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*a long
time comin'*

a novel

Robin W. Pearson



Advance Praise for A Long Time Comin'

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JULIE CANTRELL, *New York Times* and *USA Today* bestselling author

“My mouth watered at the mustard greens and ham hocks. Feels like home. You’ll fall in love with Evelyn and Granny B and a cast of memorable characters so rich you won’t want the story to end. We can only hope we’ll be reading more from Robin W. Pearson!”

CHRIS FABRY, bestselling author of *Under a Cloudless Sky* and *The Promise of Jesse Woods*

“With a deft hand and an unflinching eye, Pearson tackles the cobwebby corners of her characters’ lives and in doing so reveals truths that ultimately help us all to heal . . . even when we’ve convinced ourselves we don’t need to.”

SARAH LOUDIN THOMAS, author of *Miracle in a Dry Season*

“From the first page, Pearson invites readers into the slow unraveling of truth in her characters’ lives as the past and present collide. She writes with both realism and empathy—a powerful combination.”

BETH K. VOGT, Christy Award-winning author

“Robin W. Pearson’s authentic faith and abundant talent shine through in this wholehearted novel. Bee and Evelyn will stir your heart and stay with you long after the last page of *A Long Time Comin’* is turned.”

MARYBETH MAYHEW WHALEN, author of *Only Ever Her*

“With amazing skill and a strong Southern voice, Robin W. Pearson captures the essence of family relationships in her outstanding debut novel, *A Long Time Comin’*. . . . This powerful story will impact and inspire readers who enjoy engaging Southern women’s fiction.”

CARRIE TURANSKY, award-winning author of *No Ocean too Wide*

“In *A Long Time Comin’* Robin W. Pearson takes readers behind closed doors and into the heart of a family.”

ANN H. GABHART, bestselling author of *Angel Sister* and *The Refuge*

“Robin W. Pearson’s singular style and fully realized cast of characters ring proudly throughout this novel. Her masterful voice is a welcome addition to the genre of family sagas rooted in hope and faith.”

LIZ JOHNSON, bestselling author of *The Red Door Inn*

“The lyrical weaving of family narratives, past and present, is masterful—certainly to be compared with writers such as Sue Monk Kidd and Barbara Kingsolver. . . . Buy this book. It gripped me . . . from page one.”

JANET HOLM McHENRY, author of twenty-four books, including the bestseller *PrayerWalk*

“*A Long Time Comin’* is a tender and sweet story of a cantankerous grandmother and her dear family members. It is entertaining yet reveals some hard truths about living and loving. Her characters are charming, endearing, and flawed. I hope we have many years to come of reading Pearson’s work.”

KATARA PATTON, author

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A Long Time Comin'

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*“ . . . so that they should seek the Lord, in the hope
that they might grope for Him and find Him,
though He is not far from each one of us . . . ”*

ACTS 17:27

*To my beloved parents
and all those whose joy, healing, answered prayer,
and morning light are a long time comin’*

PART ONE

The Women

Chapter One

June 18

That night when my man eased through the door, his clothes felt and smelled like the summer rain tapping on the roof. There sure aint nothing like a North Carolina rain. He bout scared the breath out of me, but then he grinned and whispered my name in that way he had. I started missing him on the spot cause I figured he'd be gone by the time the first rays of sunlight tickled the floorboards. I slipped to the kitchen anyway and made him a plate since I never could say no to them eyes. To

this day when I fry up pork chops, I can still see him gnawing on that bone.

Know what else I see? Me pushing him out that same door not even two hours later. Only the Lord coulda made me do it. And that man made such a fuss! My heart practically thudded to a stop when I heard the children stir. A part of me ached to pull him inside and wrap my arms round him, but my bones said, Bee, there aint no coming back from this. He probly heard my heart pounding in my chest as he stood there with the rain dripping off his brim and his mouth a straight line. His eyes weren't laughing then. And they weren't asking me for nothing either. He just tipped his hat to me—and he sure never looked back. I know. Cause I waited.

But deep inside I could tell he wouldn't come creeping back in a month or so to melt away my anger with them smiles and empty promises and sliding out the door before sunrise. I just wish I coulda told my fool self—Bee, get away from that window and either stop wishing for your husband to come back or stop fearing it. You can't have both.

Beatrice tucked her pencil into the gutter of her worn leather journal and dragged her eyes from the page. She readjusted the thin watch on her left wrist. 10:42. Holding her book to her chest, she hefted herself from the chair. Her bones creaked as they made themselves comfortable in her

new upright position by the window of her Spring Hope, North Carolina, home. She strained her neck, aiming to see where the once-graveled road, now paved, turned the corner. Her fingers fiddled with the long gray braid curled across her right shoulder as she imagined his knee-length black coat and matching black felt fedora worn so low it almost covered one eye.

Then, sighing, Beatrice removed the pencil and closed the book altogether. She pulled the strip of rubber from her wrist and snapped it around her diary to secure the pencil. She'd been spending too much time these days looking backwards, getting lost meandering through those long-ago days. "Keep yo' hand to the plow, Bee."

