

Just. You. Wait.



*Patience, Contentment, and
Hope for the Everyday*

TRICIA LOTT WILLIFORD

When Tricia's book found me, I was—*I am!*—in a season of waiting. Unexpected, unchosen, unwanted waiting. And in the pages of *Just. You. Wait.*, I discovered a good guide who's weathered waiting with God, in all its comfort and discomfort. This book is a gift to all of us who are a little peeved and disheartened by the wait, because in its pages, we discover we're not alone.

MARGOT STARBUCK, author of *Small Things with Great Love*

Tricia's ability to simultaneously strike and soothe the human heart is nothing short of extraordinary. I wasn't particularly struggling with impatience when I turned to the first page of *Just. You. Wait.*—or so I thought. But I needed this book. With raw authenticity and quirky humor, Tricia avoids offering trite answers to unanswerable heartaches and instead shares quiet, poignant insights that make you suck in your breath deeply—and ponder and wrestle and shift. As I face my own season of waiting, with patience and hope sorely lacking in my own soul, I am grateful for the gift of Tricia, who has gone before me and paved the way. I am not the same for having read these pages.

SEPTEMBER VAUDREY, author of *Colors of Goodbye*

Tricia Lott Williford has created something special here, something true. If you have ever been in a difficult waiting season or are walking with someone through a painful life stage, you will find a soul companion here. With her signature humor (yes, testicles are mentioned more than once) and vulnerability, *Just. You. Wait.* is not a how-to book or a book of trite answers—as we see so often from books in these categories. Instead, Lott Williford holds raw courage in one hand and real heartbreak in the other, while offering it all as a gift to the reader. Unwrap this gift, reader. You will be grateful you did.

AUBREY SAMPSON, author of *The Louder Song* and *Overcomer*

Modern Western culture, with its blurring advances, has tried to jettison our need to wait for anything. That's why this book is so important. By bringing us into her own family's story, Tricia Lott Williford reminds us that waiting is a good thing. With candidness and humor, *Just. You. Wait.* points the way to the many hidden treasures that lie ahead for those who embrace a lifestyle of patience, hardy laughter, and stubborn hope.

JASON HAGUE, author of *Aching Joy*

Reading Tricia's writing is like sharing a cup of coffee with your best friend or sister—her experiences speak wisdom into your own. Waiting is a natural part of life, but it's one that we don't like. We pretend that it doesn't exist—but it does, and we must be ready for it. In *Just. You. Wait.*, Tricia beautifully and winsomely shows us the value in waiting.

CATHERINE MCNIEL, author of *Long Days of Small Things* and *All Shall Be Well*

Tricia is the most compassionate writer I have ever read. She forges a sincere friendship with the reader, writing as a tender survivor of waiting rather than an expert on it. Somehow, Tricia manages to strike the perfect balance between consolation and hope, nudging us forward without hurrying us along. For those who feel stuck, sidelined, or distracted by the ache of longing, *Just. You. Wait.* offers the solace and perspective you need. That's exactly what it gave to me.

BEKAH DIFELICE, author of *Almost There*

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*For Peter,
my favorite.*

Maybe
the best thing
I've ever done
was wait.

I made an art form
out of
endurance.

You were worth
every single
moment.

Tyler Knott Gregson

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INTRODUCTION

Hurry Up and Wait

I start the morning with such a friendly disposition. I promise you, I do.

“Good morning, guys,” I say with my gentle morning voice. I scratch their backs as they stir and open their eyes. I even give each of them morning warnings: “You don’t have to get up quite yet, but pretty soon. You can sleep a little longer, lovey.”

I’m telling you: I do not wake up in a grumpy mood. I don’t even think I have “the wrong side of the bed.” (Unless I am awakened by a screeching, buzzing alarm. Then all bets are off.) But generally, I am of a fine disposition in the morning. I come downstairs, always wrapped in my robe, my hair still wayward and wild. I sit in a central location, I drink the morning cup of coffee, and I supervise the happenings.

And then things slowly slip sideways.

“Buddy, could you get dressed before you have your breakfast?”

“I see you have a shirt on, but I need you to wear pants also.”

“I put your milk on your Cocoa Pebbles, so it can start to get soggy.” (Never mind that it’s against human nature to like soggy cereal. I’m a professional, and I choose my battles.)

