

The Long Awakening

a memoir

by
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For Caroline Aileen

I

I DO NOT REMEMBER the day, the moment, I first remembered who I was or what was my life.

Before I was pulled back from the deep of a forty-seven-day sleep, before I understood what had happened while I slept or that I had slept at all, before the moment I saw his face leaning close to mine and before the long journey after my waking when I lost my way and myself, I knew where, who, I was. Other things, however, take a season to know.

On a crisp fall day in 2002 the whiteboard on the wall to the left of the sliding glass doors reads “Today is October 15th. Your nurse is Marsha,” written with the hasty scrawl of a busy ICU nurse, but I am oblivious.

“Honey?” he says. “Can you hear me?”

Do I hear him? Or am I dreaming his voice?

I don’t know what’s real or what’s not. I’m lying in the black sense-deprived place of preconsciousness, the tiny space between dreaming and waking. But I don’t leave. I linger.

I hear muffled sounds, voices, then they fade away into a faint ringing sound that rises like bubbles hitting eardrums as you sink below the surface; I am underwater, floating in the sea of alter-consciousness, bobbing in preawareness, an incorporeal, matter-less, drifting existence.

Days, weeks later I will remember the sunny day when I was sixteen at summer camp in Texas floating down the Alto Frio river. At a sharp bend the flowing water hit a cement embankment. I floated downstream toward it and saw my fellow campers sitting on the sidewalk a few feet above the water's surface. As I reached the wall, before I could grab the edge and hoist myself up, the undercurrent grabbed me, pushed me under. I could see the obscure image of my friends above. Quit fighting, I thought. Let the river sweep me downstream. I'll pop up if I don't fight. I surrendered to the water until my lungs ached. I might die, I thought.

I kick, reach up once more, then a hand reaches into the water, grasps mine, pulls me up. It's unforgettable to see the surface from underwater, the dark below you, light filtering above, trapped in between, floating—don't fight it—then longing to break the surface and breathe, out of the water into life. Like the Alto Frio, like a baby, like a coma, like the watery edges of dreams. On this 2002 autumn day I don't resist. Don't fight it. Until I hear a faraway deep-timbered voice, strong and soft, as familiar to me as my own. A voice that is warmth, a hundred summer days, and I am winter. I am drawn, pulled, to the warmth. Rescued from the depth.

It is this voice that pierces the edges of my waking.

"Honey, can you hear me?" Tim says with an urgency I don't understand, a near excitement. I do. Of course I can hear you, I think. Why wouldn't I?

Then I see him, this man I married, this man I love, moving toward me and bending close, his square jaw, his blue-green eyes, soft, coming into focus. My fingertips inch across wrinkled white sheets, then touch cold metal holding me in bed while wisps of cool air swirl around my neck, foreign and out of place, and a rhythmic mechanical sound whooshes in, out, in, out, inhale, exhale, amidst the smell of plastic and antiseptic.

"Hi, honey!" he says and strokes my hair, eyes locked on mine with a peculiar look on his face, intent, unusual, an expression that looks very much like . . . what? Like . . . devotion. Like the

way he'd looked down at me the night we'd said goodbye after our wedding rehearsal dinner. Devotion that says delight and love and joy without a word. It startles me.

It's the kind of look you see in the movies when the hero locks eyes with the heroine from across the room, strides toward her, drawn like a magnet. Before the movie kiss, before the embrace or the passion or declarations of love, the guy gazes at the girl. You sit in the theater putting one kernel of popcorn after another in your mouth until that look and you stop, kernel midair. In your real married life amidst kids and a mortgage and chicken casserole and weed mitigation, you latch on to date night and laugh, make love often enough, and you live your big beautiful ordinary life where in between and after the fights that are also part of your ordinary wonderful life, you feel love like you never imagined at twenty-two or twenty-four. But what's not there, what you've stopped expecting, is "that look" and when you see it onscreen it catches you by surprise and you sort of soundlessly catch your breath.

I look at him now as I wake up. He is gazing at me with that look, with tender eyes and the softest smile, like he hasn't seen me in a million years.

The soft-focus image of him clears as he bends his 6'4" frame down until his face is inches from mine. He's wearing a white buttoned-down shirt. I love that shirt. I love that smell.

"Honey, you can hear me?"

