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REBECOMING: FROM FEAR TO FAITH



The Free First Chapter

BY MK PARRISH

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A note before we start

Most books that promise to change you open with a promise and close with a worksheet. This one has no worksheet. It has a QR code, a flight of rain-dark church steps, eleven minutes I almost spend walking the other way, and (this is the part I most want you to hear) a roomful of women who became, against every prediction I ever made about my life, the great loves of it. I find the code in the parish bulletin, of all the ordinary places, a small black-and-white square tucked between the Mass times and a notice about the food pantry, advertising a women's Bible study; I scan it almost by accident, the way the important things tend to arrive, while I am looking for something else entirely. After that, nothing in my life ever sits in quite the same place again.

I want to tell you what I found on the other side of that door, because somebody told you a story about it that isn't true. They told you the door was for a certain kind of person. They told you what kind of woman walks through it, and what kind of woman doesn't, and they let you assume, without ever quite saying it, which kind you are. I believed that story for most of my life. I am writing this book to take it apart in front of you, gently, one beam at a time, and then to show you what is actually inside: a beautiful old church, friendship with no audition, love with no invoice, a way of praying that turned the lights back on in me, and a hope I had genuinely stopped believing was still in stock for someone like me.

I am a Pisces and a poet and a lifelong insomniac and, it turns out, an empath and a highly sensitive person, which together mean I feel everything at a volume the world keeps calling a malfunction. For years I am certain that if I think hard enough and stay up late enough, I can out-argue my own fear. I cannot. You do not think your way out of a feeling. You

pray your way through the middle of it, and it helps, more than I can tell you, to find that someone has gone ahead, is holding the door, and has already set out a chair with your name on it.

Two of the people who told me I had a story worth telling are gone now. I am telling it anyway. This is me, finally, telling it.

01

PART ONE: THE QR CODE

It is raining by the time I reach the church, and I stand at the bottom of the steps for eleven minutes without going up them.

I know it is eleven because I watch each one turn over on my phone, the same small lit rectangle that carried me here, the same one that holds the whole shouting world, the way you watch a kettle you are praying will not boil. When you do not own a car, you arrive at things on foot and on time and with no armor at all. There is no idling at the curb with the heater running. No metal shell to hide inside while you quietly lose your nerve. There is only me, and the cold coming up through the thin soles of my shoes, and the gray Saturday going wet and silver around my shoulders, and a lit doorway forty feet up and to the left that might as well be set in the far wall of an ocean.

Let me put you exactly where I am, because the where of it matters. This is not some borrowed conference room with a folding sign out front. This is the parish church, my parish, a beautiful old building with a bell tower gone green at the seams and a rose window over the doors that, even unlit from the street, holds the gray light like a held breath. The stone under my feet is dark and slick and veined with rain, each step keeping its own thin sheet of water that breaks and re-forms when the wind moves over it. The handrail is beaded silver, too cold to want to touch. The brass plate beside the door has gone soft and green at its edges and bright where a hundred

years of hands have worn it. Somewhere up there a candle is going. I cannot see it yet, but I will learn the smell of it in a minute and spend the rest of my life loving it. The bulletin is folding to pulp in my fist. My breath is going halfway down and stopping, the way it has been stopping for years.

I am only standing here at all because of a square of ink. A week ago, I slipped into the back of this same church for a Mass I almost talked myself out of, and on my way out I picked up the parish bulletin the way you pick up anything, to give your hands something to do. And there, tucked in between the Mass schedule and a notice about the food pantry, was a small black-and-white QR code beside three plain words: *Women's Bible Study*. Before I could think better of it, I lifted my phone to the little square the way you might touch a stranger on the shoulder, and it opened a page with a date and a time and this address, and it asked, gently, for my name. I gave it. That was the whole of my brave act, a week early: I let a QR code in a church bulletin write my name down somewhere I could not quietly erase it later. Everything after this, the rain, the steps, the eleven minutes, is only me trying to live up to a thing my own thumb had already gone and done.

I have a speech ready. I walked the whole way over rehearsing it, a small, reasonable, beautifully constructed case for why this particular morning is not the morning. I am tired. I have a Saturday's worth of errands I could hide inside of for hours. My dog needs me, which is a lie, because Biggie has been unconscious on the good pillow since breakfast and treats my entire existence as a mild interruption to his sleep.

But underneath the speech sits the real reason, and it is wearing a costume I know by heart. It leans in close, in my own voice, the most trusted voice I have got, and it says: *you are not the kind of woman who goes to Bible study*.

And here is where I have to stop and show you the picture, because the picture is the whole problem, and I carried it for so long I forgot it was a picture at all. A certain kind of woman with a certain kind of certainty.

Women who had never once lain awake at two in the morning doubting the floor of the universe. Women in a tidy row who would look at the wreckage of me and quietly, charitably, thank God they had been spared it. A panel of judges. A club I had failed to qualify for without ever once filling out the form. I held that picture for years, fully formed, never examined, the way you can carry an opinion your entire life without ever asking where you picked it up or whether it was ever yours.

That picture is the stigma. And I want to be very clear with you, this early, about what I learned: the picture was never describing the room. It was only ever describing my fear of the room. The two have almost nothing to do with each other, and learning the difference is going to cost me eleven minutes in the rain and then save the rest of my life.

Then the rain stops pretending. It comes down all at once: fat, cold, deliberate, drumming the steps and darkening the stone two shades and running the ink on the bulletin clean off the page and into my palm in little gray rivers, and it pushes me up the steps and through the door. Partly by grace. Partly because I will not come apart on a public sidewalk like a woman in the third act of a film no one agreed to make.