“Would you like for me to pack your lunch today, or do you want to pack it?”

“Could you please come to the table?”

“Please don’t be silly at the table.”

“Stop picking fights with your brother.”

“No, your chocolate milk doesn’t taste like coffee. It’s not coffee. No, I promise you: It is not coffee.”

“We are leaving in twelve minutes. Have you packed your lunch? You said you wanted to be in charge of your lunch today.”

“It. Is. Not. Coffee.”

“Remember to brush your teeth, please.”

“Only two cookies in your lunch.”

“Only two cookies, I said.”

“Two cookies.”

“Your chocolate milk does not have coffee in it. Seriously. I promise.”

“I know you need a snack also, and you can choose grapes or goldfish crackers. No, the cookies are for your lunch—actually, you can eat the cookies any time you want throughout the day. But you are not taking more than two cookies to school in any part of your lunch or backpack.”

“Have you brushed your teeth? No, we brush at night to keep our teeth. We brush in the morning to keep our friends.”

“Shoes and socks, please.”

“We’re leaving in seven minutes.”

“Shoes and socks, please.”

“Shoes. And socks. What is your job right now? That’s right. Do it.”

“Two cookies is the limit. I’m not changing my mind on this.”

“There is No. Coffee. In. Your. Chocolate. Milk.”

“Shoes.”

“We’re leaving in two minutes.”

“Don’t forget to fill your water bottle.”

“Buddy. Shoes.”

“We are leaving ten seconds ago.”

And then: *Enough.*

“You guys! Shoes and socks *on!* I told you—two cookies and *only two cookies!* And for crying out loud, *I did not* put coffee in your milk! Put your lunch in your backpack and *get in the CAR!*”

And then they look at me with weepy, hurting eyes.

“Mom, why do you have to be so angry in the morning?”

I read somewhere that there is no grace in hurrying. But sometimes grace has been patient for as long as she could.

No matter how well I start out the morning, the small bits of waiting chip away at the good intentions in my day. Time and people move too slowly, making me feel impatient or ignored. Things don’t work out like they should, or they

don't work out at all—and suddenly I'm slamming the dishwasher and rushing the kids. My everyday inconveniences are nothing in comparison to the greater sufferings happening in the world, and yet they are not nothing. They are my world, petty as it sometimes feels. Waiting fills up my ordinary days.

Waiting turns me into someone I don't want to be. It changes me in small ways and big ones, from the edge in my voice to the lasting lessons I teach my children by my lousy example.

The challenges of waiting are familiar to all of us. Everybody waits. Nobody likes it. It's part of life, part of every single day.

We wait in line, wait for coffee to percolate, wait for the light to change, wait for Christmas, wait for morning, wait for permission.

We wait for a spouse, wait for a baby, wait on our children, wait on our parents.

We wait in the doctor's office, in the dentist's office, in the post office, and for a leader to take office.

We wait for clarity, for direction, to feel sure.

We wait on a job, a promotion, a new boss, a new day.

We wait for hope and for healing and for miracles.

We wait on God. And when we misunderstand what waiting is about, we can get confused about what God is up to.

Waiting is a big deal to God. It's one of God's favorite tools to get our attention. Waiting exists only within the concept of time, and time is the very first thing he created, "in the

beginning.”¹ And ever since that beginning, God has worked within the wait.

When God sent his Son to be born into the world, four hundred years had passed since the people had heard a word from the Lord. It’s difficult for me to wrap my mind around that much time, that much waiting. Not only had they not heard a word, but neither had their parents, their grandparents, or their great-grandparents. This was before readers could use Google and Bible Gateway to find answers, and they likely could not remember the last person in their family lineage who had heard a fresh word from the Lord. That feels pretty hopeless to me. I think I would stop believing—and stop waiting—if I couldn’t even find the last person who had any real evidence of good news. That sounds like a perfect storm that would make me seriously prone to wander. I imagine I’d even begin to forget what it’s like to hunger for his word.

In these four hundred years, God allowed a famine in the land. Not a famine of food, but indeed a famine of his word. In the silence, the people began to burn with a deep hunger for the sound of his voice. Sometimes God does that. He makes us wait so we can remember what we want the most.