Of course I can hear you. You've woken me up. I nod, waking like it's any other morning in the world, opening my eyes from last night's sleep.

"Don't try to talk," he says. "You're on a ventilator, it's helping you breathe."

I nod in understanding. OK, I have a trach. I absorb this with a matter-of-fact detachment like he'd just told me that it was supposed to be sunny outside today, but instead it was raining, and wasn't that something, to which I'd reply, well, no, it's really not something, it's just rain. That's the way it is. Get out your umbrella, it's raining, how about that, and by the way what's

for lunch? I have a trach. I can't talk. A little trach, a little rain. There you have it.

"Honey, do you know where you are? You're in the hospital." I'm in the hospital. A little rain.

"Honey . . . you've been here forty-seven days."

It will be weeks until I begin to hear the one thing that had been worse for him than watching the ventilator sucking air out and pumping it back in through the hole in my neck, and the chest tubes protruding from each side of my torso, and the gastric tube entering my stomach with nutrition, weeks until I hear the fear he'd been living with for almost two months. The doctors had warned him. Most likely, they'd said, the MRI looks questionable, bad, they'd said; the near bleed out during the birth and consequent oxygen deprivation was a major brain assault, they'd said, and he'd seen it. The signs and responses of a lost woman trapped in her body, a catastrophe that had pushed Tim to the brink of his beliefs, where my life, his life, hung in the balance.

Forty-seven days. Immediately I roll my eyes.

Today is October 15th. Your nurse is Marsha. He sees nothing but my eye roll and in that instant, he knows. He knows in the inexplicable way longtime married couples have of being able to read each other, knowing what the other's about to say, and he knows now that my eye roll means only one thing—"What a week I'm having!" An eye roll at bleak news was our black humor communicated wordlessly over many years, taken from an old Eugene Levy movie where a week of unfortunate events ends with a jab to the thigh of a Novocain hypodermic and he'd walked away dragging a dead leg saying, "What a week I'm having." Tim and I would eye roll at each other at traffic tickets and funeral preparations, a multipurpose silent communication where black humor lets you take the next step.

He sees my eye roll and smiles, a wave of relief washing over his face in an instant. He knows that I'm in there. There will be cause to doubt later, but for now, this moment, he knows. And that is enough to carry him through what lies ahead.

“Honey, we’re going to move you to a different hospital today,” he says.

“Where?” I mouth.

“To Swedish Medical Center,” he says.

“Why?” I ask.

He hesitates. “Because we think they can take better care of you there.” That’s all he says. He does not explain it’s a Level 1 trauma center, or that Swedish is connected to Craig Hospital, the hospital in Denver that treated Superman, the actor Christopher Reeves, the hospital renowned for the neurorehabilitation of traumatic brain injury patients.

He takes my hand looking like someone concerned trying very hard not to look concerned. This simple exchange between us will come back to him over and over to comfort him in the coming days and he will remember he had told me a fact and I had responded with a question. Asking questions is what I do, what I did, what had been my stock-in-trade as a journalist, and just now, hours or so out of a coma, I was asking questions, but more importantly, my question to his statement was an appropriate response. I was tracking with him. For now.

My mind hears him and I absorb this news believing it’s true and believing it is not so. I’ve been here forty-seven days and you are perfectly right and isn’t that something, what a week I’m having . . . I really just went to sleep last night.

His caress on my arm and the look in his eyes engulf me.

“Lin, do you remember that you had a baby?” he asks.

The question hangs in the air, heavy, sodden.

A baby. Do I remember that I had a baby? Tick, tick, tick, the gears in my mind rev for a second, two, three, and I ponder this. Did I have a baby?

Was this a dream? In dreams we are not contained by time or space or physics or logic. You are there one minute talking to your pharmacist and in the next instant you are sitting at a sunny piazza, sipping cappuccino with your best friend, commenting how wonderful it is that you are both in Italy, and then you remember that you’ve left your child at home and, boom,

you are at her side without the hassle of airport security, lines, or all that tedious time waiting at gate 43. You have a thought or an experience and then suddenly you are having another and no sense of time passes in between. Bits of dreams, good ones, and single moments in an ordinary day, are like movie trailers with the best parts, the prettiest parts, edited together. We awaken and wonder if this was real, then we wonder what it meant or if it meant anything at all.

