

FINDING
FAITH
in the
DARK

When *the* STORY of YOUR LIFE TAKES a TURN
YOU DIDN'T PLAN

LAURIE SHORT

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Finding Faith in the Dark

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*To Jere and Jordan Short,
God's great story for my life.
You mean more to me than you will ever know.*

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I.

FAITH IN THE DARK

*I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year,
"Give me a light so that I may tread safely into the
unknown!"*

*And he replied, "Go into the darkness and put your
hand into the hand of God.*

*That shall be to you better than a known light and
safer than a known way."*

— Minnie Louise Haskins, "The Gate of the Year"

WHERE YOU DO NOT WANT TO GO

In the first book of the Bible, we find a curious story. The patriarch Jacob enters into an all-night wrestling match with an angel of God, locks him in a hold, and then whispers, “I will not let you go unless you bless me” (Genesis 32:26).

The audaciousness of Jacob’s request is only surpassed by the surprise of what happens next. The angel does what Jacob asks. He reaches out and touches Jacob, the searing power of his finger leaving a limp in Jacob’s body and penetrating his soul.

Jacob wanted what only God could give—the really good things, the blessings. But Jacob’s blessing came with something he hadn’t asked for, and that limp was what changed him.

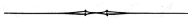
Our own experiences of wrestling with God rarely happen in one night, as it did for Jacob. Sometimes they happen over years—even decades—as we try to figure out what God is doing, why that blessing we were counting on isn’t coming the way we hoped. Maybe you’ve been there.

The husband or wife you prayed for never came.
The husband or wife you stayed faithful to had an affair.
The death of a spouse or child tore your heart.
A parent's abuse or addiction damaged your life.
A diagnosis took away your health and your future.

When these things happen, we are left wondering, "Where is that God who promises to answer our prayers if we delight in him? Why isn't my life turning out the way I hoped, let alone how I had planned?"

If you've ever been somewhere in life you don't want to be, this book is for you. And more than helping you find your way out of that place, my hope is that this book will help you find your way *in* that place, because I believe there is something that place has to give you. Hope springs from the fact that our story is never finished until we leave this earth. Something can always happen.

That's why you have to hold on. For God can show up where you least expect him to be.



In May 2012, Kim posted on her Facebook page that her Westmont sabbatical had officially begun. Her husband, Ken, took her on a seven-day cruise. They happily ate their way through Puerto Vallarta, and Kim thought her stomach pain was probably a reaction to the rich food and wobbly deck. When they got back, they found out it wasn't the food or the deck. Kim had Stage IV ovarian cancer.

Ken had made a list of things they wanted to do while

Kim was on sabbatical. Surgery and chemotherapy took their unwelcome place at the top of the list. Eventually, they became the list. Kim faced surgery like a champ, but the prospect of losing her thick blonde hair became the tipping point for her tears. Ken promised to spare no expense on a beautiful wig, and he held her as she cried. It was a symbol of a greater loss, as they said good-bye to the life they formerly knew. Cancer would be their new normal.

It seemed like an unfair turn of events for a couple who had only recently gotten back on their feet. Three and a half years earlier, their home burned to the ground in a devastating fire. They had lived in their new home for just two years. At the time of the fire, they were accompanying a group of students on a semester abroad in Europe, and when they received word that their home was gone, they had just finished a tour of Auschwitz. With images of the Nazi prison camp fresh in their minds, Ken remembers whispering to Kim, “We may not have our pictures, but we have the people in our pictures.” As Ken gazed at his bride before her first chemotherapy, he realized in a new way what a blessing that was.

Ken wished he could take his wife’s place as she bravely faced the violent nausea that accompanied each treatment. Holding her as she vomited, Ken thought back to the perspective he gained in Auschwitz. He decided that wherever this journey would take them, he would be grateful for every day they had.

Ken stood by Kim’s side as she went through twenty-four rounds of chemotherapy. He loved her when she was in pain. He loved her when she became bald. He loved her when she

couldn't leave her bed. Kim's Facebook postings went up and down with her chart, but her faith never waned. Her unyielding optimism cheered Ken on in their battle. In the middle of her postings, Kim wrote, "I am thankful to have a husband who shows me every day how much God loves me."

Though Ken prays every morning for his wife's health to be restored, they are both aware the cancer could take her. There are days when the pain is so immense that she almost wishes it would. Nevertheless they treasure each day and shoulder this trial with a mysterious sense that God has never been so close.

Ken says he has discovered things about his love for Kim that he never would have known had it not been for the cancer. And for that, he is grateful. Ken and Kim have gone where they didn't want to go. But it is evident that God is with them.



When Marla married a youth pastor, she had many visions for how her life would unfold. Becoming a single mother was not one of them. Her husband had proposed by taking her up in a plane, and as they looked down, he pointed to a marching band that had spelled out the words "Will you marry me?" After he instructed her to read the words out loud, he was the one who said yes.

His charisma had followed him throughout his life, and he seemed poised for a long and successful ministry career. Because Marla had a deep desire to serve God, she was thrilled to be his teammate.

In the months that followed her storybook wedding, a young woman came forward who had been in her husband's youth group. Apparently there had been an "incident." Unsure what to believe, the church came to its youth pastor's defense. It wasn't until three other women came forward that the truth of what had happened started to become clear.

As the story broke, Marla saw her life crashing down in front of her. She thought she had married a pastor. Instead she had married a sex abuser.

