

WHAT
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WE FIND
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IN THE
☾
DARK

Loss, Hope, and God's Presence in Grief

AUBREY SAMPSON

When loss and disruption come our way, we need trusted guides to help us wander well through such difficult terrain. Aubrey Sampson is one of those people who thoughtfully pastors us in and through the change with grace, wisdom, and depth. What she uncovers and discovers in *What We Find in the Dark* will forever mark how you understand and handle grief. A very timely and necessary read!

STEVE CARTER, pastor and author of *Grieve, Breathe, Receive*

By inviting us into her own dark night of the soul, Aubrey offers hope and light for the seasons of grief, loss, doubt, and suffering that we all encounter. *What We Find in the Dark* provides language for what is often impossible to articulate. It is vulnerable, transparent, honest, and faith filled—a sacred gift.

CHRISTINE CAINE, founder of A21 and Propel Women

Aubrey has taken us behind doors we normally keep shut, giving us an intimate and raw descent into grief. It is a baptism into the depths of sorrow only to find that God is still there. And with God's presence come comfort and hope, but not the kinds that are cheap or trite. The Savior—weeping, wounded, and risen!—is here. It has been said that God does his best work in the dark: from the chaos before creation to the coldness of the grave before resurrection. So, it seems, does Aubrey. This book is a witness to a love that is stronger than death.

GLENN PACKIAM, lead pastor at Rockharbor Church, author of *The Resilient Pastor*, and coauthor of *The Intentional Year*

Aubrey Sampson's words are a loyal companion to anyone who either is in grief or must revisit grief. There is wisdom here that was hard won through real pain. If you are in a season where shallow advice and inspirational quotes are no longer cutting it, you will find this book a welcome salve to your soul. It is for those who need the words to name their tears and the hope of God's nearness in the dark.

FAITH EURY CHO, author of *Experiencing Friendship with God*

With heartfelt honesty, Aubrey Sampson offers palpable comfort to aching hearts overwhelmed by grief and sacred companionship for lonely sojourners navigating the obscurity of the dark. *What We Find in the Dark* radiates glimmers of hope, inviting us to seek, find, and be held by God in our darkest moments.

NATASHA SMITH, author of *Can You Just Sit with Me?*

Aubrey has already taught us how to grieve with God in her seminal work, *The Louder Song*. Now she shows us how to walk faithfully when God seems distant and unresponsive in our pain. From lament to steadfast resolve, Aubrey is not only a fellow traveler but also an experienced guide who will help you uncover God's unique plan for you in the middle of your dark night.

DAVEY BLACKBURN, author of *Nothing Is Wasted*, writer of the Pain to Purpose curriculum, cohost of *The Nothing Is Wasted Podcast*, and founder of Nothing Is Wasted Ministries

Friend, if you are drowning in the darkness of grief, you do not have to walk alone. Aubrey has been to the depths of hopelessness, and she will walk slowly with you through this valley. In these pages you will not feel pressured or pushed, but you may discover a God who sees you even in the dark and a story that can guide your search to solid ground.

CATHERINE MCNIEL, coauthor of *Mid-Faith Crisis*

Profoundly raw, deeply personal, beautifully pastoral, and theologically robust—*What We Find in the Dark* is a true gift to those navigating life's shadowed seasons. Aubrey Sampson writes with a poetic grace that meets us in our brokenness and gently guides us toward the God who sees in the dark. Through powerful liturgies, moving stories, and theological depth, she reminds us that even in our deepest losses, we are not abandoned. This book is a faithful companion for anyone seeking hope and comfort in times of grief and spiritual obscurity.