After so many hundreds of years, the time came. *Came*. When Luke wrote the account of the birth of Jesus, he used that very phrase: “The time came for her baby to be born.”² When the implications of this phrase jumped off the page at me, my perspective changed in a big way. Admittedly, when I am in a season of waiting, I can only seem to notice the passing of time in a negative way, like it’s slipping through

my fingers, and I can't stop it. The children are growing taller, the leaves are changing color, the clock is ticking, the sand is slipping through the hourglass. It's getting away from me. But Luke turned that whole perspective upside down. Time isn't merely passing. Quite the contrary, my friend. The Time is coming.

God wants to do something unique in my heart and in yours, and the process gives him fertile ground to do important work in our hearts, our relationships, and our very lives while we wait for the time to come. Waiting can be sacred space. It does not have to be passive or inactive. Actually, it can be filled with heartfelt anticipation and deep intention, and even sprinkled with joy.

The further you get from the beginning of the wait, the closer you are to what will become yours. A time is coming.

Your time is coming.

. . .

“How goes the new book?” Peter asks me one day in the car. It's a rather loaded question, since there is a fine tension between being interested in what I'm working on and holding me accountable to a deadline. I love interest, not pressure. Peter and I have been married for a couple of years now, but he still can't really know which way the pendulum is going to swing; it all depends on the day, the time I've spent writing that particular morning, and how I'm personally feeling about the work I'm doing. I suspect it's hard being married to a writer.

Sometimes he says, “How is the Wait?” and I mishear the homonym and think he asked about my *weight*, and things get a little dicey for a minute or two.

Or, since he knows I’m juggling this book and two others that I’m ghostwriting for other authors, he’ll gently remind me to focus on my own words, saying, “Did you Wait today?” It’s a gift to both of us when I can say yes.

“You know what? I’ve been thinking hard about some things,” I offer. “I want to think about them with you.” I start untangling the mess of my thoughts. I tell him how I’ve been pondering the process of waiting, and I believe that every season comes down to three stages: *Longing*, *Becoming*, and *Awakening*.³

“Tell me more about this,” he says. I love those words. It’s how he wooed my heart.

And so I tell him. There comes a point when you realize you are *separated* from something important to you—a person, a role, a goal, a longing, an achievement, a life stage. That’s when the wait begins, and it brings an ache or a Longing. Maybe that’s how we feel the silent sound of the clock ticking—in a deep, intuitive sense of longing.

Then, as you wait, you enter a stage of *Becoming*. Something is transformed—maybe it’s your circumstances, or the details you can’t manufacture on your own, or (my favorite) an actual change within you. Sometimes, the becoming is so slow that you can’t feel the change. But in the waiting, you become something or someone new.

Finally, there is the *Awakening*, which is the moment when

you get what you waited for. You arrive at the moment you've longed for; you meet the goal. Sometimes the Awakening brings an acceptance that God is doing something entirely different from what you thought you wanted. Sometimes you get an awareness that you're content in this life you've been given, even without what you thought you needed. The Awakening is the sweet spot.

Waiting can seem so elusive, so hard to hold. That's what makes it miserable. But perhaps breaking it down into three stages makes it feel like there is a beginning, a middle, and an end. I've run it through my own gauntlet of examples, and so far, the formula has been foolproof.

Look at the caterpillar. She has this intuitive longing to grow into something different, so she separates from her social life with her caterpillar friends, and she makes her cocoon. She crawls inside to wait, and she slowly becomes a new and different creature. Finally, she breaks free in a moment of awakening, now with wings and wonder.

Jonah had a longing to do his own thing when he went in the opposite direction of Nineveh, so he created his own separation when he chose to disobey God. When he was swallowed by a big fish, Jonah began his three days of Becoming. He became open to direction, he became receptive to the voice of God, and, I imagine, he became covered in big-fish-stomach-grossness. When he was finally vomited onto the shore, Jonah awakened to dry land, the light of day, and a path to obedience.⁴