I lie in the bed with the metal railings and white wrinkly sheets and the nurse call button I'm unable to press, and roll the word "coma" around my mind like a child. Where am I again? What's happened to me? Who am I?

I look at Tim and see Brent Kinman, our friend and pastor, standing next to him. I notice his blue cap with white letters that pops with color in this white world, and his smile, both soft and intense, like he's seeing something he can't quite believe.

"Tim," he says, "why don't you tell her her story?"

Tim leans over the stainless steel railing of the bed on the second floor in the ICU and bends close. His eyes smile and his brow furrows.

Did I? Did I remember I had a baby?

2

I'D LAIN IN THE DEEP, within the mystery of consciousness, a place of nothingness, of dreams, dreams, dreams, a place without time until I felt and heard those hundred summer days.

Weeks later I will remember another voice, different from the warmth that had penetrated my darkness with startling clarity.

"Mommy!" I heard with the muffled sound one hears when floating near the surface of a lake, water against eardrums; I heard her without seeing her and blurred images come and go, but the voice rang true, high-pitched, joyful. My child. She's excited. Calling me.

There were no thoughts of, Oh, I've got to sit up and talk to her. What is she doing? How is she? No thoughts of, Oh, it's Alli, my youngest child, my nine-year-old; I'm so glad she's here.

Just My Child. Excited. Calling me. Her voice, crystal and steel, sank into the world I was in from the world above me just out of my reach, a world I wanted.

"Mommy! Hi, Mommy!"

"Alli," Tim said. "Go get Mommy's glasses."

I heard her footsteps running out the door. Then more darkness, sleep, until Tim put my glasses on my face.

"Here. Is that better? Can you see now?" I focused hard and

saw his face and her chestnut hair bobbing up and down and I nod, worlds touching until sleep takes me again.

Today is October 15th. Your nurse is Marsha. Whoosh, whoosh, whoosh. Think. Think. Tim's waiting for an answer. Do I remember?

Yes. I had a baby last night. I did.

A little girl. And I got to hold her.

Five minutes. Just five minutes.

I nod to Tim. Yes, I remember I had a baby. Relief washes over his face and he smiles and looks like he might cry. Why, why did he look like that?

There had been a decade between our youngest child and this one, and she'd been no surprise. Choosing to have this baby at forty, nine years after our fourth child's birth, was an enigma. I'd worked for years reporting and writing, story after story. This, I'd think while working on a piece, is my little place in the world. I loved being a journalist, and I also loved being a mother. A few months before this pregnancy I'd read a *Wall Street Journal* article about a trend of growing numbers of women wanting a baby for their fortieth birthday for many different reasons, but lots of people hear about a woman having a midlife "caboose" and figure you have a new husband, you had an "oops," or you were crazy. Many decisions in life are made for multiple reasons and sometimes why we do what we do isn't completely understood, even to ourselves, maybe especially to ourselves. Radical or not, Tim and I sensed our family was supposed to be one person bigger.

When I first held her in my arms I'd leaned my cheek on her pink-and-blue-striped stocking cap and cradled her chest and chin in my hand.

"Smile, hon," Tim had said. Snap. "That was a good one." He'd captured the first minutes of our acquaintance. I was con-

tent to hold her swaddled in her receiving blanket, my hand on her tiny round rump, feeling her seven and something pounds. There would be time later for the unwrapping, the inspection of newborn fingers and toes and the small of her back. Time later.

Five minutes. Just five minutes.

Velvety baby cheek on my chest, the feel of those five minutes, is what I remembered later, when I first remembered her, what I remember still.

The memory of the searing pain of a uterine rupture has stayed with me, an amber molten steel rod lodged in my abdomen. When they'd wheeled me out of the birthing room into the corridor for emergency surgery, I'd looked up at the nurses and anesthesiologist injecting Diprivan into my IV, he on one side of the gurney, nurses on the other, and said, "Please take care of me. I have five children now," then the sedative surged. Darkness began. How could I know, how could I possibly know those were my last spoken words for almost three months? But then life doesn't seem to give us advance warning of abrupt turns.

Please take care of me. Five children.

Those hundred summer days to my winter draws me, pulls me with the sense of his presence first, then like tuning in a barely audible radio station, finding it and turning up the volume, I hear him.