TARA BETH LEACH, pastor and author of *Emboldened*

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Published in alliance with Tyndale House Publishers

What We Find in the Dark: Loss, Hope, and God's Presence in Grief

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Contents

An Opening Confession: This Is Not What I Planned For 1

PART ONE **NIGHTFALL** 11

A Liturgy for What We Lose in the Dark

- 1 Enter the Dark: Understanding the Night You Find Yourself In 15
- 2 Twilight on the Horizon: As Loss Comes Close 27
- 3 The Obscurity of Dusk: When God Seems Hidden 33
- 4 The Dimly Lit Path: Persisting When You Can't See the Way Forward 45
- 5 Nighttime Losses: Surrendering to the God Who Holds Everything 53

PART TWO **MIDNIGHT** 61

A Liturgy for Darkness and Grief

- 6 The Longest Hours: Be Gentle with Yourself in Loss 63
- 7 Tossing and Turning: Wrestling with God When You Have No Strength 73
- 8 Shifting Shadows: Facing Spiritual Disillusionment 83
- 9 Holding On in the Dark: What Tethers Us to God at Midnight 91

- 10 A Strange New Orbit: Letting Go When Nothing Makes Sense *101*
- 11 The Still of the Night: How the Soul Expands in Grief *111*

PART THREE **NIGHT-LIGHTS** *121*

A Liturgy for What We Find in the Dark

- 12 Floating Lanterns: When You're Not Ready to Say Goodbye (or Hello) *123*
- 13 Northern Lights: Unexpected Finds in the Dark *129*
- 14 Illuminations: Stripping Away Pretense, Reclaiming Your Voice and Agency *137*
- 15 Satellites and Starlight: Waiting Patiently for the Lord *147*
- 16 Blue Hues: Jesus in the Dawning of Our Souls *157*

Reflections and Practices *167*

APPENDIX A What Is the Dark Night of the Soul? *177*

APPENDIX B Breadcrumbs of Hope *179*

APPENDIX C Spiritual Practices for Midnight *181*

Acknowledgments *187*

Notes *189*

AN OPENING CONFESSION

THIS IS NOT WHAT I PLANNED FOR



This is not the book I set out to write.

At the beginning, I thought it'd be something like *When You Think Your Life Will Go One Way but It Goes Another (Totally Opposite) Direction*. The writing process was going to be straightforward: researching and typing, mining my life experience, unearthing wisdom from experts, examining the Bible's words on the topic. And, of course, I'd look into an inevitable follow-up question or two: *When our dreams die, how do we live with the gut-wrenching disappointment?* And *Where is God in it all?*

The early threads of that book are still woven into these chapters. The fingerprints of the Aubrey who set out so assuredly to write it are still pressed indelibly throughout these pages. Yet, in some fragile poetic irony, just as this book was headed in one firm

direction, my life—and therefore these pages—unexpectedly went another.

If you read my book *Known*, you might recognize the name of my best friend of twenty-five years, Jenn Ohlinger. Jenn was my ride-or-die, my go-to person in crisis, my first call when anything good or hard happened, and the emergency contact on my kids' school forms, their guardian in my will. For a quarter of a century, Jenn and I stewarded ministries, marriages, miscarriages, and the raising of families. We shared inside jokes and side-eyed glances that would cause the other to immediately burst into uproarious laughter. We spoke or texted nearly every single day for over two decades. For all those years, we tended to all the momentous minutiae that add up to a deep soul friendship.

And then, at the end of 2022, we were forced to steward something new—a sudden goodbye. Jenn died on the winter solstice, the longest night of the year, after just a week on hospice, following her arduous two-year battle with breast cancer.

Just as suddenly, this book could no longer be a *what-happens-when-your-dreams-die* book. These pages, instead, became a journey of loss and fresh grief, a slog through the dark, an attempt to stay awake, a way to put one unsteady foot in front of the other. While writing these words, I have fought to be brave for myself and for my people. I have fought to remain present when I felt like I was evaporating.

And I have fought to stay connected to you.

It's easy to underestimate what loss does to the body and soul, the heaviness of grief, until you're in it. It's easy to feel utterly alone, like no one else in the world can understand the void, the wild exhaustion, the onslaught of complicated emotions and physiological reactions. Grief is harder than anyone

will tell you, acute and shocking and messy. You carry grief in your lungs, your limbs, your adrenal system. It makes you vomit and lose sleep.

Grief is also very difficult to find language for, to explain, because it can feel like so many jumbled, opposed, and poignant metaphors or events all at once. Grief is like jumping on a cheerless trampoline, a constant disorientation between adrenaline and gravity. Grief is an empty, dilapidating playground—a sad, stoic icon of lost memories and *what could have beens*. Grief is a firestorm, full of uncontrollable destruction and rage, and simultaneously a mudslide, sloppy, shocking, and unstoppable. Grief is a planet—vast, cold, and mysterious. And grief is somehow also a roly-poly pill bug, often unnoticed by others, armored and earthy.