The Israelites left their home in Egypt, longing for

freedom, and they began a season of Becoming as they wandered through the desert for forty years. The people of Israel ambled for forty years before entering the Promised Land, though the technology of modern cartography tells us that they could have made the trip in just a few weeks, had God allowed them to know where they were going. The distance was not that far—a simple search on Google Maps shows it was a straight line of less than three hundred miles. Assuming they could travel a minimum of thirty miles per day, they could have made it in about ten days. Actually, that's a pretty ambitious pace for more than half a million⁵ people to walk together, so let's slow them way down and consider all of the children, elderly, and camels. If they could only travel one mile per day, they still could have finished the journey in less than one year.⁶

In this case, let's not ignore the fact that their own choices played a role in the delay, since the consequence of their sin was that the first generation had to wander and wouldn't see the Promised Land. They made things worse with their own sin, and isn't that so often what we do too? Perhaps they could have finished the journey in less than a year, but *finishing* was not God's priority; the *waiting* was his priority. He was more interested in their obedience, their character, and the posture of their hearts. He was most interested in who they were *becoming*.

But not all of our waiting is the result of bad choices. Sometimes it's just the nature of how things go. I mean, I could even break down my morning routine into the stages:

the *longing* for a cup of coffee. I'm separated from my waking heart's desire. The goodness of modern technology turns the beans into grounds, and they *become* liquid gold in the coffee pot. With a splash of cream, the beverage is all mine, and an *awakening* happens on several glorious levels.

I talk to Peter's profile while he keeps his eyes on the road, and I save the *pièce de résistance* for last: "And it's even true of Jesus. When he died on the cross, he was separated from life, even separated from God. The disciples longed for their friend and leader. Mary longed for her son. Then his dead body was buried in the tomb, and the transformation began. Sometime in there, blood began flowing through his veins again, and he became healed, whole, and alive. And he emerged on the third day, just as he promised he would. The world awakened to hope."

I lay all of this before him, expecting him to be blown away by this discovery. I am even silent while he mulls it over.

But then he says, "I don't think it's true."

"What? You don't think *what's* true?"

"The becoming part."

"Why?"

"Well, I can think of sometimes when I had to wait, and nothing ever came of it. There was no healing, no transformation, no *becoming*. I was just angry because I was still waiting, and nothing changed."

I don't know what to say. I hadn't thought about that. In a few words, he has shattered my theory.

But, however reluctantly, I can see what he means. Peter

and I have each encountered different seasons of waiting, some of those on our own and some of them together. His waiting has been different from mine.

He says, "Not everyone is like you."

"How?"

"Not everyone is hopeful. Sometimes, waiting feels hopeless. It's not always neat and easy to sum up in three steps."

I consider this for a moment, partly defeated, partly curious. "So, what do you do in that place? What do you wish you had known when you've felt hopeless?"

"Well, I needed to do a lot more listening," he says. "I wish I had stopped arguing for what I wanted and instead listened to why I might not be getting it. I should have listened more, even just to the handful of people I trusted."

And then he says, "Look at me. I just realized something."

I look at him. He pulls my sunglasses down my nose.

"You don't have any eyebrows."

"I've never had eyebrows."

"I never noticed it before. You're like a hairless little mouse."

"True story." (Technically, I do have eyebrows. They're blonde and not worth mentioning. Or noticing, apparently.)

We started talking three years ago, and we haven't stopped. Our dialogue dances in and out of the heavy and real to the trivial and silly. From the transformation of Jesus in the tomb to the absence of hair above my eyes. And then back down deep again.

"I'd love to tell your story, if you'll let me," I say.

He pushes my sunglasses back into place.

“I’ll think about that.”

. . .

And so, here we are, you and me. All geared up to wait. I chose the title of this book for three reasons. (And you know I love a good list.) First, just you wait, because everyone takes their turn in the waiting room. If you’re waiting, it’s because we all do. It’s your turn. I’m sorry about this long and painful fact of life, but shortcuts and microwaves don’t work for everything. Just. You. Wait.

Second, just you wait and see what God is doing. There is so much happening underground, long before we see the first bud break through the spring soil. And there is so much happening within a new mom, long before she knows she is pregnant. Before parents see a flickering white light on an ultrasound screen, the baby has already begun to develop a heart, brain, spinal cord, muscles, and bones. God is at work behind the scenes, so many layers deep, in invisible ways you cannot see . . . yet. Just. You. Wait.

Third, just you wait and see how ready you’ll be if you spend your waiting well. Waiting is not wasted time, but rather a chance for you to study and prepare, to practice and learn, to find a mentor and hone your skill. When your turn comes after you’ve waited well, you can say, “Look out, world. I am ready to shine. Just. You. Wait.”

