

CHAPTER 19

Why?

LATE FRIDAY NIGHT, I'm awake rocking a fussy Jack in the downstairs of Aaron's childhood home. Between the dark hours of midnight and pre-dawn, my bare feet wear the pattern of waltz steps into the old, shag carpet. Poor Jack. He's overstimulated after being passed to so many unfamiliar arms during the wedding celebrations. The combination of his empty stomach and strange surroundings result in an inconsolable baby who cries the moment I try to lay him down. We become acquainted with midnight shadows cast through the basement window.

The wedding day ended with a spectacular demonstration from Tanner, who had discovered that reception ennui could be averted by throwing Rice Krispy balls into the chocolate fountain in the same way a boring day of fishing is fixed by throwing rocks into the water. His flailing arms spewed splatters of chocolate onto the white linens as I pulled him away from the refreshment table igniting a no-afternoon-nap-meltdown-tantrum, showcasing a spectacle of body-writhing, kicking, screaming, and hair-pulling (mine *and* his) to rival the most brutal exorcism. Somehow the bride escaped without brown chocolate spots on her white gown.

A nauseous stomach also keeps me awake—hard to know whether it's the Cloverman retreat stomach flu or a ten-hour drive followed by too much wedding dessert and birthday cake—but several times the gut rumbling sends me running to the bathroom where I must set Jack

on the cold linoleum in order to lean over the porcelain bowl. Thus I pass the night pacing the hallway, bouncing Jack against my chest, and cradling his head into my shoulder to soothe and also muffle the volume so his crying wouldn't wake my in-laws.

Thankfully I never throw up—this is the good news. Nobody wants to finish their birthday by vomiting into a toilet. I turned thirty-one years today. Somehow, Aaron managed to stop by a grocery store and bring a surprise, store-bought birthday cake to the wedding luncheon, which—if you think about it—was a waste of money since there was already dessert provided by the caterers. In the midst of a bustling day, Helen also remembered my birthday and gave me a card.

Sometime later, I hear the ruckus of the Danny-Kate-Tanner trio upstairs. At last I've fallen asleep on the family room couch, Jack sleeping curled on my chest. The adults in the house want to sleep late after a long day of wedding festivities, but my kids bounce awake at 6:30 a.m. no matter how late they went to bed. They sound like a herd of elephants running through the kitchen, dumping out Grandma's toys, and raiding her cereal closet. I should bring them downstairs so they don't wake Helen and Grant, but...Jack is *sleeping*. My eyes close and I drift back to sleep listening to the sound of Helen's voice asking the trio what they want for breakfast.

It's late when I slide Jack onto the couch and go to the bathroom to splash cold water over my eyes, blink out the redness, and carry Jack upstairs. Before entering the living room, I tilt my chin up and put on a smile. "Good morning everybody."

Helen moves out of her recliner. "Sit down here." She pats the cushion for me then takes a seat on the floor.

"We are going to hike up Payson Canyon. How long until you can be ready?" Aaron's words highlight the fact that I'm the only person in the room still wearing pajamas.

Hiking? I could barely walk up the stairs.

"Go ahead. I'll stay here." Under the blanket I lift my shirt and help Jack latch on.

Aaron looks crushed. “Why?”

Why?!

The room waits for me to answer, but my brain struggles to formulate a coherent response. Saying “I’m tired” is no good—everybody is tired after yesterday. I wish I could be more organized and on top of everything as other women are. I wish I could bound out of bed ready to spend the day on a grand hiking adventure. But today is Saturday, and there’s something pressing I need to do. Through my grogginess, I can’t come up with it. My brain is swimming in letters, like alphabet soup, but I can’t turn the stew into words. In the end, the only word I find is a word that means everything and nothing.

“Because.”

The word doesn’t satisfy.

“I’ll carry Jack for you.” Aaron knows he has a solution to fix this problem.

“He was so fussy last night. I think he needs to stay in one place today.”

“I’ll stay home and watch him while you go.” Now Helen has the fix.

“Please come. Please come,” Danny and Kate sing in chorus.

In the pause I’m taken back to the hospital the day Jack was born—the yearning to be at Danny’s graduation, the desire to divide myself into more than one person. Everyone is looking at me.

“I can’t.”

“Why?” Aaron questions again.

“Don’t you want to go?” Grant asks. “I’ll help with the kids.”

There is nothing to do but shake my head. They pack water, snacks, and sunscreen and ask three more times if I’m sure, before leaving me sitting in the front room questioning if I made the right decision. Rather than going back downstairs to rest while the house is quiet, I sit on the couch, awkwardly glancing at *why?*

I hate that Aaron invited *why?* here this morning—a demanding houseguest—and left me alone to entertain him.

Why? hovers in the room looking at family photos on the mantle, drawing fingerprints in the dust on the fireplace, scrutinizing me

over his double monocles. He pinches both pant legs, hiking the trousers above sock level before lowering himself onto the far end of the couch. “Hmph,” he torts while polishing his lenses.