The voices, mine, then his, August 30th and October 15th, are back-to-back audio cuts seamlessly edited together with time in the middle erased.

Please take care of me. I have five children now.

A hundred summer days.

Honey, can you hear me?

The cool air encircles my neck in time to the whoosh, whoosh, whoosh of the machine next to me. Today is October 15th. Your nurse is Marsha. If I've been here forty-seven days, what about

my baby? Is she . . . dead? A chill shivers through me. The heart of a mother beats for her child until it beats no more. “Is she OK?” I mouth.

“Yes! She’s fine,” he says, quick to relieve me. “She’s beautiful and healthy. Jacquelyn’s bringing her up in a little while, they’re on their way.” He tells me I’ve been in a medically induced coma to allow my body, brain, and lungs time to heal, that’s why I’ve been here forty-seven days.

“Honey, after she was born you had two emergency surgeries that night and they had to do a hysterectomy. I’m so sorry.” He looks at me, sadness in his eyes, like he expects me to burst into tears at the news. Why does this matter? Uterus in, uterus out. A little rain. Get out your umbrella. I had no use for that body part anymore. Should I be upset about this? Weeks later a nurse will come in and ask, “Was the hysterectomy done abdominally?” Hmmm. I lift the covers and look at my stomach. No, I look up at her and shake my head. I hadn’t had an abdominal incision. However I discover later that I had; I’d slept so long that by the time I’d awakened and looked, my abdominal incision had healed.

Exerted and medicated I drift off and awaken again, the morning’s clarity fogged, and am mystified by a room full of people. It’s a party.

Why am I at a party in my pajamas? I blink. My children are there, my stepsister Donna, my best friend Kathy, Tim, and nurses, all milling about talking with each other, smiling, smiling, laughing, about . . . something I should know. I remember I can’t speak so I don’t even try to communicate that I’m sorry, but I’m not sure why you’re all here.

Kathy walks over to me looking like she won the lottery and she holds Caroline up to me. I shrug. How can she be mine? How can that baby be mine? She is, but how? I just had a baby and she is too big to be mine.

Again I sleep. I wake and Tim and I are now alone. If this direct air-conditioning vent blowing on my neck would stop, I’ll get up. Yes, I’m going to get up. Drugs, coma, forty-seven days. OK. I’m just going to get up now. I move, but go nowhere.

He has so many questions. How do I feel? Do I hurt? Can he get me anything? Do I understand what he's told me? What am I trying to say to him? He leans close and I smell his scent of starched cotton and familiar flesh that is distinctly him, that I love, and I try hard to form the words clearly so he can read my lips. How did this happen? Why did this happen? What is happening today? I can't make him understand my questions. His eyes narrow, he purses his lips, leans even closer, looking only at my mouth. He starts to answer. No, that isn't the question. I shake my head and try again. Hit. I nod. Miss. And so it goes until I shake my head and close my eyes.

Where had I been? I'd been elsewhere and then I was found. As so often happens, a moment, or a series of moments, the bat of an eye instantly changes everything, takes us somewhere we don't want to go and leaves us some place other, a place where our life is shoved into some foreign shape, a place where love goes missing, its meaning eludes, and we are a self gone missing, an identity lost. A place where we don't even recognize who we are.

I am desperate to become un-lost, to find all that's missing.

The fog returns. We wait for the ambulance, and wait and wait and I am like a little girl with her suitcase packed and waiting by the door, waiting for the signal that it's time to actually leave for Grandma's or vacation or somewhere that is safe and fun and better than here, waiting for the all clear that her suitcase can be put in the trunk and she can begin traveling, anticipation becoming action. We wait for hours. Then finally two men in blue come into my room, nurses move me to a portable ventilator. Clank, they check that the metal rails on the bed, which have been constantly up, are secure. Chest tubes, IV tubes, catheter tubes, ventilator tubes, feeding tubes are all checked and rechecked and draped over me, carefully organizing the spaghetti of life support. Then we are moving.

"I'm right here, honey. I'm going with you," he says, which we've been over. A couple of times.

“You’re coming?” I’d asked earlier.

“Oh yeah. They should be here soon.”

“When?”

“They say it’ll be any minute.”

“You’re coming?”

He reassures me again, and now that my bed was moving I ask again. Same answer.