I have poured myself into these pages, asking God to join

me in the writing and to meet you on the page. Will you join me on the journey? As I love to say with each of my books: Let's write this together. The black parts are what I have to say, and the white space is for you and your thoughts. I don't know what your waiting looks like, but I do know that a person doesn't decide to read a book about waiting without feeling the realities of the battle with patience. Be gentle with yourself on this journey. You may even begin feeling excited about what God is going to do.

For many years now, my favorite conversations have unfolded when readers have stopped me in the grocery store, on the baseball field, at a bookstore, or at the airport to tell me about the journey we shared on the page. You've told me your stories of grief you thought would swallow you whole, of sadness that has torn you in half, of beauty from ashes and joy in the morning. You've shared with me the stories of your hard-won confidence, how you've learned to dance in the skin you're in, and how you've begun to like the person in your bathroom mirror. I look forward to the day when you will tell me about the journey in these pages, how we waited together for what God wanted to give you, what life had to show you, and the person you will become.

So buckle up, my friend. Waiting can be one wild ride.
Let's go.

PART ONE

Longing

“My name is Peter, and I’m an alcoholic.”

I was sitting next to Peter in an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting the first time I heard him say these words. We were in a church basement, in a room with yellow walls, some holes in the carpet, a few posters with Bible verses, and the scent of freshly brewed coffee. “We drunks like our coffee,” Peter says, raising his Styrofoam cup in solidarity. Cheers.

He had invited me to join him because it was his “fifth birthday.” Five years of sobriety. It’s a sacred celebration for an alcoholic, every time they pass a milestone and get a new chip. It’s a much-deserved gold star. He invited me to meet his sponsor, to see a piece of the program at work, and to see the network of people who helped him get his life back. I was honored and humbled to meet this army of warriors battling a disease they are powerless against.

Peter first told me his story on our third date, over a morning brunch of pumpkin pancakes and breakfast tacos. He wanted me to know where he had been, what he had been through, and what he had once been all about, because he

wanted to give me ample freedom to exit in case I decided it was all too much. He filleted his heart open with vulnerability and the full knowledge that I could choose to walk away from the mess. Little did he know, that level of honesty and transparency only made me feel safer. I'd far rather be with someone who knows his weaknesses than someone who thinks he doesn't have any.

A few months ago, I asked Peter to tell it to me again, his journey of waiting for freedom, as we sat in rocking chairs overlooking the rolling river in front of the deck of his family's cabin in the mountains. Might I say, private access to this sacred acreage is one of the perks of marrying into this family. My sons call it Peter's Forest, and they, too, are smitten with the whittling and the bonfires and the fishing and the tubing and the grasshoppers and the full moon and even the outhouses. This place has a fairy-tale quality that nurtures our souls. Here, suburban boys can become Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn, and a wife can carve a little space to ask her husband to revisit a difficult story.

"Honey, tell me the hardest thing you've had to wait for," I said.

"The hardest thing I've waited for . . ." Peter paused a moment. "Well, probably the hardest thing was waiting for my situation to change. That was a pretty hopeless walk through the desert, and it lasted a long, long time."

Peter got his first tastes of alcohol before he started high school. He got an early exposure to the ways it could change his personality, and it all seemed like a win-win at the

beginning. He discovered he was funnier, louder, braver, and the life of any party. He carried this life skill into adulthood, sure that his affinity for alcohol was merely a preference, not an addiction. After all, he could stop if he wanted to, and it's not like he had to maintain a constant blood alcohol level. He didn't drink every day. But when it was time to party, he'd be sure to make it count. He'd start early and finish last. He knew how to hold his liquor and build his tolerance, and he liked that version of himself. Party Peter was a fun guy to be, and everybody else seemed to enjoy Party Peter too. Give him a few drinks, and your entertainment package was complete. He was a trained professional.

Peter got married and started his family in the late eighties, and there were a dozen good years of marriage with a woman he loved and a daughter and son he adored. But he brought alcohol into their family culture, and alcoholism makes a bad housemate. A whole lot of ingredients led to a great explosion, and after sixteen years of family life, he was a single man on his own. He was angry and bitter. He hated that he couldn't see his kids when he wanted, hated that he had to move, and hated that he had to work multiple jobs for money that would never be his. He'd earn enough to make ends meet, only to hand the check over for alimony, lawyers, and child support. The bar scene seemed more welcoming than ever, an acceptable alibi.

