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The Monsters at the End of This Book(Introduction and Chapter 1 of A Glorious Dark: Finding Hope in the Tension Between Belief and Experience)

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A GLORIOUS DARK

FINDING HOPE IN THE TENSION
BETWEEN BELIEF AND EXPERIENCE

A. J. SWOBODA



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For Dad
I love getting lost with you.

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All writing is done in storms.

At least that's what my heroes have said. Writing a book, Faulkner advised, is like "building a chicken coop in a high wind. You grab any board or shingle flying by or loose on the ground and nail it down fast." Virginia Woolf similarly captures the same idea. A writer, she says, learns how to "arrange whatever pieces come your way." These words capture perfectly what writing has been like for me—storm chasing.

Many acknowledgments are due to those who not only helped me survive the storm, but also actually made it a rather enjoyable process.

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Finally, it's customary to acknowledge God in any Christian book. On that basis of custom, I refuse to offer any perfunctory praise or thankfulness. Rather, I thank God because my every breath is from God. Jesus is the deepest, bottomless well of grace any human could ask for. If writing is a storm, then there probably were times along the way it seemed as though Jesus was sleeping in the back, unaware of my toils. But now, finished, I know you were with me every step of the way. And I know you always will be.

INTRODUCTION

When I was a kid, a free-flowing river meandered its way through my backyard. My family loved rivers. We always lived near one. Growing up in dark, drippy, soulful Oregon winters, I'd watch the death of January conquer, year after year, the once free-flowing and wild Willamette River. By mid-month, during the muffled silence of cold, a deep, bone-chilling freeze would halt every living thing upon the face of our backyard. The Willamette fell victim with the rest. The river looked dead—frozen dead.

But the frozen river wasn't really dead. My old man would tell me that underneath that cold, dark, seemingly dead surface was a wild, powerful, primal flow that untrained eyes couldn't imagine. You had to *believe* it was alive. Rushing waves lurked underneath the stillness of death, as powerful as ever. Dad knew it was there, below the surface. I believed it was there too.

For some, and probably for more than are ready to admit it, faith appears like the dead surface of a frozen river. And what I want to say is that below the dead-looking surface is a living river too—a *glorious dark*. What appears as dead is really alive, alive like the wind. Faith, as I've been told, is the story of things unseen. That's the

story of the frozen river. A primal flow secretly gushes on whether it's seen or not—below the surface, that is.

Underneath every story of death and darkness and doubt is a hidden flow of God's resurrection and power and glory, which almost nobody chooses to see.

Here's to seeing below the surface.



“Make your point and beat it to death,” my speech professor scribbled in red on one of the assignments she graded. She always did that, grading with bright red pencil as though she sat at the left hand of God or something. Or, worse yet, she wanted me to think she used blood to write. Either way, terror has a way of teaching. “While trying to say *everything*,” my speech professor wrote, “you end up saying *nothing* at all.”

This book is about three days—a long weekend Christians call Good Friday, Holy Saturday, and Easter Sunday. Within, I want to persuade my readers that Christian faith is the *whole* weekend and that they must enter *all* three days—we must embrace the pain of Friday's sunset, the awkwardness of Saturday's silence, and the hopeful sunrise of Sunday morning. These three days serve as a kind of grand finale to what's known as Holy Week. Of course, it should be pointed out, there remain other holy days as well: Christmas, World Communion Sunday, Pentecost, Epiphany, and Maundy Thursday.¹ Upon each day, Jesus comes to us in a special way. And lo, there's Palm Sunday, my favorite, when we heap homage upon Jesus as he parades into Jerusalem on a borrowed little donkey to the applauding fanfare of a flighty, emotional crowd who would soon abandon him at his death. Still, today, Jesus rides into *our* lives. And still he refuses to arrive on popemobiles, chairs carried on shoulders by steamy men with oily biceps, or with any kind of well-prepared inauguration speech. Jesus moseys to us on

the back of an ass. One has to love the manner by which God's salvation comes to the world: Jesus, the Savior of humankind, rides awkwardly on a plodding donkey to a prepared spot where he'd soon die for a whole wide world of asses. Jesus rides upon the thing he'd soon die for.

Take that for irony.

Yet despite the many other holy times Christianity may have on its religious calendar, nothing tops Holy Week. Holy Week is high time. Holy Week is to Christians what dead week is to college students—it's a *preparation* for the one who comes to us still, this year, again, to die and be resurrected to take away our sin. Sometimes Holy Week feels like our time to make up for a yearlong bout of spiritual procrastination in the same manner we start flossing hours prior to our dentist appointment. But it shouldn't be like that. Holy Week is a preparation—regardless of how faithless we may have been all year long—for the full life and experience of the resurrected Lord who will again, like the faithfulness of a sunrise, arise out of the cold tomb of our sin and narcissism.