But you don't know all that until you know it, and once you know it, you wonder if anyone else could possibly understand, since you can barely make sense of it yourself. You can barely identify yourself on the grief map, let alone find language to describe the terrain.

For weeks after Jenn died, I couldn't sleep. A good friend was nursing her newborn twins at the time, so she was often up in the same strange, wee hours. She invited me to text her at 1:00 a.m. or 3:00 a.m. or 5:00 a.m., and she would consistently reply with "Get up and write. You need to be writing."

So that's what I did. I wrote this book in the dark, both figuratively and factually. Through restless, wrestling nights, I tried to find language for the unspeakable, attempted to forge a path through the unknowable. I wrote while waiting for a word from God, who has felt so oddly distant from me this year, even while showing up in wild ways.

WHAT WE FIND IN THE DARK

Mostly, I wrote for you, so that even as you feel alone, you and I can be alone together.

I wrote these words from my deep abyss of grief because I could not stop thinking about all of us who lose what we love, who are bent over by the heft, the magnitude, of it. I wrote these words as a way to reach through the chasm and confusion so we can find each other, and in the finding, to offer *I know* and *I understand* and *I've got you*. I have felt the solemnity of this sacred task: to become your traveling companion through the dark; to help you encounter, as I have (though not without struggle), God's goodness where it seems like none could or should exist. This has been my undertaking, for me and for you: to find goodness, hope, and God's presence in freshest sorrow and darkest nights.

And as I wrote in the middle of the night, I came to view grief differently: as a paradoxical waking up. In grief, our eyes are blinking, adjusting—not to light but to *night*. In our losses, we are bidden awake to strange darkness and surprising gifts.

So many of us inherited a sort of sunny spirituality, the tendency to avoid darkness, or avoid what the darkness might teach us. But as Barbara Brown Taylor, author and spiritual director, writes,

The way most people talk about darkness, you would think that it came from a whole different deity, but no. To be human is to live by sunlight and moonlight, with anxiety and delight, admitting limits and transcending them, falling down and rising up. To want a life with only half of these things in it is to want half a life, shutting the other half away where it will not interfere with one's bright fantasies of the way things ought to be.¹

Did you know that there are at least 153 passages of Scripture about darkness? Yes, in many of them, the darkness is a bad, an evil, or a gloom that God has overcome; Jesus is the Light of the World, after all (John 8:12). Darkness is not dark to him, after all (Psalm 139:12).

But there are others—mysterious passages of Scripture, texts I was not formed in, did not memorize, texts I've never heard preached on—where darkness is a companion (Psalm 88:18), where darkness envelops God's throne (Psalm 97:2), where darkness is good (Genesis 1:18), and where darkness contains treasures (Isaiah 45:3, *esv*).

Maybe you find yourself in the dark right now—distressed, disappointed, and deeply confused. You don't see God's light overcoming the darkness, and you certainly aren't finding any treasures in it. You are just trying to survive. You are endeavoring to *not sink* in the dark waters of grief, while overwhelming waves of lost people, pathways, and pipe dreams crash over you. You're fighting fiercely to exist in your skin, to *not* disappear, to screw your faith to the sticking place, while at the same time you feel like you're barely inhabiting your own life, a two-dimensional portrayal of who you used to be.

I know how that feels, friend. You are not alone.

This book is an invitation from one nighttime traveler to another, an opportunity to walk side by side through the darkness, to honor our pain and loss and discover how God shows up in what feels like his absence. By creating space for the worst things we have ever been forced to hold, by forging the darkest paths we have ever tread, I believe we can—we *will*—find glimmers of goodness here.