Peter said, "I wasn't the kind of guy who needed to keep alcohol in my blood all the time. But I was a binge drinker. It was difficult for me to ever be satisfied with one or two

drinks. I needed many. My tolerance was built up so much that it took many drinks for me to feel the way I wanted to feel, which was happy, fun, and gregarious. But the thing about alcohol is that it's a depressant. *Happy, fun, and gregarious* can turn into *mean, angry, and belligerent* in the right circumstances. If I didn't get what I wanted, I'd get mean. Suddenly, a conversation would become a fight. I don't think it happened often, but that's the root of alcohol and the core of drinking. A belligerent drunk is unruly and cannot be reasoned with. With a few drinks, I could turn on a dime."

On his sober days, Peter would head out to a field where he talked to God and asked for a change. He'd walk the field and lament, "God, I feel ashamed. When can I get meaningful work? When can I pay off these debts? When can I be in a healthy relationship? Please, God. My children are ashamed of me. I can see it in their eyes. They don't want to come to my apartment and sleep on an air mattress, but it's all I have to give them. Please, God. Where are you?" He'd crack open another can from his faithful six-pack by his side, and he'd add, "Oh, and maybe I should cut back a little on my drinking . . . or maybe even quit. Maybe. That seems extreme, but if you could help with that, I'd appreciate it."

In 2011, things started to look up when he was cast in a TV commercial for the Colorado Rockies. If ever something deserved a couple of cold beers, it was an afternoon spent shooting a commercial for his favorite baseball team. He went to a bar to celebrate how fun the commercial had been, but that was just the pregame for a second event that

night—this one with an open bar. As Peter says, “If they offered me an open bar, they were going to be on the losing end of that equation. Most of the time, at an all-you-can-eat situation, they’ll serve heavy, glutenous foods. Breads, pastas—inexpensive foods that fill you up with one or two servings. But with alcohol, it’s different. They had two bars at this place, one at each end of the ballroom. So, I’d make good friends with both bartenders, and then I’d strategically bounce back and forth between the two, timing it perfectly and never visiting so fast or so often that either one would notice how much I was drinking. Like I said, I was a trained professional.”

Here’s where it gets dicey. Peter left that open-bar party, and he drove himself home. He made it almost all the way there.

At the last stoplight before he arrived at his apartment complex, an officer stopped him. Peter wasn’t slurring his words, but there was enough alcohol on his breath to prompt the officer to run his plates. The record showed that Peter had an outstanding ticket for a bar fight, and the terms of that ticket included that he wasn’t allowed to drink for the next three months. The officer took him to the station, a Breathalyzer test showed he was over the legal limit, and Peter found himself in jail for the night. And he was none too happy about it. Livid is the better word, probably. He had almost gotten away with driving drunk *again*.

See, Peter hadn’t intended to go to jail for this nonsense, he had a business presentation in the morning, and—most

pressing on his mind—he had a new puppy at home. Sam was his black Labrador that he had rescued from a shelter, and they were just getting to know one another. They had finally managed to curb some of the anxiety Sam felt over being alone, and this night apart from Peter would be a setback. Peter didn't want Sam to worry, and he wanted to call his sister to ask her to check on the dog. Harmless, right? Perhaps, but when you've broken the law and you've landed in jail, you're at the mercy of the officers. And the officers weren't concerned about the puppy's rough night.

The more they made him wait, the angrier Peter became because they had chosen not to do what he wanted. He could see them from his cell while they were watching the news and biding their time. Peter pressed the call button persistently and annoyingly, raising his own frustration and blood pressure, all to no avail. When someone finally came, the officer said, "We heard you say you were so angry."

"I'm very angry."

"We heard you say you were going to kill yourself because you're so mad."

"What? No, I never said that."

"Well, that's what I thought I heard you say, and we're going to need to protect you from yourself, sir."

When you're in jail, you're at the mercy of the officers. It's not wise to make them angry with your impatience.

