



MY DARKEST HOUR

BY MARY CAIL

It was late afternoon. The house was empty except for my dog. She yawned at me, stretched her long body and ambled across the room. I tossed my handbag on a chair and went upstairs to my bedroom. I was back from meeting a friend for coffee, one of my closest friends. She had called me every week, unfailingly, for coffee or dinner; she was a steady presence after my husband's death. I often cried during "those

years," as I think of them now. I was like an animal with its leg caught in a jaw trap, unable ever to escape the sadness. I sank beside my bed in the fading sunlight and buried my head in my hands. Tears came, so many tears that they poured from my eyes, ran through my fingers, and splashed in two pools on the carpet. I remember the darkening rings, the motion, the strange awareness of how fast those tears were falling.

Two years earlier, on a cold, clear Sunday evening, when sidewalks and streets were edged with grimy crusts of snow, I had found my husband in his hospital office. The corridors were almost vacant that night, and my footsteps echoed on the linoleum floors as I walked quickly past elevators, locked clinics, and unlit labs to a back wing sequestered by an electronic entry that swung open and closed with a sharp clap. I knew Wayne was dead the instant I cracked his door and slipped inside. Wild frantic screams rose within me, screams I could not control. My legs gave way and I huddled against the wall with my eyes tightly shut. I screamed over and over, unable to stop, as though I had been shoved off a cliff. He had taken his life using the fine leather leash I'd given him along with a box of pet toys for Christmas, just a month before. My main gift to him Christmas of 1999 was a puppy we had chosen together, fat and freckled, not quite old enough to leave its litter. The leash had a shiny brass plate with Wayne's name engraved on it, and I can still see it, catching ambient light as it swayed.

When he didn't come home from the hospital or answer my calls that night, I left a half-finished dinner scattered around the kitchen—tomatoes, onions, a pot of pasta beginning to boil—and went to look for him. As I drove a straight stretch of the country road leading into town, a dark silver BMW streaked by in the opposite direction. Relieved, I turned around on a gravel road a bit further up. He should have phoned to let me know he'd be late; it wasn't like him. I pulled into our driveway minutes later and found the house still dark and empty, the cat waiting in a front window.

Soon after, I arrived at the hospital parking garage, where I spotted Wayne's car and pulled alongside it. Definitely the right car, with his sunglasses and dry cleaning receipt on the passenger seat, his stainless steel coffee mug in the cup holder. I made reassuring excuses to myself: he

was tired and distracted. He wasn't well.

He had been dealing with a storm of recent troubles, beginning with a nine-hour surgery to remove a rare type of tumor lodged near his brain stem. We had traveled to Los Angeles to find an experienced surgeon. His room there was like a walk-in closet, hardly big enough for the monitors and tangled lines, the hospital bed, my chair. One royal palm, incongruous amid massive skyscrapers, rippled in the hot dirty breeze outside a postage-stamp window. Days afterward, at last able to sit up without vomiting, Wayne looked grimly at his reflection in a mirror, his head swathed in a turban of bandages. Muddy bruises had settled under his eyes, and his face was so pale, it was almost ashen. "My God," he said, "I look like somebody from Afghanistan."

The surgery left him deaf in one ear, perpetually dizzy and afflicted by tinnitus, unable to think clearly, unable to sleep. But the worst loss came two months later, when he felt driven to step down from the position he loved, as director of a world-class radiology division he had built from the ground up, pushing through objections and obstacles with the force of sheer passion. These words are, of course, only an outline of his penetrating, complex sadness. Flat, black, stark words, like the images of the brain and spinal cord he could read, almost unerringly.

Wayne's despair had filled me that winter with thick, constant worry, but I was holding inside a private grief, too. I had recently lost hope of ever giving birth, seemingly in one devastating morning. Wayne felt, I think, an unspoken relief. In his work, he saw a steady stream of parents coping with children who had neurological problems, and his view of parenthood had been distorted by the constant exposure to their struggles. "We're okay," he'd say, "just the two of us, aren't we?"

He couldn't understand my yearning for a baby. I had dragged us through every possible solution—vials of hormones so expensive I resorted

to ordering them from a foreign pharmacy, failed in-vitro attempts at an infertility clinic thousands of miles from home, surgeries to make a successful pregnancy more likely. A weird herbalist who sold me a concoction that swirled blackly in the stewpot and made the house smell like a bag of rotten potatoes. Acupuncture. Prayer chains. I had even turned to an egg donor I chose for her blue eyes, love of horses, and legible handwriting, although I never made it quite so far. The surgery that ended it for me was performed last-minute by a physician on probation, we later learned, for alcoholism and malpractice.