Grief, and fresh grief in particular, is an uncharitable, unchartable path. It does not follow a pattern, arc, or tidy progression, and I refuse to be reductive or formulaic about pain. Still, I hope you'll allow me to join you as a fellow wanderer through grief's obscurity, one who has walked a piece of the path and discovered some of what is hidden in the landscape. Whether you are grieving the loss of your person, the end of a relationship, the death of a dream, or the vanishing of hope, I hope to offer a rhythm and relationship in our shared experiences of loss. Together we will journey through three occurrences of the dark night: its onset (nightfall), its darkest hour (midnight), and the daring moments of luminosity that emerge *only* as our eyes adjust to deep darkness (night-lights).

I'll do my best to offer us some mile markers along the dim path. If you are feeling a little lost in your dark night or on your grief journey, this book will help you locate yourself and show you an honest way forward through the dark.

We will begin by orienting ourselves to the dark night of the soul. Then we will spend some time in twilight, when we start to realize that we have no power to stop or control the darkness that is coming. Here there is still some light to be found, but we must be sober-minded about the coming night. Then we will move toward dusk, the start of night, when loss and pain become inevitable.

From there, we'll journey cautiously through the darkest part of grief and loss, midnight, where loneliness, heaviness, sleeplessness, and unadulterated sadness live. This is where the path of our journey is not as clear, and we might stumble a bit or lose our way momentarily. My prayer as you travel with me—especially if you find yourself in your own midnight of the soul—is that these chapters will bring you a sense of solidarity and solace, a safe place to bring your raw pain, your grim questions, and your own

grappling with God. Nothing you feel or think will surprise me because I have felt it and wrestled it to the ground, too, as you'll find while you read.

This is not a morning book or a sunrise book, so there is not much talk of daybreak in these pages. But even blackest midnight does not last forever. We will make our way, even if a bit wobblingly, to the blue hour—that time just before the gilded light of morning appears. There is hope, however fragile, however weary, in the whispers that dawn is coming.

As we travel through the night together, and as you find your way to the end of this book, it's unlikely that your grief will have gone anywhere. But you will find that you have changed because you have survived something. And nighttime survivors have a way of giving birth to new gifts of creativity, compassion, connection, empathy, meaning, real faith, deep love, healthy boundaries, and a gravitas about what matters in life—what some might call wisdom. You might even discover a miracle along the way: You are healing even as you are hurting.

If you are in the thick of fresh grief, feel free to give yourself permission to simply receive these words, to feel seen and not alone, rather than reflect on them or feel any pressure to manufacture something out of them. If you find yourself with a longing and renewed strength to step forward, either on your own or with a group, you'll find some reflections, considerations, and spiritual practices for the journey in the back of the book. I hope these will add meaning to your spiritual and emotional journey.

So here we go.

I am going to let you in on my process of grief, and fair warning: These pages are filled with a sometimes unrelenting heartache and a painfully honest brawl with God. But they are also filled

with my reach for hope and God's presence in absence. In my own darkness, I have found myself surprised by God's love, even when I couldn't feel him, sense him, or hear from him. I believe God longs to meet you in the same way.

In one of C. S. Lewis's earliest works, a fairly unsuccessful mythical poem called *Dymer*, Lewis writes about a man not unlike himself—a brave hero facing a monster. *Dymer*, as Lewis scholar David C. Downing explains, is filled with hints of a classically Lewisian suggestion: “that death may have the power to transform something loathsome into something beautiful.”²

As we walk together through unspeakable and unknowable things, I can tell you this: If you pay attention, if you wrestle with God, grief can become a garden. There is some goodness to find, though it may be hard to see in the haze of your heartache. Because of Jesus' death and resurrection, the power to transform something loathsome into something beautiful exists. This is who God is. This is what God's Spirit has always done. This is what Jesus will ever do.



A friend recently reminded me that light is never really absent. In the arc and turn of Earth, light is simply hidden. The sun is always somewhere, and night always, inextricably, moves toward dawn. Darkness isn't what defines night. The sun's rays are always there, just on the other side of shadow, just on the other side of the moon. As your eyes adjust to the night, as you wade through the dark and wait for daylight to return, may you remember this—where there is a dark night, there are also stars, blinking punctuation marks to light your way.

THIS IS NOT WHAT I PLANNED FOR

I want you to know that I do not take your pain lightly. I have poured and prayed over every sentence here, with one goal: that you will encounter God's love in the darkness. I will do my very best to help you find him here.