They stripped off all his clothes, tied his naked body into a straitjacket from his neck to his knees, and locked him in solitary confinement for the night. Peter was in a small cell

LONGING

with a cold draft blowing across the cement floor he had to sleep on and a drain in the corner if he needed to use the bathroom. And so began the worst night of his life. Two Bible passages that he had memorized as a little boy came to mind: the Lord's Prayer and Psalm 23. He said them over and over to himself, waiting through a night of the deepest despair he had ever known.

Peter told me, "As for taking a man's dignity, that's as bad as it gets."

CHAPTER 1

The Wait You're In

Name the Longing

There have been seasons in my life when the waiting felt like it would be the end of me. When the waiting was a suffering all its own.

When my sons were five and three years old, their dad died very suddenly. Robb was sick for only twelve hours. The doctors thought he had the flu, and they sent us home from the ER with instructions to keep him hydrated on Gatorade and popsicles and settle in for the ten-to-fourteen days this bug would take to run its course. They said, “He won’t die from this, but he will feel like he’s going to.”

They were only partly right. He had the flu, but those

symptoms masked a septic infection in his bloodstream that attacked his heart and lungs. He died in our home the next morning.

I was with him in his final moments, and I tried to save his life with chest compressions and mouth-to-mouth resuscitation on our bedroom floor, with screaming pleas begging him to stay alive. But his spirit slipped right through my fingers before the paramedics could arrive. He went from very healthy and completely with us to very sick and suddenly gone. He died just two days before Christmas. In a single hour one morning, everything changed. I became a thirty-one-year-old widowed single mom to two little boys who were fatherless and not yet in kindergarten. It felt and truly was as horrible as it sounds.

When other families were wrapping gifts and hanging their stockings on Christmas Eve, we were meeting with the funeral director for the final arrangements. I used words like *eulogy* and *cremation*. On Christmas morning, we each opened gifts that Robb had chosen and prepared, wrapped just a few days before, when everything still felt right in the world. The boys opened a battalion of army soldiers and remote-control cars from their daddy. I opened a pair of red satin pajamas, wrapped, tagged, and perfect.

That week between Christmas and New Year's is a foggy blend of images in my mind. We hosted Robb's wake and visitation hours at the coffee shop that was our favorite spot for a Friday-night date, and we had a memorial service at our church, appropriately ending with the Ohio State fight song.

My children and I were surrounded and held in every single way. In the weeks to come, as relatives and friends went home and everyone else went back to their lives, a thick darkness settled over me. I couldn't know it then, but I had entered a winter that would last for two years. Everything looked familiar, but nothing felt right. Robb didn't come home from work anymore.

Tucker, only five years old, became fiercely independent and determined to need nobody. He spilled milk as he poured it into cups, determined to get better fast at this big-brother role. He had lost one parent overnight, and he became compulsively aware that if I should die just as quickly, he might need to take care of himself and his brother at any time. Tyler, my baby at just three years old, controlled his world by refusing to change his clothes. Because when you're three years old, what you're wearing is the only thing you're in charge of. So, his wardrobe consisted of his Thomas the Train jammies or his Lightning McQueen T-shirt. My children each had their way of making sense of a loss too deep to explain.

My world got very small. I slept for two-thirds of every day, but the traumatic details of Robb's final moments played on a loop in my mind each time I drifted into any sleep that could bring rest. I didn't know how to see the path to the next day. I measured every victory in meals and moments and baths and bedtime stories. I saved a few ounces of energy for the end of the day, just to do something silly to make my children laugh, so they could know their mommy was still there, behind those layers of sadness. I waited and waited and

waited for the depression to lift, for the sun to shine, for the winter to give way to spring.

In that devastating season of waiting, I learned that the unknown is the hardest part. I found myself wondering how long this would go on and just how much worse it all could get. But there was a strange comfort in the fact that, though my story was uniquely my own, I wasn't the only one who had walked this path of searing heartache. Others had felt invisible pain that seemed it could break them in two.

Certainly, when the apostle Paul wrote his letter to the church of Corinth, he was experiencing his own grief, uncertainty, and impatience, the sort of suffering ache we who have walked through dark seasons know all too well. I don't know the details of his pain, just like I don't know the excruciating nuances of yours. Still, his words comfort me. Because that's what the Bible does for me.

