



after the

Leaves fall

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After the Leaves Fall

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For Dad
(I've waited twenty-four years to write that.)



Many heartfelt thanks . . .

To Todd Diakow, my writing partner, encourager, friend, and first-draft editor. This book would not be without you.

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God has blessed my life far more than I could ever claim to deserve. The debt of gratitude I owe my Master defies explanation.





part 1



WAITING IS A COMPLICATED LONGING.

I lost my father when I was fifteen, and I've been waiting ever since.

He was buried on a rainy day in October, and I remember the sound of the raindrops on the lid of the sleek black casket and how it seemed like music to me. The pastor was doing his best to make sorrowful an occasion that seemed anything but—the leaves on the trees above us were burnt amber, the consoling sky around us was velvety gray, and the rain was singing softly. I didn't feel sad. I felt expectant.

My father had been in pain. There was so much pain. It had seeped out of his limbs and crept hauntingly into my blood and bones. My grandmother and I carried pain from his bed every time we walked away from a failed attempt at getting him to eat. We steeled ourselves against the ache that slowly invaded when we sat by his side and held his cool hand, his fingers dry and fragile in ours as if this small part of him were already gone. Even walking the few steps past the living room, where he lay entombed in an impossibly narrow hospital bed, to the dining room, which was the only way into the kitchen, was a staggering experience. I'd pause imperceptibly in the hallway, gather myself, and walk with purpose and more than adequate speed until I was wrapped in the warmth of the kitchen, where the oven was baking something that he would never eat.

Sometimes he cried, but the tears just gathered in the corners of his eyes and pooled there like so much dark water lost among the black-brown of his gaze. I wasn't always sure if he was even aware of his crying, but those tears called out of their own accord, and the reverberation would echo through the house until it drowned out all else. I felt I would go deaf from it. *Stop. Oh, please, God, make it stop.*

When it stopped it was as if the world was filled with air again. I breathed again. Great gasping lungfuls of air that left me dizzy and panting. And weeping. The night after Dad died, Grandma found me in the grove behind the old chicken coop, gulping that glorious, rich air and sobbing without making the tiniest sound. She knelt beside me in her housecoat, letting the damp grass soak her arthritic knees, and pounded me on the back until all that good air took and

my tears could be heard as well as seen. *I'm dying too*, I thought when I heard the keening that could only be coming from my own mouth. What but death could possibly feel like this?

But I wasn't even close to dying. Fresh air was new life that filled my veins. Grief was so quickly and yet so incompletely replaced by something that felt like relief that I careened from guilt to repose and never became fully settled with anything I felt.

After he was gone, I would find myself in the darkness of the living room in the middle of the night, standing where his bed had filled the space in front of the picture window. The October sky would be cold and clear, and from the farmhouse window the stars would shimmer like something otherworldly. *Thank You, God, for taking him*. I would breathe the half prayer over and over, and for those minutes in the newly quiet house, I would feel something close to peace. Then the very next morning the lack of his presence across the table would choke me until my tongue was thick and threatening in my mouth, and I promised God my soul if only I could have one more day with Dad.

It was in this new living that waiting became so complicated.

I began to exist in a tension between wanting and not wanting—waiting for something I couldn't even pin down in my most naked and honest moments. Waiting for a balance where I neither ached nor forgot, regretted nor accepted. Waiting for my heart to be light again yet fearing the implications of that same lightness. I suppose I waited for peace—an end to my own personal warfare.

The imbalance struck me for the first time immediately after I threw a fistful of sodden dirt on the box in the ground that contained his body. I was torn between laughter and tears. Feeling that

something big and incomprehensible had just happened, Grandma and I stood hand in hand until the graveyard was empty and the rain had all but ceased to fall. Her lips moved faintly, and I knew she was whispering prayers for me. I couldn't join her—I had forgotten how; the ability to pray had slipped out of my soul like the dirt had tumbled from my fingers. I wasn't angry at God or anything—that would have been far too clichéd. He just seemed irrelevant.

When Grandma spoke, it was unexpected. “You know what my favorite time of year is?”

I blinked for the first time in minutes and looked up at her. “Huh?”

She continued without looking down at me. “I love it best when the leaves fall.”

I didn't know what to say.

“Lots of people like autumn because the leaves turn such pretty colors.” Grandma smiled at this as if she had a secret, something sweet and unforeseen that she was going to share with me. I watched the familiar, wrinkled profile soften. “I like it when all those leaves fall because it's such a small thing that means so very much.” Pulling her hand out of mine, she turned to me and tilted my face toward her own. “Do you know what I mean?”

I didn't.

She searched my face. “There's this subtle sadness—winter is coming, and it's going to be hard and cold. And there's a feeling of good-bye. But there's also . . .” She searched for the right word. “Suspense? Maybe hope? Because it's not *over*; everything is just waiting for spring. Do you know what I mean?”

Grandma sounded expectant, and I smiled at her because I loved

her better than anyone else in the world now that Dad was gone. “I think so,” I said quietly.

“You can see more clearly when it’s all stripped bare. You can see that everything gets to be new.” Grandma smiled at me with every hope for our future shining in her eyes. “That’s the good part.”

A gust of wind from the southwest shot through the trees and showered us with cold water and soggy leaves that were anything but hopeful.

I’ve been waiting a long time for the good part.

About the Author

NICOLE BAART was born and raised in a small town in Iowa. After lifeguarding, waitressing, working in a retail store, and even being a ranch hand on a dairy farm, she changed her major four times in college before finally settling on degrees in English, Spanish, English as a second language, and secondary education. She taught and developed curriculum in three different school districts over the course of seven years.

Teaching and living in Vancouver, British Columbia, cultivated a deep love in Nicole for both education and the culturally inexplicable use of the word *eh*. She became a Canadian citizen for the sole purpose of earning the right to use the quirky utterance.

Nicole wrote her first complete novel while taking a break from teaching to be a full-time mom. She is also the author of hundreds of poems, dozens of short stories, a handful of articles, and various unfinished novels.

The mother of two young sons and the wife of a pastor, Nicole writes when she can: in bed, in the shower, as she is making supper, and occasionally sitting down at her computer. As the adoptive mother of an Ethiopian-born son, she is passionate about global issues and works to promote awareness of topics such as world hunger, poverty, AIDS, and the plight of widows and orphans. Nicole and her family live in Iowa.

