

One

FEAR OF FATHER

Eleven weeks pregnant. I made my way to the depressing second-level section of the law library. An Ozark winter had set in, and I forfeited battling the cold by wearing a thin zip-up sweater. I couldn't see the value in hauling around my warmer coat all day, to wear it only for the four-minute hike from my parking spot to the library door. Besides, denying my own desires was part of the gig. I reminded myself that I was going to be studying all day; warmth could take a backseat. With a slight chattering of teeth, I spread the books onto the table. I was determined to be focused.

For me, the first semester of law school had produced more time worrying about finals than actually doing anything school-related. The final grade in each class came down to one test at the end of the year. This struck me as a cruel way to structure things. I pictured myself letting my wife know that I had failed at law school and was fresh out of ideas for our future.

Of course, if I flunked out she wouldn't care. Without missing a beat, Ginny would assure me that the school had missed out on a great thing and that the teacher who failed me must have had a pathetic upbringing that yielded intimidation and insecurity upon being confronted with obvious signs of intelligence.

"Yep, they're gonna regret that one," she would say.

Were she the type to care about such things as law school success, she would have been long gone. The Lord knows I had given her ample ammunition in recent months to forego the good-wife role and tell me just to get a job. In six months she had smiled through two moves, and now I had dropped us squarely into her nightmare—Fayetteville, Arkansas.

Having grown up in a farming community of five thousand in the Louisiana delta, she had already made the decision to spend the rest of her years exploring a life not found in small towns. She bit her faithful lip, but we both knew she preferred cities—the bigger the better. She swears that cities reveal God's creativity.

Her adjustment to Fayetteville had been slow. There was a great farmer's market but no one to accompany her. Meanwhile, I had no strong feelings either way about our newfound community that was equal parts hippie holdover and college town. I had grown up in Arkansas, moved on, and had no plans of a return trip, but things had not been going to plan as of late.

Prior to Fayetteville, I had pulled Ginny out of a town we both loved, telling her that if we didn't move now, we would be in Fort Worth forever. As someone who fancies himself a free spirit, this

seemed an obvious worst-case scenario. So in the way she does, she bought it; more *for* me than *from* me. While she slipped into a love affair with Nashville, I began to look for a job.

Before fleeing to Tennessee, my quarter-century of life had pretty-much been exactly the way I would have scripted it: easy and comfortable with an arm-candy kind of wife. God was good, because my life was good. The script was fine by me.

Until Nashville.

In Fort Worth I had taken my first real job out of college. I got paid to work with junior high and high school students. “Paid” may be somewhat of an overstatement for my position as the area director of a local ministry. Perks included free dental work from a sympathetic gentleman on the board of directors as well as the keys to a rat-infested house. I hate everything mouse related—even Disney World. More than once I have been spotted squealing atop a table and pointing to an area where I saw movement. Upon talk of marriage, I told Ginny that I would do all the “man” stuff—kill spiders, grill meats, research strange noises, and so on. But I would not deal with mice, rats, or the largest of the breed—possums. This was an integral part of the deal. And she obliged.

Thus, there could be only one reason that I was willing to stay in that mouse house—I loved the job. And although I was young, I knew that most of my peers did not share this affinity for their work. The Fort Worth kids would pull up in a Lexus to invite me to join them at some restaurant I knew I could not afford. They did not seem to notice that I had no money, so I never brought it up. I politely declined their invitation and instead invited them to help me set out traps.

The vast majority of my time with these confused beings still shy of independence consisted of video games, variations of any competition involving a basketball hoop, and rolls of duct tape, which was primarily used to strap each other to the wall. But

when you gain the trust of persons in this age bracket, they slowly begin to bring their baggage with them and expect you to help them sort through it.

And right about here, I realized that I was sheltered.

For reasons unknown to me, the fact that I could smoke them on original Nintendo prompted these kids to bring their harsh realities to me: eating disorders, physical abuse, suicide. *Sheltered* sounds so negative, but my parents must have succeeded. As far as struggles in my own life went, I could think of only two. Both were related to sports, and both were quite a pathetic parallel when serving as one's resource for these realities.

I quit being the fourth-grade quarterback when Coach Mann yelled at me, opting for the defensive unit, where the coach was a bit mellower. Continuing the tragic tale, I sat on the bench my junior year on the basketball team with the burning knowledge that I was better than the starting point guard. Both of these injustices made me cry quite a bit more than I am revealing.