Paul wrote about his experience in Asia—

We were crushed and overwhelmed beyond our ability to endure, and we thought we would never live through it. In fact, we expected to die. But as a result, we stopped relying on ourselves and learned to rely only on God, who raises the dead.¹

Yes. That. Everything that. I have a sign in my stairwell that says, "You never know how strong you are until you have no other choice." I'd like a second sign to say, much

more importantly, "You never know what God can do until nobody else can do it."

. . .

Dear friend, as you are holding this book, please know this: You are very real to me. How I wish we could sit together over coffee in a couple of my favorite mugs. I'd ask you to tell me your story. What is happening in this season of your life? What are you waiting for?

Maybe you're single in a world that seems tailor-made for couples, and you're unspeakably tired of hearing the question "Why aren't you married yet?" at family reunions and Christmas dinners. The subtext of that question is actually "You look like a reasonably desirable person, so why hasn't someone snatched you up? You must have some hidden baggage or issues that only emerge when you're in a relationship long enough for those skeletons to step out. It's probably that. I mean, you look like someone who should be married, and yet you're not, so it's probably just that I can't see what's wrong with you." It's a terrible question without a real answer.

Maybe you're facing a health crisis. It's not going to kill you, but it's not going to go away either. You're going to have to live with it, and there seems to be nothing you can do to fix it. You can only manage the many symptoms.

Or maybe you're in a professional crisis. Maybe you planned to invest a lot of years in this line of work with this company, but now it seems you must make a change.

Someone has attacked your character with rumors about who you are and what you're about. Or there's a new boss in town and the new leadership structure is toxic and dangerous, and there seems to be nothing you can do about it. You thought there was a chance to advance, but as my friend Phil says, "The ladder you were climbing was leaning up against the wrong wall."

Maybe you're in a marriage that's not what it used to be, not what it's supposed to be, not what you want it to be. Neither of you wants a divorce, but the way you're living isn't working, and you feel like such a cliché. You didn't intend to become strangers sleeping in the same bed, but here you are. And there doesn't seem to be anything you can do to change it.

Perhaps you're in a parenting crisis. Maybe you have a child who's an absolute puzzle, or a child who's gone off the rails. You look at Facebook pictures of families with babies and small children, and you remember when you were in that life stage. You thought you could teach and train them enough in the early years to keep everything under control, but now you're wondering if any of your teaching landed anywhere at all. You miss the days when the hardest parenting challenges involved the cost of diapers and power struggles over fruit snacks.

Or maybe you're facing years of infertility. Your spouse doesn't want to adopt, and you can't afford fertility treatments; your options are few and your answers are fewer.

Maybe you're in a financial crisis. You're trying to "Dave

Ramsey” your way out of it, but every step in the right direction feels like a raindrop in the Grand Canyon. This isn’t going to change—or get better—for a long, long time.

When I’ve been in any of these situations, I’ve begun to wonder if God is even aware of my plight. Is he paying attention? Is he listening? And if he’s listening, why isn’t he answering me? Why isn’t he speaking? And most importantly, why isn’t he *doing*? I’ve been tempted to think either he must be unaware or he doesn’t care at all. I mean, let’s be honest. Everybody’s waiting for something. I must be pretty far down on his list.

I’m a firm believer in giving people the freedom to feel how they feel. Telling someone how to feel is like carrying a birthday cake into a gorilla cage: Everything is about to get messy, a fight will break out, and you’re just asking to get your nose bitten off. I’m not about any of that. I promise not to tell you how to feel while you’re waiting, and I won’t rush you to a place of patience either. That’s the whole thing about waiting: We can’t change it. And the helplessness is what makes it so miserable.

I’m inviting you to name what you’re waiting for, so we can keep it in front of us while we journey this path together. I’m in it with you. I’m so familiar with the ache of longing, and in this very moment, I’m still waiting on a good number of things. There’s strength in numbers, and you’re not alone. I believe we can do this. We can survive the wait with a handful of wildflowers named hope, courage, and laugh lines. Hear me on this: We don’t have to like it. But we can learn a whole

JUST. YOU. WAIT.

lot about who God is and what we're made of as we wade through the murky waters of waiting.

. . .

Somewhere, something incredible is waiting to be known.

SHARON BEGLEY