Aubrey

PART ONE

NIGHTFALL



*Earth was a soup of nothingness, a bottomless emptiness, an inky blackness.
God's Spirit brooded like a bird above the watery abyss.*

GENESIS 1:2, MSG

*Are your wonders known in the place of darkness,
or your righteous deeds in the land of oblivion?*

PSALM 88:12

A LITURGY FOR WHAT WE LOSE IN THE DARK

We begin with a list of lost things:

dreams

tokens

memories

relationships

hopes

a sure faith

These lost things are more than nouns.

*They are verbs and adjectives—telling stories, keeping secrets,
standing as witnesses*

to languishing time,

to eras that live and breathe within us.

And of course they do.

We always contain every season.

*But some of these seasons, some of these losses,
have left us fragile, fragmented.*

And now it is nightfall.

The time of leaning in closely.

The time of closing things down.

The time of whispered goodbyes.

The time of forlorn formlessness.

*As we face the coming darkness,
we lift our list of lost things to you, O God.*

The God Who Hangs the Moon.

The God Who Flicks On the Stars.

The God Who Sees in the Dark.

*Would you, God with Night Vision, scan the universe for our
missing matters?*

*Please find them, tend to them, and care for them,
as only you can.*

We trust that nothing is truly lost with you, in you.

*Our hearts are broken from longing for so many precious
lost things.*

Once, we were found, but now we are also lost.

*So would you, God of Lost Things, come find us
in the descending darkness?*



ENTER THE DARK

Understanding the Night You Find Yourself In



Someone once said that grief occurs anytime you wish something was more, better, or different. So, in its most basic and ubiquitous form, grief happens when life is not turning out how you expected. Grief isn't limited to loss, or even death. Grief happens anytime you find yourself holding tightly to the precious dust of prayers that never materialized, caring for the cinder of languishing hopes.

We are all tending to ashes of some kind.

My best friend, my ride-or-die of over twenty-five years, is dying of breast cancer. My faith tells me that God could stop it. But God is not stopping it. And since I do not have the power to stop it myself, there is an actual physical ache in my chest. I feel like I'm molting, melting, like my intestines and tendons and soul are spilling out of me. I regularly place my hand on my heart and

whisper to myself, “You are safe. You are contained. You are not splattering everywhere.”

God also seems distant from me in this season. I don’t know what God is doing. Why are God’s presence and power sometimes so evident, so palpable that even the most committed doubter couldn’t deny his miracle making, yet other times so abstruse, so *not there*? I’ll never understand. Theologians say that if I did understand, it wouldn’t be God I understood. God, in *being God*, is mysterious, inexplicable, beyond containing with our notions. There’s no explaining incomprehensibility, I guess.

So I am meeting with a new spiritual director, Ben, and I’m trying to find my bearings in all this uncertainty, in what is starting to feel like spiritual upheaval, spiritual unravel.

In one of our first sessions together, Ben guides me through an imaginative spiritual practice he calls “Jesus on the Bridge.” I feel dubious as I watch him walk across his office to a CD player (of all things), press an open button (of all things), and put in a CD (of all things). I move rapidly from dubious to cynical when *nature sounds* begin to play a bit too enthusiastically over the weary speaker system. I privately ask God to remove my cynicism. I want to enter this experience with an open heart.

I close my eyes, adjust myself on Ben’s couch, and place my two feet firmly on the carpet beneath me. I square my shoulders, put my hand over my heart, pull in a deep breath, then exhale my skepticism in order to *be here now*. Gratefully, this time I find the birdsong peaceful. The crunch of gravel relaxing. The sound of a rushing river centering. Soon, I am able to be present in this moment. But then Ben invites me to “sit with Jesus on a bridge over a river” in my imagination, and I startle, almost freezing at the invitation.

I don't know if you've walked through a spiritual exercise like this before, something intended to ignite your spiritual imagination. These practices can be transformational. The Spirit of God tends to show up with so much love in moments like these. But with my anticipatory grief over losing Jenn, and what feels like spiritual darkness crowding around me, this kind of ask is excruciating. Lately, I struggle anytime I am asked to "picture" Jesus. Other spiritual mentors have prompted me to imagine myself sitting on Jesus' lap or leaning against his frame in a field of wildflowers. I have friends who love imagining that they are sitting on a park bench with Jesus. I just can't do it. It's weird. It makes me cringe. There's some block there, some sort of wall that keeps me from whatever spiritual illumination is supposed to happen.