That's all I had. I could not relate to real pain. Not to these kids who were looking to me, not to the news I saw on television, not to anything that whispered of deep heartache. To me this seemed best. One thing I knew in observance of others' pain was that it warranted continued avoidance. I devised some sort of map that helped me navigate the pain of others, but admittedly, the map was cliché, and the main goal was to detour hard realities.

The church also kept me keenly aware of my lack of anything to grieve. Scripture does not allow a bypass of pain—heartache and loss are everywhere. The pains I so deftly avoided are actually sold as part of the package deal in the life of one who believes.

The Bible is full of deep valleys and pain that we tend to ignore upon retellings at backyard Bible schools: the first parents endured the murder of their son, David was depressed, Job was the poster boy for pain.

Jesus went so far as to ensure troubles and then made good on this guarantee with all those close to Him. But for me, anguish was a stranger. I remember sitting in the pew and listening along as the guy at the podium told the story behind the hymn “It Is Well with My Soul” as we all prepared to sing along in unison. The hymn was penned aboard a ship by a father as he crossed over the spot where his four daughters had died aboard a sinking vessel just days earlier.

*When peace like a river attendeth my way,
When sorrows like sea billows roll,
Whatever my lot, Thou hast taught me to say,
“It is well, it is well with my soul.”*

I sang it out—each word of all the verses. Despite Coach Mann’s shrill screams and my time spent filling water bottles that junior season, my voice rose with all the conviction I could muster.

Yes, it was well with my soul.

Until Nashville.

Apparently, there are a lot of young people in Nashville, and all of them had something to offer employers that I did not. I could not get a job.

I began by looking for jobs that I actually thought I wanted, and I continued until I was declined by every bookstore and coffee shop in a twenty-mile radius. Ginny had been supporting us with her merchandising job at a clothing retailer. With Christmas approaching and after four months of making myself do nothing but job-search daily from 8 A.M. to 5 P.M., Ginny was able to swing me a job (as a favor to her)—I folded sweaters at The Gap.

I quickly ascended the ranks and became loved by the managers for two qualities: sobriety and punctuality. I loathed the job. Every day was life’s little Post-it note that I was a failure. It wasn’t the fact that it was retail—I had done that multiple times before. But the Nashville move had been made in hopes of adventure

and memories, a risky leap that was sure to turn out in storybook manner. The two of us had always talked of our disdain for *picket fences*. This was our code signaling the typical script of a typical couple—the ones who smile a lot and have great lawns.

But steering clear of the Joneses was not getting us any closer to what we wanted. I folded sweaters by the dozens and sweat-shirts by the hundreds, all the while devising witty answers for those who asked what I did and why we had moved to Nashville if we were not aspiring musicians.

I let the dream die one particular day in the mall. Wiping down the plastic table, we took our seats. Ginny unpacked turkey sandwiches as we discussed if we could afford to split a fountain drink. We agreed to save the money for a date night. Ducking my head in an attempt to hide the obvious, I pretended the tears were not happening and stumbled through an attempt to explain how sorry I was that I had moved her here—away from friends and the place she loved—to work in the mall together. I tried to feign confidence that it was just a season, fumbling through a pep talk on how I would come up with something. She let me finish before making it clear that she already thought we were fine and she certainly wasn't waiting on my grand scheme to save the day. Not long after this lunch, and somewhere around folding hooded sweatshirt number three thousand twelve, I thought law school sounded good.

If Nashville served as the introduction to a life that did not go swimmingly, it also revealed a propensity to rely on myself by devising alternate routes around painful potholes instead of traveling through them. So I headed back to school to get a law degree, all the while fairly certain that I didn't want to be a lawyer. And Ginny just smiled and helped me load the Arkansas-bound U-Haul to head away from a city she loved and toward a place she would rather not go.

Therefore, flunking out of law school was not an option. I would pass these upcoming finals, and Ginny would like me. Delving into a too-thick book that day in the library, I reminded myself of all that was riding on my ability to answer these questions at the proper time: my life.

Our recent affinity for home-hopping now seemed but a small drop in a large ocean of insecurity. Predictably, my mind quickly wandered from copious notes on civil procedure. There are seasons of life when monumental life changes come in droves.

Ginny was pregnant.

It had not been easy to accept this reality. I remember checking the home pregnancy thing seven times. We had opted for the cheaper, three-pack version, the one that merely gave an addition sign for a positive pregnancy test. It never dawned on me that the meager addition-sign version might be insufficient until I spotted the five-dollar upgraded, top-of-the-line model, which apparently bought a full-blown “You’re Pregnant” for one’s reading pleasure.