I had miscarried a pregnancy the Christmas before. I was forty-one years old. It seemed wrong to continue, perhaps wrong to have tried as hard as I had. I sent for information from adoption agencies in Eastern Europe, and the brochures were spread out like a strange quilt in our spare bedroom. I had studied the rows of little faces, some unsmiling despite hair bows and whimsical toys meant to make things look less bleak, and begun to think we should try to adopt an older child, one with less of a chance. That dream crashed, too, the night of Wayne's death. I remember gathering up the papers and putting them in a box I carried to the attic.

I believed in God as a child, although I didn't grow up in a religious family. During late morning services at the suburban church we attended, I was mainly concerned with jabbing my father in the ribs periodically to keep him from snoring. I taught myself to pray, kneeling by my frilly canopy bed, repeating blessings I memorized from a book. In college the need to question this God-of-my-little-girl-faith drove me to an urgent, solitary investigation. I pored over C.S. Lewis, Thomas Merton, Watchman Nee, Viktor Frankl—anyone whose works held pos-

sible answers. I hovered around Christian groups on campus, never fitting in, despite their determined inclusiveness. A few years later I accepted, relenting, the fact that I believed and could not seem to do otherwise.

But after Wayne died, my understanding of God fell away like a bridge of shattered glass. God was inscrutable, frightening, even. I reread the book of Job, feeling a new, sick truth in every word. I began visiting nursing homes, soothed by the wizened faces, the hunched backs and faded eyes. I found comfort in the sure knowledge of death. I would die, eventually. I wished for death in almost the way I had, at ten years old, wanted to be in every plane that streaked across the sky over my square of fenced yard. The destination didn't matter. It would be different.

In the coffee shop with my friend, the day of the many tears, I sat facing the door and plate-glass windows. Tucked in the center of an outdoor mall, the shop was one of those cozy places meant to evoke the sense of a library or an old kitchen, with tall ceilings and rich wooden moldings that played up the smell of roasted coffee beans and hot milk. The hiss of equipment, baristas wiping their brows, cheerfully taking orders. A young woman pushed open the door, shepherding a toddler ahead of her. He stomped his feet, apparently fascinated by the novelty of walking, and smiled delightedly at this roomful of strangers. I stared at my cup and held my breath. My friend, who'd grown a little weary of my grief—no matter how I hard I tried to pretend otherwise, it was like a morose, curmudgeonly old man I brought along everywhere—gave me a look of consternation.

"I don't understand you," she said, in the tone good friends can judiciously take with each other. We need our friends to give us a kick in the pants occasionally, and she must have thought

this was such a time. “You see children, and you look away. Children are joyful. They should make you feel good.” She wrapped the criticism up on a particularly stinging note. “You aren’t trying to be happy. You aren’t giving yourself a chance.” I knew she meant well. She only wanted my comfort, and babies naturally brought to her mind the pleasures of her own children’s first years. But babies and toddlers in darling miniature clothing, I hate to admit, made me feel crushed.

Visibly upset, I tried to focus on breathing, which was my strategy during “those years” for getting through bouts of anxiety, especially in public. “Just breathe,” I’d tell myself. “All you have to do is breathe. Breathing is easy.” It always worked. It was a distraction, like throwing scraps to an aggressive dog. We cleared our cups and wiped the table with a napkin. An awkward minute passed as we stood outside on the walkway, preparing to leave. People with packages stepped around us; cars crept by. A middle-aged woman with a bored black lab strode past, tugging him along faster than he wanted to go. I glanced away for a second to find the right words. “I’m sorry. I can’t seem to do any better right now. I must be your most problematic friend.” In her face I could see both regret and love.

“No,” she said, looking straight into my eyes. “I think you’re my best friend.” Impulsively, as though to prove it, she put her hand on my arm and kissed my cheek.

I drove home in a blur, a sense of desperation building as the miles of fields and farms slipped by. When I got there, I fled immediately to my bedroom, escaping the downstairs rooms with chairs and sofas arranged as if inviting a family to come in with gym bags, sweaters, and schoolwork. Through the front window I could see the ridge of mountains, like an undulating blue ribbon behind a distant line of trees. I loved these mountains. They were like the sea, always the same yet always different. Endless hues of blue

reflected distinctly every season and time, every variation of sunlight and clouds. But today the scene outside was like a faded postcard in a gift shop of cheap tourist trinkets—figures made of glued seashells, toothpick holders, crocheted tissue boxes. Not real or enduring. I sat on the floor, leaning against the bed. The tears began in a fast stream.