“I’m right behind you,” he says. The bed moves through the door into the corridor, Tim follows and I feel thrilled and scared and have no idea why except that it is time to put my suitcase in the trunk.

I’m excited, I’m traveling, and my heart pounds. I think it very odd and comforting that they have put me in the back of a station wagon instead of an ambulance. The double doors in the back are open and I’ve been put in headfirst, feet near the doors, which is so thoughtful of them because I can see out the back window at all the places we’ve just been, like I did when I was a kid sitting on the rear-facing seat of our old blue Ford station wagon. Tim stands in the open back doors, waiting, talking to me, talking to the nurse.

Get in, I think. There’s plenty of room. That nurse will move and you can sit right next to me. Turn around and face the back like me and this will be kind of fun, we can see out the back together. He talks to the nurse. My heart is all skittery. Travel is exciting. I think I might be scared, but I’m not sure. No, I am scared. Pretty sure of it. And I’m excited. Little bit scared, lot excited. Then more scared. But why? If Tim would only get in the back of this station wagon we could get going. Get in already. We are not moving. The nurse is taking my vitals, heart rate, blood pressure. The nurse seems to be the one holding up the show and I begin to wonder if the driver’s getting irritated yet sitting all at the ready behind the wheel. Why won’t Tim get in the car?

“Honey, we need you to calm down,” he says, leaning into the back, patting my legs. The nurse is at my side near my head and she seems so busy. How strange that I am angled in the back of

this station wagon. How did they do that with the seats? Our station wagon when I was a kid had that old bench seat facing the rear. Some had those seats on either side, didn't they? So I'm not quite sure how I am in here at an angle, looking out the back, head near the car's driver side, feet near the passenger side.

"Can you calm down, Lindsey?" the nurse says with warmth and firmness, not a question at all. Tim still doesn't get in and I feel like tapping my foot, being all at the ready, the driver and me.

"Lin, I know you're scared, but try to . . ."

My heart is pounding now, indefinable distress flows through me. I will be fine if we would just start the car, get going.

"Her heart's racing," I hear the nurse tell Tim. You know things are off when people start talking about you in third person. I am getting tired, and irritated, and agitated, and pound, pound, pound, my heartbeats speed up again until I can feel them in my temples, vibrating my chest. Fear spreads through me, like sudden hot rain.

"Her heart rate is 152," the nurse tells Tim. Third person again.

"Can I ride with her?" he asks the nurse.

"Not now," she answers.

"OK, I'll follow you. I'm in that gray Range Rover."

They talk to each other in hurried, urgent tones. . . . just follow . . . leaving now . . . her heart . . . have to give her . . .

"Honey!" he shouts and I jerk my eyes open, the slate edges of all that's around me receding and the golden-red trees and Tim's white shirt against the aquamarine sky, the gray panels of the inside of the station wagon, come back into focus and I see his face, his blue-green eyes, looking at me and I lock onto them.

"I can't ride with you," he says, "but I'm going to be right behind you. I'll follow you all the way and I'll be there when you get out. Can you calm down for me? They need to give you something to help you . . . some medicine . . . got to slow down your heart . . ."

"Lin!"

I open my eyes, and concentrate on slowing my heart and

willing my veins to push out the sedative and the fear. I'm not going back there, that place of other I've just left. Fight. Rise above this.

I look at him and mouth, "I'm scared."

"I know, honey. I know," he says leaning in enough to touch my hand. "I'll see you there," he says as the nurse injects liquid stillness into my IV.

Why won't they let him come with me? Why am I afraid? I want to just ride with him. Maybe they'll let me do that. I like his car. We can move my suitcase.

"I love you," he says. The double doors close and I see his face through the window until we drive away and I see nothing but sky, then nothing at all. He is gone and I am gone.

On the other side of those doors Tim looks at me through the glass until the ambulance pulls away and he turns walking fast over fallen leaves as he hurries to his car. He follows the ambulance questioning if he made the right decision to move me to the other hospital, terrified by my deteriorating vital signs. What if I've killed her? he wonders. This was the second time that he'd agonized that his decision would cause my death. Who could imagine that one could ever wonder that about their loved one? But August 30th had changed everything.

It had been the day our baby had come into the world and I had left, a day that had begun so normally and ended so utterly not, a day that had begun all smiles and excitement and anticipation and joy and ended with running and panic and blood and tears.