3:31 is commonly read as resuming 3:21; the text doesn't say what Mary thought or whether the words "He is out of His mind" were hers. That "Woman" was a respectful address in its time is the standard reading of John 2:4 and 19:26. "About thirty years" follows Luke 3:23. **Outside fact:** the *Stabat Mater* is a medieval Latin hymn on Mary at the cross, set by Pergolesi (1736) and Dvořák (1877), among many others.

CONCLUSION

He Came Out

Outside the house, with the one who stayed · Luke 15:28

The older son was out in the field when his brother came home.

That's where the story finds him. *Meanwhile the older son was in the field, and as he approached the house, he heard music and dancing.* He'd been working. It was an ordinary day for him, and he was walking in at the end of it, and there was a party going on in his father's house that nobody had told him about.

So he stopped one of the servants and asked what was happening. The answer came in one breath. *Your brother has returned,* he said, *and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has him back safe and sound.*

Notice who told him. Not his father, not his brother. A servant, passing it along the way you'd pass along news about the weather. The older son found out about the biggest day in the family's life secondhand, on his way in from work, after the music had already started. The text doesn't say whether anyone meant to leave him out. It only says nobody had come to the field.

The older son became angry and refused to go in.

He stayed outside, with the music going on in the house.

So his father came out and pleaded with him.

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Most people remember this parable as the story of a father who ran down the road. It is. But it has a second half, and in the second half the father leaves the house again.

This time he leaves his own party. The house is full. The calf has been killed. The son he thought was dead is inside in a new robe with a ring on his hand. And the father walks out of all of it to stand outside with the son who wouldn't come in.

Luke uses one plain word for what he did there. He pleaded. He didn't send a servant to fetch the boy. He didn't stand in the doorway and call him in. He didn't tell him to stop making a scene in front of the guests. He came out to where his son was and asked.

The father went out to both of his sons. The first time he ran. The second time he came out and pleaded. Both times he went to where the son was, instead of waiting for the son to come to where he was.

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The older son had his say, and the text lets him have all of it.

Look, all these years I have served you and never disobeyed a commandment of yours. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. Then he pointed at the house. *But when this son of yours returns from squandering your wealth with prostitutes, you kill the fattened calf for him!*

This son of yours. Not my brother.

It would be easy to be hard on him. It's worth hearing what he actually said. He had stayed. By his own account, he had served his father all those years. Whatever else was in his heart, and the text doesn't tell us, he had been the one who was there.

He is not the villain of this story. He's the father's second son.

The father doesn't argue with him. He doesn't correct his count of the years or defend the calf. He answers the hurt first.

Son, you are always with me, the father said, *and all that is mine is yours.*

Go back to the start of the story and that line gets heavier. When the younger son asked for his share, *he divided his property between them.* Between them. Both sons. The younger one took his and spent it. If the property was split between them, then what was left was the older son's portion, still on the land, still being worked. The text doesn't do the arithmetic out loud, and it would be reading in to say the father meant it as a legal point.

But it's hard to miss. Nothing the older son had was being taken away. The robe and the ring and the calf didn't come out of his future. *All that is mine is yours.* It had been true the whole time he was out in the field.

You are always with me. Of everything the father could have said in that moment, he started with that. Not a correction. Not a reminder of what a son owes. Just the plain fact that the one who stayed had never been out of his sight.

Then, gently, he gives the brother back his name. *But it was fitting to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.* The older son had said *this son of yours.* The father said *this brother of yours.* He was handing him back a brother, out there in front of the house, with the door still open behind them.

. . .

And that's where Jesus stops.

We never find out whether the older son went in. There's no last line where he softens, or turns his back and walks off into the field. The father is standing outside with him, the music is still going, and the story ends. Luke doesn't add a word.

The text doesn't say why the story ends there. It may be that it was told to people standing at a door of their own. Luke says the whole chapter began with people grumbling about who Jesus ate with. Whatever the reason, the last thing we see is not the party. It's the father, outside, still asking.

The light was for both sons.

It was for the one who came up the road with the smell of the far country still on him. And it was for the one who never left, who was standing outside his own father's house and couldn't bring himself to walk in. The father didn't keep one lamp for the son who left and let the other go dark.

Some who read this book have two people on their mind. One is down the road somewhere. The other is close by, at the table or in the next pew or on the phone every Sunday, and may be tired, or quietly hurt that so much of your attention goes to the one

who left. The story doesn't tell you which one matters more. It tells you the father went out to both.

And the father didn't have to split himself in half to do it. He didn't love the older son less while he was running to the younger, or the younger less while he stood outside with the older. He just went, one at a time, to wherever each of them was.

. . .

The book started with a father looking down a road and seeing a shape in the distance. It ends with him standing outside the house beside a son who hasn't decided yet.

He doesn't have an answer at the end. Some of the people in these pages got theirs and some never did. Jacob waited years. Rizpah sat on her rock until the rain. David's door stayed open while his face stayed turned away, and the book doesn't pretend it ended well. Mary stood near.

What the father had at the end was a full house behind him, a son beside him, and the words he'd already said. *Son, you are always with me.*

The door was still open.

. . .

When they're ready

Someday the one you're waiting for may say something that sounds like an opening. A hard night, a question, a lost job, a funeral, a long pause on the phone. If that day comes, you won't need a speech. You might need a book.

These are free, and each one was written for a particular kind of night. Find the line that fits, and hand them the name or the address. Say "I thought of you when I read this," or say nothing at all. Then let it go. It's theirs from there. You don't have to follow up, or ask later whether they read it.

Can't sleep, and nothing is fixed yet. *Off Watch.* offwatchbook.com

A role just ended. *What Is That in Your Hand?* whatisthatinyourhand.com

Left church years ago and figures that settled it. *Outside the Building.* outsidethebuilding.com

Feels too far gone. *Carried.* carriedthebook.com

Turning toward home, and scared of the reception. *Bring the Baggage.* bringthebaggage.com

Would rather listen. Found Outside. foundoutsidebooks.com

Where these stories come from. Luke 15:25-32, with 15:1-2. Quoted: 15:25, 15:27, 15:28, 15:29, 15:30, 15:31, 15:32. Background: the grumbling that opens the chapter, 15:1-2; the robe, ring and calf, 15:22-23. The chapter summaries of Jacob, Rizpah, David and Mary point back to chapters 01, 04, 05 and 08. No outside fact in this chapter. The "When they're ready" list matches the "which book for which night" table at foundoutsidebooks.com.

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