During the first Holy Week, Christians profess, a lowly cabinet-maker named Jesus came out of the woodwork to die an excruciating death upon a wooden Roman cross on a Friday, lie in a borrowed, dusty grave on Saturday, and rise to defeat death early Sunday morning. During that weekend, the ancients testify, God rescued the whole world from its captivity to sin and the devil.

Chalk it up as the most productive weekend in human history.

And it's because of that one weekend in history that Christianity exists. Christianity works precisely because death didn't. I write this because I've come to believe that there truly is abundant—one might say, bottomless—life in Jesus. However, this life isn't found on Sunday alone. Life is found in *all* three days—pain and death on Friday, doubt on Saturday, and resurrection on Sunday. To follow Jesus as we're created to is to simultaneously enter the whole

weekend. Today's Christians, lamentably, almost never embrace the totality of the weekend in their personalized versions of Christianity. Most remain selective, prejudiced, discriminatory, choosy: we're picky about the one day of the weekend we desire to experience. And once we've landed on our favorite day, we rarely budge until we're forced to. Incomplete, this makes for three cheap knock-off versions of Christianity.

Friday Christianity is the religion of those who've chosen to find their identity in a spirituality of defeat, death, and loss. Their spiritual depth abides solely in the torment of suffering on the cross. Friday Christians worship suffering so much that they assume one *must* be experiencing loss and suffering in order to be considered "honest" or "authentic" or "real." This way of faith has a huge price tag. When we live only in Friday, we assume that the Christian life is an existence of pain and punishment—and those who smile or have joy must be fake. Friday Christianity is about losing, about pain, about suffering.

Sunday Christianity is equally problematic. These chipper, slick, ever-too-happy Christians see God in, and only in, victory, prosperity, and blessing. Everything, for them, is a footnote on their own pursuit of personal happiness. When Christians live in Sunday alone, they fabricate a kind of hassle-free approach to Christian spirituality that, while outwardly appealing, is entirely impotent—lacking power, girth, and any amount of stamina. It lacks the ability to sustain because when one camps out on Sunday, there's little space for the reality of loss and pain. Those who are sick, underpaid, mourning, or weeping are probably just that way because of sin or lack of faith. *They're doing something wrong*, a Sunday Christian assumes. Sunday Christianity dismisses the realities of death and loss.

Lastly, we can find Saturday Christianity. Holy Saturday is the day in the middle: the day Jesus remains in the grave. It's an

in-betweenness, a liminality, an uncertainty, a doubt—that moment you're unsure if the sun will ever rise again. Saturday Christianity is for those of us who've come to consider doubt and ambiguity as final destinations rather than conduits through which we actually enter into resurrection. When we celebrate only Holy Saturday, we believe, in our doubt and questioning, that we have permission to be cynics and deconstructionists—and that everyone should sit in our graves with us.

Usually, different kinds of Christian communities will emphasize their favorite day. For instance, Roman Catholics have a very Friday way of looking at things. Catholics don't have crosses; they have crucifixes. Crucifixes still have Jesus hanging on the cross in the throes of suffering. The evangelical type, on the other hand, have a Sunday way of looking at things, preferring an empty cross and using it as a decorative item in their home. It might be curly, gold-painted metal with gemstones or made to look old and rustic, but it's always beautiful. The late Brennan Manning wrote that he was troubled that we continue to “mineralize” Jesus—molding him into a naked savior in gold, silver, bronze. “The more we reproduce him,” Manning writes, “the more we forget about him.”² For many Christians, Jesus is no longer on the cross, nor should he be. He's resurrected and ascended. We need both Friday *and* Sunday, not just one or the other. Some want to suffer with Jesus; others want to be resurrected with Jesus. Few desire both.

We can't prefer one day and reject the rest. Christianity isn't a religion of preference. Christianity, in fact, takes our selfish preferences about what elements of faith we desire and what parts we reject and hammers three huge nails in the hands and feet of our preferences and screams, *Die, die, die—and please don't rise ever!*

Jesus is our Lord to the degree our preferences aren't.



You'll find this book organized into three parts—Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. Each chapter within a section represents a glimpse of that day. What follows isn't exhaustive. Rather, it's more like an appetizer. You'll find that my reflections are rooted in the Bible but fleshed out in everyday life, particularly the life of my local church. May they encourage and disturb you. In advance, forgive me for the blunders of my hand. Those are mine. Whatever blessings you may enjoy, however, are from the hand of God.

At one time or another, we've all had a hard time taking ourselves seriously. It's not that uncommon for me to imagine that my faith—my love of God, my desire to know him—is a lie, a crutch, a dead, frozen river in the backyard. I still hear Dad tell me about the cold, hidden mysteriousness of the living waters rushing below the ice. Then Hope himself sails his little dinghy into the harbor of my life. No matter how dark the river looks, how cold and frozen it becomes, in Christ there's always the power of resurrection flowing in the secret below. We just have to learn how to see it.