So today, when Ben asks me to picture Jesus on the bridge just sitting with me, having fun with me, and making me feel loved, I get frustrated. *This won't work*, I want to grind out. Instead, I fight back tears. I am bone-weary from asking God to show up, to hear me, to do something.

Have you felt this spiritual ache too? Maybe you didn't know what you were experiencing because it's been so confusing, so incomprehensible, so *different*. This season of darkness might even make it feel like you've been abandoned by God.

Maybe life has turned out differently than you imagined. Maybe someone spoke a prophecy over you that hasn't come true. Maybe you feel too broken to dream. Maybe you prayed and prayed but have found no answer, no solace. Maybe your faith is changing and that is terrifying. Maybe grief has stolen your joy. Maybe your losses are too much to bear. Maybe you are fatigued from asking God your questions.

This searing feeling of loss, this wondering where God is, and this exhaustion from begging him to show up time and time again with what feels like no response have a name—*the dark night of the soul*.



When our spiritual path suddenly darkens and our conflicting emotions battle for supremacy, finding language for the disorientation helps us plot our course. If we can make the tiniest semblance of sense in what feels senseless, then we can stretch our legs out in it, explore a bit. Like knowing your coordinates on a map, if you can locate yourself even when you feel lost, you can get your bearings.

And bearings are the difference between survival and overwhelm.

So what is the dark night of the soul?

I mentioned the phrase to a friend once, and he thought I was talking about Batman. “Not *that* Dark Knight,” I said, shaking my head and laughing him off.

Beyond the Caped Crusader, we’ve largely misunderstood the concept, or at least largely misused it, in our current vernacular. We’ve bucketed “the dark night” into a general category with sadness, depression, doubt, or spiritual dryness, which isn’t entirely inaccurate, but neither is it the whole picture.

The dark night is a season of spiritual *difficult to see*-ness. It’s an experience of God removing the “felt sense” of his presence from you—and doing so on purpose. The dark night is not something we choose. Rather, the dark night *descends*. Night *falls*.

The phrase *the dark night of the soul*, or *la noche oscura*, is credited to St. John of the Cross, a Spanish priest who was deeply influenced

by his spiritual mother and mentor, St. Teresa of Ávila. Teresa was a Carmelite prioress and reformer who affectionally referred to John as “half a friar” because he was so short—under five feet.¹ I picture him as a tiny Friar Tuck from Disney’s animated *Robin Hood*.

John and Teresa were wildly different, near opposites. Teresa was born into wealth in 1515 during the Spanish Inquisition and raised by a single dad after losing her mom at age twelve; John was born into poverty in 1542 and raised by a single mom after losing his dad at a young age. John was rigorous and highly educated, while Teresa, though educated at home, was deeply self-conscious about her lack of formal, theological education. Still, these two Catholic mystics connected through their deep passion about prayer and formed an incredible co-laboring partnership in ministry (much like Paul with Lydia, Priscilla, and Phoebe).

Teresa’s own dark-night journey included intense family conflict, acute self-doubt, severe chronic illness, and such a low sense of worth that she stopped praying for years, something she would come to regret for the rest of her life.² Yet, in the midst of her physical, emotional, and spiritual darkness, God drew Teresa into deeper intimacy with him and gave her more confidence in her life’s calling. As she witnessed corruption in the Catholic Church, she did not shut down or turn away: She chose to stay connected to the church and work for change. She founded several convents as part of the Carmelite order, a return to the older desert way of solitude, simplicity, and prayer—and a rejection of what she was seeing in the church around her. Many monasteries were also founded because of Teresa’s decades of reform.

St. John’s dark night came when, just a year after joining Teresa’s reforming work, he was abducted by an opposing Carmelite faction and kept as their prisoner. He was thrown into solitary

confinement, badly abused, never allowed to bathe or clean himself, and taken out only once a day on a lead.³ I once read that John was rarely fed, maybe being offered one sardine once a day. While imprisoned, John had a powerful encounter with God. This experience led him to write a poem, “The Spiritual Canticle,” and eventually another, “The Dark Night of the Soul.”