In the store I had scoffed at the lavish morons who would fork over an additional five dollars for a readable stick. But now, staring at these undeniable intersecting lines, I felt as though the more expensive one must be better. Yes, I would feel more certain about this whole idea of a person growing inside my wife if I had the newest, most advanced, readable stick on the market. How could one base life’s biggest piece of breaking news on an inferior product? Besides, I didn’t trust her aim. She was a novice. With years of accuracy practice under my belt, even I would have struggled to direct the spray precisely.

Ginny was giddy with laughter. Poor her, I thought. She was buying it. Apparently she had not realized that I had picked the generic stick.

“Ninety-nine point nine percent,” she said as she kept pointing and reading from the box label.

"Exactly" I replied, as if she had proven my point for me.

Any idea this preposterously big takes time to swallow.

L-I-F-E . . .

B-A-B-Y . . .

F-A-T-H-E-R . . .

Even though we had been wanting and waiting—daresay, expecting—it's just the type of moment I unwittingly imagined must always be accompanied by big background music like Beethoven or Mariah Carey. But no musical accompaniment, just Ginny's laugh followed by my imploring her to "Do it again. We've got two more."

I don't remember the moment I crossed the line of accepting that I was actually going to be a father. It seems more of a process than a line anyway. A few days pass before realizing that the baby is not coming tomorrow. Days are a good thing when you're trying to change every single thing you hate about yourself.

The demarcation of parenthood provides an opportunity for the equivalent of a colossal New Year's resolution list: I'll be kinder to people when I have the baby; I won't cuss when the little tyke is here; we will all exercise together as a family.

And for me this was about the time subtle fears began creeping in. Color me naive, but I do not think I had known fear in an intimate way prior to the news of a baby. But trepidation was tethered to fatherhood for me—and rode in sidesaddle as a part of the deal.

Some of it was just that I wasn't where or who I wanted to be when I became a father. But the larger part was feeling as if I were opening up my heart. It was an unfamiliar movement of which I had faint knowledge. Though marriage had hinted of a love containing peaks and depths beyond anywhere I had gone, this was different.

I had chosen my spouse—and in doing so, only after much deliberation, I had willingly allowed someone into a sacred space behind

the curtain, one I had stitched together through the years, having learned the value of a divider. It served more as a shield than a curtain, but this little one was coming with no deliberation allowed.

Children introduce their parents to an unprecedented vulnerability even before birth. They dive headfirst into your heart—to the places where the deepest love is stored. Fear accompanies their arrival, stemming from a subconscious awareness that the space where they land is the holding tank for great pain as well.

An unknown person was receiving an all-access pass to places of me that, until now, I did not even know existed. As opposed to the calculated nature of marriage, this child was happening *to* me. How could I have such thoughts and fears for someone I had never met?

I do not know when I relented to the fact that I was actually a father. But it occurred somewhere around my acceptance that someone was coming who could break my heart, and instead of avoidance, I ran headlong.

Yes, I was going to be a father.

I was shocked. Sure, I realized the physical mechanics of how this all worked. But I was going to be a dad. Grappling with this realization brought alternating waves of hope and fear.

It seemed to me that creating and raising a real, live person would have all the makings of adventure and lifetime memories that I so desperately craved. However, law school doesn't pay well. While most of my friends had settled into lives whereby kids seemed to fit, I was months removed from referring to myself as a "Gap girl," headed back to school for a degree I didn't intend to use, and I still enjoyed a good bowl of Lucky Charms.

So I spent my first semester sorting through questions of jurisdiction along with ones of whether or not I would be the one to cut the umbilical cord. There was no way I was cutting that cord. Of all the questions circling my head, this seemed the easiest one

to answer. My goal would be not to pass out, with a backup goal of no one actually knowing I passed out if I happened to fail goal number one.

I'm not sure how many times I've passed out—a sure indicator that it's been too many. Always the same routine: I reassure those around me that I am fine; then I begin to slur and sway until finally dropping like a building imploding to make way for the new strip mall.

Although I had never been witness to the actual birthing process, I had talked to father friends who had. Their reports did not seem promising—a perfect concoction that leaves me tasting the floor. I was left wondering how this whole cord phenomenon ever came about. I couldn't devise one plausible scenario whereby cutting this mother rope had become en vogue and even created an expectation placed on an entire gender.

And it felt good to nail down the answer to at least one question. Fatherhood, law school, and life seemed evasive, but I knew this—I wasn't about to cut that cord.