When her husband was let go from his position and told to enter rehabilitation, he was remorseful and heartbroken. Bravely, Marla stayed with him. For one year, she lived with him in an apartment complex, complying with the treatment of daily therapy sessions and processing the reality that ministry was no longer an option for their future. Grace surprised her when, after the year had passed, they received a call from a church three states away. This church had known both of them for many years and was aware of the delicate journey they'd been on. The church's leaders were willing to give Marla's husband another chance if he was open to serve in a different capacity under intense accountability. As Marla moved away from family and friends, she thanked God that they had been given a fresh start.

Months passed, and they started settling in, meeting new friends and enjoying life in their new community. As things stabilized, Marla was thrilled to discover she was pregnant. Three weeks after Marla gave birth to their baby boy, her husband came home with an empty look on his face.

"Well, you might as well know it's happened again," he

said in a voice just above a whisper. He took the blanket off their bed and slept on the couch.

As those dreaded words replayed over and over in her mind, Marla lay paralyzed in the silence. A strange mixture of guilt, remorse, and heartbreak washed over her. The following week, she took their baby, got on a plane, and went home to her family.

Two years later, Marla's marriage ended with a signature.

After the birth of her child and the breakup of her marriage, Marla was offered a youth ministry position at a church just a few hours away from where her ex-husband had served. Amazingly, she became a healing agent for the women who had been victims of his illness. In a stroke of painful grace, Marla became the youth pastor she originally thought she had married.

Ten years later, Marla was courted by a thirty-nine-year-old Christian man who had never married and whose sights were set only on her. It took her three years to open her wounded heart. When she and her teenage son finally stood next to her patient suitor at the altar, those of us who witnessed their marriage saw the longevity of faithfulness displayed.

Marla had gone where she didn't want to go. But God was with her.



"I've been called to serve in Iraq." It was 2003, and Lisa's fiancé's words fell on her like a dark cloud.

"But you're a reservist," she replied. "I don't understand. Can't you tell them you can't go?"

Lisa thought of spouses who were hearing the very same words. All over the country, men and women were trying to get their heads and hearts around the news that would alter their families' lives. She was only engaged to a Marine; there were spouses and children who were much more deeply affected by this news. Yet she still couldn't help but feel her own pain.

Lisa was forty-three years old, already past the age of marriage by anyone's standards. She had faithfully prayed for a husband for over twenty years. And then, Lisa met Ryan.

Ryan and Lisa became engaged four months after they met. Ultimately they came to the conclusion that planning a wedding should be secondary to planning a life, and that they needed more time. Their first wedding date was postponed.

After a couple of months and a few therapist bills, they finally set their second date. Ryan and Lisa had to mesh two different personalities, two kids, and an ex-wife, but they were both still on board for a wedding. Lisa had two bridal showers, ordered her bridesmaid dresses, and decided on the most beautiful wedding dress she had ever seen. She hung it in her mom's closet. Now, with the news of Ryan's deployment, it would hang there a lot longer.

In the weeks preceding the deployment, something else disturbed Lisa's thoughts. She thought Ryan's ex-wife was having second thoughts about their divorce. Lisa consoled herself that Ryan would tell her if anything had changed.

Finally the day arrived for Ryan to be deployed. They all arrived at Camp Pendleton—Ryan, his ex-wife and two kids, and Lisa. Together they waved good-bye, looking like a progressive Hallmark card.

During the first few months of his deployment, her communication with Ryan was pretty steady, but eventually the letters and phone calls tapered off. A military chaplain comforted Lisa by saying Ryan was probably in a place where he couldn't deal too much with life at home. If she loved him, she would wait.

She did. And in the meantime, she turned forty-four.

Nine months later, two days after he returned, they held hands and sat through many pregnant pauses. Then he spoke. "I still love you."

Lisa's heart jumped a little, with a slight twinge of hope that it had all been just a bad dream. "I think I might love you too. Do you still want to get married?"

He paused for a minute, then said, "No." Months later, Lisa found out that Ryan actually *did* want to get married—just not to her. Ryan remarried his ex-wife the year after he returned.

The reason I know this story is because the woman was not named Lisa. It was Laurie. It was me.

*When we give up on
our story before God
has finished writing it,
we miss out on what
our story has to give us.
Sadder still, we miss out
on what our story
can become.*

In the months (and years) that followed my broken engagement, the loss of my dream led to a crossroad of whether or not I would hold on to my faith. In the darkness of disappointment, I struggled. But ultimately I decided to trust—and that choice became the impetus for this book.

That choice also paved the way for the events of my life unfolding in the

miraculous way they did. You'll hear later about a new man who eventually changed my name and my life, but at this juncture, let me say this much about story and hope: When we give up on our story before God has finished writing it, we miss out on what our story has to give us. Sadder still, we miss out on what our story can become.



In John 21, Jesus is talking to Peter, one of his disciples, when suddenly the conversation takes a turn. He says to Peter, “When you were younger you . . . went where you wanted; but when you are old . . . someone else will . . . lead you where you do not want to go” (verse 18).

It’s a verse you never really notice until the day you are led there too.

Stories of pain vary in their degree, but at some point they find their way to the same place: *Darkness*. These are some of the words that propel us to that place:

“We found something on your tests.”

“We are letting you go.”

“I want a divorce.”

“I can’t marry you anymore.”

These phrases descend on us like unwelcome visitors, and we long to send them away. Instead they beckon us to follow, and we don’t get to choose whether or not we go. There is evidence, however, that we don’t go there alone—and our response to where we are led can make a difference in how our story unfolds.