According to both John and Teresa, the dark night is something God does deliberately—and not only deliberately, but *lovingly*. The dark night is intended to bring us freedom from our false attachments and idols and deepen our intimacy with divine Love—to help us know our unshakable identity as the beloved⁴ while helping us better love others.

The dark night’s goal is all about that: love and loving.

To be honest, I haven’t internalized this yet, nor am I sure I believe it.

Why would the God you have communed with your entire life suddenly seem absent or distant in the most fragile of circumstances? What sort of loving God pulls his presence from you right when you need him? And how is that supposed to draw you closer? Isn’t that just a childish game of hide-and-seek?

Scripture promises that God neither leaves us nor forsakes us (Deuteronomy 31:6). So in the dark night, that must mean that God never *removes his actual presence*.

“The Dark Night of the Soul,” then, is better translated by tracing the etymology of a word in John’s Spanish title, “Noche oscura del alma”—“The *Obscure* Night of the Soul.” *Obscure* because during the dark night, the receiver can rarely decipher what God is doing; God’s plan and presence are hidden and out of view. (For a primer on the dark night, see appendix A, “What Is the Dark Night of the Soul?”)

If there is anything typical in a dark night of the soul, it is just that—the sense of nonsense, the *what-in-the-world-is-God-doing?* of it all. It is nearly impossible to ascertain what God is up to or determine where he is leading.

And since I cannot currently make sense of this season I am walking through, and because I have no idea how dark my night will grow, I am meeting with my spiritual director to find some modicum of understanding, to provide at least a glimpse of a path forward through the waning light.



Back in Ben's office, I am still upset, worn out from willing myself to "be with Jesus on the bridge." I don't know if Ben notices my anxiety or if this is part of the spiritual exercise's purpose. But he asks me, as I sit on this imaginary bridge, to "stand up and walk to a beach" in my imagination.

"Ask God to meet you there," he adds.

The music soundtrack shifts now. I stretch my legs and shift my body, trying to be present again. Soon I'm in an ocean scene by night. I hear the tide's inhale and exhale, a crackling bonfire. I am suddenly there, walking along the sandy shore.

And that is when a lion appears at my side.

This lion is alert, a protector. But also somehow warm and inviting, with big, golden paws: a wild, tangled mane; and a coat so warm and smooth I can almost feel it.

The lion's pace is slow, and I sense it telling me to go as slow as I need to. *I will keep pace with you.* This beast is not scary; it's just sort of *around. There. Here. Now.* Weaving in and out of my path on the sand as the stars shimmer above us—always keeping watch,

keeping time, keeping steady with me on the beach. Sometimes its large paws playfully pat at the ocean tide. Sometimes the lion plods deliberately behind me. All the while, I sense that patient, unbothered steadiness: *I can go as slow as you need me to.*

I understand that this is counterintuitive even as I experience it—after all, we should move at God’s pace, not the other way around, right? Isn’t that what faithful Christians do? And yet, somehow, I know this is simultaneously true: If God is willing to go as slow as we need to through the thick fog of night, that means we do not have to rush to solve it or emerge from it or even “win” it.

God is never in a hurry as we are hurried, because hurry is the opposite of love. Though I am in a rush to decipher the dark night’s mysteries, though I am desperate to time jump to ten years from now when this year is a distant memory and I’ve made sense of it and learned the lessons from it—

God is neither rushed nor delayed.

The dark night is slow work.

Ben interrupts my meandering thoughts. “Aubrey, if there is anything you want to say to God while you are on the beach, feel free to voice that aloud or say it silently in your mind.”

I choose the silent route. *Okay, Lion, I think to myself, or maybe I think these things toward God, hurl them near God, bleed them out in the direction of God. If you are keeping pace with me, I have some . . . thoughts.*

If you are keeping pace with me, if you are truly here, then why does it feel like you’re abandoning me in my darkest hour—right when I have needed your comfort and your peace the most? I am so angry at you. Am I repellent? Have I disappointed you? Have I done something wrong? Are you punishing me for something? Or am I delusional, and this is simply how it feels when life gets hard? And how long will this

distance, this silence, last? Are you even listening to me? This is too much, God. I am exhausted.