Peeking around the curtain one last time, Beatrice cast a disparaging eye on the Wilson boys in their daddy's car. "Mm-mm, flying down the road like they ain't had no sense." As the noise from their engine faded, she stepped away from the window, retrieved the box from the bed, and laid the journal atop the papers inside. She'd just stow it all in her closet for now. *Too much trouble gettin' out that key to the steamer trunk.*

She shut her closet door and glanced around her bedroom. Sunrays streamed through the parted curtains and struck the mirror. The reflected glare revealed not one speck of dust. It had taken her the better part of a week of stops and starts to scrub her room and the rest of the house with orange-scented Murphy oil soap, and the wood floors seemed to smile at her, they were so shiny. Two fluffed pillows adorned

her otherwise-plain light-blue bedcover, the hem of which hung exactly one-half inch from the floor. Nothing needed fixing, straightening, dusting, sweeping, or spraying.

In the front room, Beatrice found something to straighten: the black-and-white photograph of her mam and pap, one of the two framed pictures on the eggshell-colored wall. The back bedroom sat empty, undisturbed. She walked the few steps to the kitchen, but there even the stainless steel sink proved true to its name. Everything was cut, canned, wiped, washed, or stored away. Sighing again, she retrieved the empty clothes basket on the washing machine and tramped from the kitchen out to the clothesline.

The heat slapped her. Beatrice reached toward the first wooden pin and unclipped the underwear. She worked her way down the line, folding the stiff laundry and dropping it into the basket at her feet. She grimaced—*Too heavy a hand with that bleach*—and edged the now-overflowing basket to her right. Panting as much from exertion as from the oppressive heat, Beatrice bent and hoisted the basket to her waist and plodded to the kitchen.

The kitchen clock read 11:17. Beatrice fetched the garden hose from the shed and brought it to the front yard to water the roses her granddaughter had planted by the mailbox for Mother's Day. After she finished dousing the wilting plants and any other hint of vegetation in the yard, she walked to the hose bib. With a squeak of the spigot and a stiff turn of the wrist, she extinguished the stream and detached the hose. She coiled it loosely around her elbow and trooped toward

the porch to enter the house by the front door, too tired to go around to the shed. After she dragged her slight frame up the steps, she noticed her water-splattered legs and mud-covered brogans. Shoulders slumped, she eased down the steps—even more slowly this time—to go around back. Worn-out once she reached the door, Beatrice plopped down on the stoop to catch her breath. She couldn't even make it up the one step.

“I told Ev'lyn them flowers was mo' trouble than they's worth.” The hose uncoiled on the ground around her ankles.

Some time later, Beatrice pushed herself to her feet with great effort and left the hose in a loose pile, forgotten. She unlaced and removed her shoes before entering the kitchen. Inside, her hot, wet skin greedily sucked in the cool air from the window unit. Refreshed a bit, Beatrice glanced at the clock over the sink: 11:55. *It ain't too early to eat some lunch. I've worked me up quite a hunger.*

The refrigerator yielded just enough pimienta cheese for a nice-size sandwich, and she plucked a Granny Smith apple from the bin in the pantry. Sitting at the table facing down her food, she prepared her stomach to eat.

Lord, You know what I need 'cause You the one who gave it to me and blessed it. Thank You. Amen. She took her time chewing, talking her way through her meal, frequently sipping the water, all the while ordering her stomach to stay in line. And just like many of the people in Beatrice's life, it obeyed.

When it was nearly half past noon, Beatrice slid her bookmark on James 1 and closed her Bible. She ignored the scrape of the chair's feet as she pushed away from the table. She

scrubbed her lunch dishes, dried them, put them away, and retreated to her bedroom. There she resisted the urge to flip back the curtain to see whatever busied itself on the other side. Instead, she cast an eye at the clock. Its hands told her, "*Time for a nap.*"

Nearly two hours later, refreshed and back on the porch, Beatrice leaned on the cushions and replaited her hair. She wound it, tucked it, and pinned the one long, silver braid into a bun at the nape of her neck. By now, the sun had crept toward the rear of the house, mercifully sparing the front porch. She basked in the nothingness stretching out beyond the yard and the street running in front of it. Then, "My Lord!" she entreated, gripping her side. She hunched over as pain speared her insides, inched around her spine and over her hip, and took hold somewhere in the area around her chest. It stole her breath. She sat still as stone, gripping her dress, eyes squeezed shut.

Seconds . . . a minute . . . forever passed until at last, the fist of pain loosened its hold, finger by finger, and finally let go altogether. The breeze that merely dislodged the heavy air raised chill bumps on her clammy skin. Doctors had warned her, but the suddenness of this spell caught Beatrice off guard. She had half a mind to cancel her afternoon plans, but before the other half caught up, a car crunched into the drive.

Piece by piece Beatrice put herself together, and then she stepped into her house far enough to retrieve her keys and turn the lock. She'd already pushed the heavy baskets laden with clean laundry onto the porch. Wordlessly Beatrice lifted

her head a notch as she passed the hand that tried to help and stiffly took the three concrete steps to the ground.

“How you doin’ today, Granny B?”

“Same as always.” Beatrice looked neither to the right nor the left as she marched to the ancient burgundy metallic Monte Carlo, much as the second hand had ticked away the time. “You can put them two baskets in back.” She threw the words over her shoulder as she climbed in. Beatrice drew from her pride rather than from her depleted stores of energy to slam closed her door behind her.

The other door opened and the seat was let down before the driver scooted the laundry baskets across the back. Then he slammed shut his own door and the engine chugged to life. Reverend Farrow turned to his passenger. “Granny B, are you ready?”

Beatrice nodded briskly. “If I ain’t now, I ain’t never gon’ be.”