And the inside of that old church takes my breath the way it has been taking the breath of frightened people since before my grandmother's grandmother. The ceiling lifts away into a vault you cannot quite see the top of. The late stained glass throws long lozenges of red and blue across the stone floor, even on a gray day, even in the rain, as though the building keeps its own private weather of color. There is the smell of beeswax and cold incense and old wood and rain coming off wool. There is a rack of votive candles burning low and gold against the dim, a little galaxy of other people's intentions, each flame a prayer somebody could not say out loud. I came ready to endure something. Instead, standing just inside the door with the water running off me, I want, with my whole sudden traitor of a heart, to stay.

And before I can second-guess a single thing, before the heavy door has even finished sighing shut behind me on its slow brass hinge, before I have wiped the rain from my eyes, she is there.

The group leader. She crosses the room toward me the way dawn crosses a field, unhurried and total, and she does not offer me a hand to shake and she does not ask my name first and she does not give me a moment to arrange my face into something braver than it is. She simply opens both arms and folds me into a hug so complete, so unhesitating, that for one whole second I forget that I am a stranger, that I am soaked through, that I am afraid. She holds on like she has been saving this exact embrace all morning and has only just now found who it belonged to.

And she is warm. Actually warm: radiant the way a lit window is warm seen from a freezing street, the way the inside of a cupped hand is warm. Over her shoulder the candlelight seems to lean toward her, the low gold of it pooling around her hair until I half expect to find it gilded, haloed, leafed like the saints in the side chapels behind her, the ones standing patient in their niches with their chipped plaster hands open. She glows. I am not reaching for a metaphor; or I am, but it is also simply, plainly, what I see. She lights the room the way one candle lights a shrine, not by flooding it, but by giving every shadow in it somewhere gentle to go and lie down.

Angelic is the word that arrives, fully formed, and I do not bother hunting for a better one, because there is not one, and I have spent my whole life hunting for better words.

And into my wet hair, soft, like it is the simplest and most settled fact in the world, she says: *"You came. You already did it."*

You already did it.

We gather not in some grim annex but in the Lady chapel off the south transept, a circle of chairs drawn up under a statue of the Blessed Mother with her foot on the moon. There are twelve of us. A woman much further along, silver-haired and still as a held breath, who looks as though she has buried a couple of husbands and kept most of their secrets out of plain

good manners. Women in the middle, like me, composed on the outside, immaculate, carrying things on the inside we have never once said out loud to anyone living.

And no one makes it strange. That is the second miracle of the morning, and I have learned since not to rank my miracles by size. The woman who settles in beside me slides her own copy of the book across to me, open, and I look down and the margins are crowded. Underlines. Question marks. Whole sentences boxed and starred and argued with in three different colors of ink, the pages soft and furred at the corners from being turned and turned. She does not slide me a clean book. She slides me her mess. And that, it turns out, is the real invitation: not *here is the answer,* but *here is how unfinished I still am; come be unfinished beside me.*

I think about the prodigal son the whole way home, in a way I have not in years. Everyone remembers the homecoming, the robe, the ring, the fattened calf, the father hiking up his good clothes to run flat-out down the road. But I keep landing on the part that comes first, the part nobody paints. The son is still a long way off. Still in the mud. Still rank with pig. He has not been forgiven yet and has no idea how any of it will land, and he gets up anyway, and turns toward home, and starts to walk. *While he was still a long way off,* the gospel says, *his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran to him and threw his arms around him.* Still a long way off. The father was already running before the boy had a single word out.

There is a name for that turn. The old Greek for it is *metanoia,* and we usually translate it as *repentance,* which sounds like sackcloth and apology. But it does not mean groveling. It means, almost literally, *to turn the mind around.* To be walking one direction and to stop, and to turn, and to start walking the other. That is it. That is the whole of it. Not arrival. Not certainty. Just the turn, and a Father already running.

There is an invitation I had heard quoted my whole life, printed on tote bags and coffee mugs and the backs of parish bulletins, worn so smooth by overuse that I had long ago stopped hearing it as actual words. *Come to me, all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you*

rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.

Come to me, all you who are weary. Not: come to me, all you who have it together. Not: come to me once you have lost the weight and mended the marriage and silenced the two-in-the-morning voice and assembled yourself into the right kind of woman. Come weary. Come carrying. Come exactly as heavy as you actually are. I had spent my entire life certain the invitation had a dress code I could never meet, and it turns out the only thing required at that door was the one thing I had always had in abundance. I was tired. I was carrying something far too heavy. And I had, at last, in the rain, come.

Nobody puts that part in stained glass. The turning around. The eleven minutes at the bottom of the steps. The thumb hovering over a small square of black and white. The stranger's arms closing around you before you have even said your name.

I have not arrived anywhere yet. I have only turned around and started walking home. It is going to take me a long time, most of this book, to understand that the turn is the thing. That it was always the thing. That she was right, there in the doorway, with the rain still running off me onto her shoulder: I already did it.

KEEP READING

That was the first chapter.

REBECOMING: From Fear to Faith continues for twelve more, through fear and prayer and the Blessed Mother, through a father's last phone call and an irrefutable family story of the afterlife, through a grandmother's rosary and a roomful of women who became the great loves of a life, and through the quiet, necessary work of taking apart the lie that any of it was ever off-limits to you.

If the door is calling you the way it called me, come the rest of the way in.

Read the whole story. The full memoir is available now as an instant ebook (PDF and Kindle EPUB) and as a paperback shipped to your door. A portion of every sale is donated to my local parish.

Get it here: <https://www.mkparrish.com/rebecoming>

You are already late for people who are going to love you.

♡ MK

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