

Visit Tyndale's exciting Web site at www.tyndale.com

Copyright © 2001 by Travis Thrasher. All rights reserved.

Author's photo copyright © 2001 by William Koechling. All rights reserved.

Edited by Anne Christian Buchanan

Designed by Julie Chen

Scripture taken from the New King James Version. Copyright © 1979, 1980, 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

This novel is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, organizations, or persons living or dead is entirely coincidental and beyond the intent of either the author or publisher.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Thrasher, Travis, date.

The watermark : a novel / by Travis Thrasher.

p. cm.

ISBN 0-8423-5445-X (hardcover)

1. Grace (Theology)—Fiction. 2. Guilt—Fiction. I. Title.

PS3570.H6925 W38 2001

813'.6—dc21

2001002732

Printed in the United States of America

07 06 05 04 03 02 01

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

part one: an undeniable past



SEPTEMBER 24

Dear Amy,

I'm not even sure why I am writing.

Today as I walked across the campus grounds I saw someone who looked like you. She passed me on a sidewalk with a smile that didn't notice me. I almost stopped her to say something. But of course, I knew it wasn't you.

All day long I wondered what I would say if I could actually see you or talk to you. I've wondered this for months, years. Perhaps that is why I'm still writing you, even after all this time.

What would I say if I could meet you face-to-face?

I guess above everything else, I would say I'm sorry. I would ask for your forgiveness.

I would ask for one word from you. Any word.

Maybe I'm writing in hope of one.

Sheridan Blake





o n e

I sat on a wobbly barstool in my apartment waiting for the answering machine to haunt me again. The message played, the words already memorized. It was the first time I had actually heard the man's voice. After so many years, he had decided to contact me in person.

I knew he still hated me.

Pressing the delete button on that voice felt almost as good as locking my apartment door and escaping into the October night.

The dark swallowed me as I walked down an alley to the main street a block away. I felt more at ease knowing I was completely alone, unable to be located by ghosts from my past. Yet a voice in my head reminded me I wasn't truly alone. A thousand shadowy memories stuck to my every move. I could never outrun them, no matter how hard I tried.

Chicago nightlife ignored me. I hadn't planned on going out alone again on a Friday. I had told myself I might actually connect with my roommate wherever he ended up, or I might call one of the three guys I was on a first-name basis with at school. But the four-sentence message on my answering machine had changed it all. I needed to go out and forget about that message.

The night felt cool and damp from the earlier rain. I hiked the twenty-minute distance across busy Chicago side streets to Covenant College and passed under the arches of the arts building on campus. Passing through its front doors always reminded me of entering a church, though it had been years since I had actually set foot in one.

In the auditorium, I sat alone in my usual row of seats. I was half an hour early, but I didn't mind. I would soon be surrounded by students five, six, and seven years younger than me. Funny how relaxed I felt in a room full of people when I knew they didn't expect me to talk with them.

I tried to forget about the message on my machine. But the words continued to play over and over again in my head until a stranger interrupted them.

"Do you know what time it is?"

I glanced up at the figure who had walked to the center of the row of seats in front of me to ask an obvious question. I pointed toward the clock visible on the wall to our right.

"Is that right?" the woman said.

"I think so."

"Okay. Thanks."

The Asian girl with long, black hair pulled back and slim glasses perched on her nose sat down almost directly in front of me. I felt annoyed, the same way I would if someone were to sit by me on an empty plane.

"Do you know what they're playing?" she asked me after a few minutes had passed.

"They never tell you."

"Really? I thought they advertised the movies in the school paper."

“That I wouldn’t know,” I replied, my tone laced with indifference.

“I’ve never come to one of these things. Usually I’m out on Friday nights.”

She smiled and I nodded, deliberately not looking into her eyes. I neglected to tell her I hadn’t missed one since the semester started.

I didn’t say anything for a while. The young woman in front of me continued to look around as if she was waiting for someone. The silence made her wiggle uncomfortably in her seat. The only thing uncomfortable for me was noticing her every move and wondering if she was going to turn around again. The nice thing about this particular auditorium was its big movie screen. Every Friday night there would be a double feature of films tied together by a theme or an actor. So many students came that it had become easy to blend in and get lost in the crowd. Perhaps this was one of the reasons I enjoyed coming.

Students began filing in. I saw it was still almost fifteen minutes until the first movie. Last Friday the whole place had been packed.