I had never felt so alone, alone in a way that transcended time and space, that made my efforts to fight back against the grief seem laughable. Trying to suppress the mental picture I had of Wayne at death, I’d found myself plagued instead by a horrifying intrusive image of ocean waves made up of blood, rolling in with a stringing lip of pink froth. I gave up wiping the tears, rested my forehead on my knees and let them spill to the carpet, where they pooled and splashed.

At some point the despair shifted like a barge turning in a shipping channel, ponderously, with a dull warning whistle. I felt a swell of rage. *God. Where was God, anyway?* God seemed less aware, less real, less sensate than the mountains. Aloof, untouchable, distant, illusionary. Something I could easily have made up.

“You don’t care about me,” I said in the dead-ly voice a wife might use to leave a husband, finished with his philandering and lying. “You don’t know me. You don’t care about me. I don’t even know if you exist. And if you do exist, you don’t have anything for me. Nothing. Nothing at all!” By then I was shouting and trembling. My eyes fell on my Bible, its corners worn, the spine split, the pages smeared and underlined. I had inscribed it with my maiden name and the date in 1989 when I bought it at a bookshop in England, expecting that I would read this Bible for as long as it held together, maybe as long as I lived. Making note of the day, it would age along with me like a living thing.

“And this book doesn’t have anything for me, either!” I went on recklessly. I snatched it off

my nightstand. “And I’ll prove it!” In the heat of the moment, it seemed the best way to insult this nonexistent God was to point out specific examples of how irrelevant and confusing and contradictory the Bible is. Eyes gouged out. Infants dashed against rocks, and men swallowed by whales. I ripped it open.

People seem to know the story whether they consider themselves Christians or not. At the age when most of us are buying a house, or having a baby, or finally finishing school, earthly life for Jesus ended in a terrible weekend of blood, thorns, and torn flesh. We focus on this part of his experience because, hard as it is to picture such unmitigated gore and cruelty, we can, in fact. We’ve all bled and felt physical pain, many of us true agony—agony that goes on, not for days but weeks, sometimes years. Works of art depicting crucifixion can only hint at the struggle it must have been for him to anticipate and choose this ending, in full understanding of what was to come. Praying in Gethsemane, sweat rolled from his brow in drops of blood. *Hematomatidrosis*, the clinical term for it, is a very rare but real symptom of great mental torment. But this wasn’t the part I read.

I had yanked my Bible to page 1495, out of 2145 tissue-thin pages. My eyes were riveted, almost as if drawn by a magnet, to an isolated verse, the one about the absence, during those terrible hours, of his closest friends, who were asleep. “He again found them sleeping,” I read in the book of Mark, “because their eyes were heavy. They didn’t know what to say to him.” I felt the anguish wash away almost in an instant. And I felt as well, without actually hearing, a few more words, for me, in that second: *I do know how you feel. I’ve been there.*

In somewhat the same way, a nurse had finally shaken me out of my screams the night of Wayne’s death. The nurse’s hands, grasping my shoulders, made me feel gutted, as though

the most I could manage after she let go was to walk dumbly beside her in surreal disbelief, in a dreadful new world I alone inhabited. In my bedroom, though, the sense of shared humanity, of being flawlessly understood, was so palpable and real that I wasn’t disappointed to glance around and see only my dog curled in the corner waiting for me. The long shelf of broken shells I’d collected walking on a winter beach the weeks after the burial. Wayne’s favorite piece of art, a strangely wrought galloping horse, hanging on the bedroom wall.

I put my Bible back on the bedside table, gently. “Well then,” I said, “as long as we have that straight.”

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I think about how the night might have gone, I had I searched differently back when I faced headlong the question of God’s reality and capacity to break intimately into human lives. If I had been born in China or the Middle East, I wouldn’t have gravitated toward the likes of Lewis and Merton. My search was informed by my past, by those Sundays in a church with a vaulted ceiling meant to look like an upside down boat hull. But I wonder how that hour in my bedroom would have played out. I believe God loves no more the person who answers yes, in whatever way, to the question stitched into our souls and no less the person who answers no, whether by conscientious decision, or out of apathy or fear.

My grief didn’t end the night of the many tears. I had despairing nights afterward, when I cried until the bed sheets were damp. But I never again grieved without hope or found comfort in the idea of nonexistence. I grieved knowing that human tears count—are being counted by a God who has, indeed, been there. Been here. ♠