I tell myself to ignore *why?*, but he is so curious, so interesting. There’s much he could reveal to me: *Why* wasn’t I able to go hiking with my family? *Why* aren’t I capable of doing everything that everyone thinks I should be able to do? *Why* am I weaker than other women?

I examine *why?* for clues while thinking about all the days backward: the hike, the wedding, the ten-hour drive, the puke-soiled bed sheets, the company family retreat, my mom and sister’s visit, Jack’s birth...

Why doesn’t Aaron realize it’s all been too much? *Why* wouldn’t he tell me to stay home and rest? *Why* doesn’t he see how exhausted I am? *Why* did my in-laws think I should be able to go hiking the day after a big wedding, which was the day after a long car drive, which was barely three weeks after giving birth to their grandson?

And before that was the music conference, the long drive to Tucson... Before that was the June magazine deadline, the months of door-to-door selling, piano lessons, seminary, cleaning out the family house... I think all the way back to that night when Aaron left me sitting alone at the awards banquet.

“*Why* is it never enough?” I shout out loud.

I want to cry—a deep, cleansing cry while the house is mine alone. I want to sob hard, washing away the *why?* until I am purged. But tears don’t come on demand. *Why?* presses his hands to his knees, raises himself with importance, and exits the front door without asking to be excused. What poor manners! He robbed the peaceful hours of my morning and gave nothing in return. He may answer to his name, but he doesn’t have answers to his name.

I’m left alone sitting on the couch; Jack has long since fallen back to sleep. In the quiet, the nagging feeling of an unremembered task resurfaces. *What is it I needed to do today?*

A sound outside calls my attention. “Knock, knock? Hello?” Laih breezes in. She is in town for something important, but at

this moment I can't recall what exactly. "I can only stay a minute." She takes *why?*'s place on the couch and looks around, noticing the quiet. "Where is everybody?"

"They went hiking. Please don't ask me *why* I didn't go. Just tell me *why* I'm not as strong as people think I should be. Helen fed my kids breakfast this morning. I'm a horrible mother."

It's barely 9:00 on a Saturday morning and Laiah is dressed for business, giving the impression she's already completed a number of significant accomplishments for the day. After Kate was born, I'd asked her if there were mothering judges or a mothering report card. How else does a woman know if she's succeeding in mothering? I need a way to know if I'm doing things right. Laiah could be my guide. She works as a consultant or a coach (I don't understand her work exactly). She's successful, organized, put-together, a dynamo—all the things I'm not. Now that she's living close by, would she do it? Will she help me organize my life? Will she show me where I'm falling short and tell me how to fix it? Will she help me be successful?

"Yes." Laiah nods. "I'll do whatever you want. I'm here for you."

I've seen the personal evaluation forms she carries around where people can self-assess their competence in areas like timeliness, organization, reliability, and preparedness. I need her to point out where I'm falling short and tell me how to fix it. I need her to coach me on how to be successful.

"First, tell me where I went wrong this morning. How did I let so many people down?"

"Did you sleep late?" Laiah and I have had a thing since college about not wasting life by sleeping in: *Early to bed, early to rise. The little bird who wakes up early is healthy, wealthy and gets the fattest worm.*

"Yes. I slept late. I heard the kids awake then I let myself fall back to sleep."

"Helen had a wedding yesterday and is probably even more exhausted than you are. Here's the thing. Life is hard. Everybody gets tired. You have to be stronger than your body and force yourself to get up and get moving."

Laiah is right. If I'd gotten up the first time I'd heard the kids wake, I could have fed them breakfast—like a good mother would do—and been dressed and ready to go on the hike.

“No person ever achieved success by keeping company with their pillow.”

Did Laiah hear that from a philosopher, a self-help guru, or did she make it up?

The back screen door slams, letting in a cacophony of voices and announcing the triumphal return of the hiking expedition. The conquering heroes regale tales of snake catching and wading under the waterfall. Their sun-kissed faces are luminous with the excitement of adventure. They crawl their gangly bodies onto my lap, wrap their rangy appendages around my neck and show me pictures from Aaron's camera of mountain cows and meadow flowers. I can feel their heartbeats pulsing warm and alive in their necks.

“You are cold!” Kate tells me and retracts from my embrace. She asks why I'm still wearing pajamas, why I'm sitting in the same place I was when they left. Kate plays with my hand while she talks about racing sticks down the river and asks why the veins on my wrist are blue and flat. She doesn't expect me to answer, which I don't, not out loud. *My veins are empty*, I think. *No lifeblood there*. My morning has been an utter waste—first, sleeping late, then squandering precious time bickering with *why?* Their outing had been fantastic and while they have memories and sunburns, I have regret. Three hours of hiking would have been a cinch compared to my morning wrestling with guilt. I should have gone. I made the wrong decision. For the rest of the summer, I vow to myself, I will participate in anything and everything my family wants to do.

Helen interrupts my thoughts. “What can I do to help for tomorrow?”

What's tomorrow? Seconds tick off in my brain to the backdrop of quiz show music before the answer to my nagging feeling finally surfaces.

Tomorrow is Sunday. Jack's blessing day.