“Excuse me. I know this is going to sound strange, but do you have a brother?” the dark-eyed stranger in front of me asked after turning around again.

“No.”

She apologized with a radiant smile. “Oh, I just could have sworn—well, nothing. Sorry.”

“I have an older sister,” I found myself offering.

“No,” she said, “this was a guy.”

“Okay.”

“In a class I had years ago.”

“No brother. Sorry.” That was all I could think of to say.

I searched my memory vaults but couldn’t remember ever meeting any tall, slender Asian girl in any of my classes. I was certain I would have remembered her.

A group of students captured the young woman’s attention—obviously, the people she was waiting for. They filled her row and began talking nonstop. I couldn’t help overhearing their conversation. It was nothing worth noting, except for the fact that they all paid attention to the woman who had been talking to me. A wiry guy with frosted hair and an oversized soccer shirt sat beside her, chatting and whispering and making her laugh. He had an obnoxious laugh I instantly disliked.

Minutes before the first movie, I wondered if the woman was going to turn around again and say something. Yet why would she? And more important, why did I care?

The lights dimmed. So, I assumed, had any more chances of communication with her.

As the opening credits began to roll for one of my favorite movies, the young woman turned around again.

To smile.



The movies that night turned out to be *The Shawshank Redemption* and *The Fugitive*. The theme must have been injustice and escape. One guy was in prison and one on the run, but both were desperately clinging to hope.

Had someone known I was coming?

Most of the people around me cleared out before I left the auditorium. The dark-haired woman I still didn’t recognize had

looked back at me one more time as the second movie's ending credits showed. I saw the brightness in those dark, narrow eyes and knew I could not have seen her before. Surely I would have remembered her. I walked slowly back to my apartment, thinking of the young woman I just had the chance to meet and failed to connect with. Yet was it really a failure? Wasn't that my intention, especially with these Friday night movies—to lose myself in the big screen, to know I could avoid for several hours having to reveal anything about myself to anybody?

Maybe you need to stop living your life through actors on the big screen and simply start living a normal life again.

I knew this. And yet, another voice inside told me that the young woman probably hadn't given me another two seconds' worth of thought after asking me those simple questions. I didn't blame her.

An unseen mist fell outside, and I was soaked by the time I opened the door to my apartment to my old dog's familiar, tail-wagging greeting. Barney wandered over to smell the new and exciting scents on my legs.

I lived with my roommate, Erik Morrison, on the North Side of Chicago, only a short distance from Covenant College. Having lived with Erik since the end of summer, I knew he wouldn't be home—not at such an early hour as half-past midnight.

Maybe it was the combination of the movies and dreary weather and almost meeting a girl I couldn't stop thinking about and probably would never see again. It was that and a lot more, I knew, that made me feel so lonely.

Most of all, it was the reminder of the answering-machine message I had received only hours ago:

“Sheridan Blake. This is Mike Larsen, and I’ve been trying to find your number for a while. We need to talk. Please call me at 312-794-5348.”

The man’s gruff voice. The sharp, harsh tone. The unmistakable words.

I had been gone so long. Seven years. Seven long years spent living with my parents only an hour away in the suburbs, but far enough to make Chicago and Covenant feel like a world and a lifetime away. I never thought I would return, but now that I had, I was feeling overwhelmed.

Minutes later, as I slipped underneath comforting covers, the silence of my apartment allowed my mind to wander past the walled barriers I had erected many years ago. They drifted into areas I hadn’t visited for a while.

Such as God.

The thing was, I knew God was there—watching, waiting. Part of me had always known it. Yet I couldn’t say a word to him. I knew of his forgiveness, of his atonement for sins, of his amazing grace. Yet somehow it just didn’t seem to apply to me. What I had done still seemed too close, too real, too unchangeable.

It had been years, and yet it felt like it all could have happened yesterday.

Talk to me.

And what if I did? another voice answered back in my mind. What if I did finally open the window and begin trying to pray? What could I say? Where would I begin? How could I even try, after so many years?

The words would fail me. I believed this.

I thought of the smile I had been privileged to see earlier that night and wondered when—or if—I would ever have such a

carefree grin. I used to carry one around like a puppy, filling those around me with the same enthusiasm my smile showed off. The sort of smile the woman at the movie had displayed.

I could use a friend like her, I thought.

I'm not sure why of all nights I then chose to do the thing I had not done in ages. But I clenched my hands together and breathed in deeply and managed to say two words that had not come out in the last few years. In the last seven years.

“Help me.”