I pause my diatribe briefly to gather my thoughts and then press on. *My faith feels so frail, so small. Can this minuscule belief be enough for you? Because it doesn't feel enough for me.*

This spiritual practice may be inviting me to use my holy imagination, but we are never asked to playact with God. Faith never requires pretending. So I roll my ankles, stretch my neck, and pause before naming, before *admitting*, the last of my questions.

Is your arm so short that you cannot stop cancer?

Are you weak?

Are you even able?

Are my prayers just an afterthought to you? A joke?

Because I have been asking you to heal Jenn, and I have been asking you to show up with me, and your silence is callous.

I feel electric as I finally let my raw, red, inflamed laments unfurl. These are the real ones, the questions I am afraid of, the ones that have been thrumming within me for some time now, beating against the edges of my bones, hammering under the pores of my skin. Today, they have become a lit fuse racing toward me, ready to explode. My lament is a bid, a fight for my relationship with God. And I need him to answer, or I might not survive the dark night.

Still, with what little mustard seed I can muster, wrung out after this audacious questioning, I risk one more plea:

God, please. Please. Please. Please come be with me again. Please be who you say you are. Please keep loving me. Please don't leave me alone in this.

In your own dark night, you probably have some unspoken questions, the subterranean ones. You are not alone in that. It's not faithless to ask your cavernous questions. It's a bold act of worship because lament requires intimacy. There are exceptions, of course, but we don't often get meaningfully angry at or profoundly frustrated with people we care little to nothing about, right? Absent relationship, we are indifferent, or the anger is passing. If you've got some spitfire for Jesus, I say, set the night ablaze.



I am exhausted emotionally, ready to be done, just as Ben begins to wind down the exercise. The music from the CD shifts again, this time to the rushing sound of wind blowing. Ben asks me, "Is there anyplace else you'd like to go before we end this exercise?"

I inhale deeply, unclenching and stretching out my fingers. I've been holding them in fists and didn't even realize it. I allow myself this final moment and end atop a cliff, like a Jane Austenian heroine. The wind is blowing my long skirts and tangling my hair. It is drizzling, and I am looking out over the gray ocean. That ocean is a world, a realm, a veil, a cosmos. That ocean is the cloud of unknowing, where I currently exist. Jenn will soon be on the other side of that ocean. The lion is at the bottom of my cliff, and somehow the lion is also the ocean.

Ben finally turns off the CD, and my eyes are puffy from tears. He looks at me with concern, so I try to explain. I tell him about the lion, about our conversation, or rather, my word vomit *at* the lion. "I worry," I try to explain, "about how God will or won't respond to my questions. But I also worry that I can't envision Jesus with me. And even when I do, God appears in my

imagination as nothing more than a lion. Like I can't get beyond some childish, C. S. Lewisian version of God."

Ben, like the lion, is unrushed, and his pause is taxing to my impatient heart. He eventually replies softly, "Maybe. But what if this is how God is inviting you to see him? There's no shame in that, Aubrey. What is it about the lion that God wants you to notice?"

When I reflect on that question a few days later, I jot down some bullet notes in my journal to describe the lion in my vision:

- big paws—protection
- warm coat—safety and comfort
- wild mane—uncontrollable, undomesticated, untamed
- beating heart—alive and real
- king—predator and protector
- pacer—friend in the dark night

Later, much later, in a future spiritual-direction session, God will invite me to see Jesus as my older brother and my best friend. But for now, I am coming to terms with something: This lion is my dark-night companion. I have been looking for God, and I suppose God has revealed himself. Just not as I expected.

I don't know how dark your night will become, how loud the din of darkness will grow. But I know that God is not yanking you up some mechanical ladder of spiritual growth or rushing you past a finish line of pain. And I know you are not going backward. You are not moving too slow.

God is protective of and patient with you as you stop along the shore of confusing loss, kneel in the sand, and let your tears and groans keep stride with the broiling, roaring, dark ocean.