Never judge a river by its surface.

PART I

FRIDAY

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1

THE MONSTER AT THE END OF THIS BOOK

They say the winners write the history books.

That's not totally true. It's the people who knew the publishers who wrote the history books. The rest of us were forced to blog for a really long time.

My history of being raised in the wet, mossy tundra of the Pacific Northwest is a good place to begin. Mornings around my house were predictable: rain, strong coffee, and National Public Radio (NPR). In my family, NPR was a kind of sacred liturgy—a liturgy awakening within me a love for the modern, progressive, thoughtful way of life that Democrats boldly preach. I was a cradle progressive. More than anyone, Dad instilled within me a handful of modern ideals—an abiding love for respect, tolerance, civic engagement, and diversity. Driving me to school, slurping his fair-trade coffee from his reusable Alcoholics Anonymous mug that rested perfectly

on the dashboard of our Subaru, Dad used his one free hand to fine-tune the turn-style radio to the soft-sounding voices of NPR commentators like those of today: Audie Cornish, Robin Young, and Robert Siegel. It was a liberal's heaven.

If NPR is church for the liberal, then I was raised in the church.

Otherwise, church was a foreign land. Our childhoods never escape us. I remember the soothing voice of NPR's Neil Conan and how he sounded a bit like God—or, at least, what I imagined God might sound like at that time in my life. I had no alternatives for what God might sound like. Like I said, I didn't grow up in church. Funny how often we imagine God to be like those we looked up to as children. Maybe that's why so many people today imagine God as a sort of Santa Claus, dispensing the gift of heaven to those on the good list and giving eternal coal to those on the naughty list. Our childhood experiences shape our view of God. The great theologian A. W. Tozer once said that the most important thing about a person is what they think about when they think about God. It's true. One's picture of God is inextricably wrapped up in images from the past. People raised in fundamentalist, Bible-thumping churches describe having a hard time shaking their image of a God who stands erect, with suit and tie, behind a pulpit, screaming. His Bible is open, and he's pointing his wrathful, old, wrinkly finger at everyone below him, saying that they've been sinning too much that week. I never had to shake that image. For me, God was like Neil Conan—nice, thoughtful, nonjudgmental, progressive, politically active, and, like the NPR radio hosts during a pledge drive, hated asking his listeners for money. God was also probably a Democrat.

That's the image I had of what God was most likely like.

A bumper sticker on my dad's Subaru says it all: "Not all who wander are lost." We were *that* family. My old man, a child of the sixties, sought adventure even if it meant getting lost in the woods on occasion. I was a grandchild of the sixties, eager to journey

wherever Dad led. I spent countless days in the back of the Subaru with Dad driving, always about to run out of gas, lost on our way to a hot spring or powwow or national park. Again, what I call *lost* he generously called *wandering*. I suppose *wandering* is the hippy way of saving face for not having bought a map.

Despite all of this, I loved getting lost with Dad.

And I miss getting lost. Mom and Dad were both good, thoughtful, justice-loving people who raised their only son with the best modern sensibilities the American middle class had to offer. We were pro-choice, pluralist, tolerant, and suspicious of any kind of exclusivist, conservative ideology that said Jesus was the only way to God. I was taught to care deeply about the injustices of our world. Listening to NPR, Dad would intermittently cuss or blurt out his disapproval or anger over this or that story—the exploits of greedy corporations, ecological degradation in Brazil, pro-lifers bombing another abortion clinic, what some conservative president just signed into law. He was that guy who attended rallies for his beliefs. He got arrested a couple of times. I love him for that.

I always had a vague curiosity about God. In those early years, I imagined God was nice the way grandpas are nice. My grandpa would give me money to go to the candy store and take me fishing during the summers when I'd visit him in Montana. God was like that—distant, benevolent, and senile. Still, God didn't seem all that interested in involving himself in my day-to-day life. God was also incredibly progressive, always getting super infuriated with Christians for their closed-mindedness, judgmentalism, and hypocrisy. Yet when it came to addicts, sinners, and non-Christians, God never judged. Nor would he judge me. The Christians were God's biggest problem. God never judged anyone except for his own people.

Then something happened. When I was sixteen, a guy named Matt at the YMCA told me late one night after pickup basketball that if I didn't believe in Jesus Christ, I'd be squatting in hell for

eternity. As a cradle progressive who conceptualized God as a distant grandpa, I quickly broke out in progressive hives. *How offensive*, I thought. *How does he know who's going to hell?* Alone, riding the #18 bus home, I mulled over Matt's words. A flow of catchphrases that I'd always held dear ran through my mind like a cracked Paul Simon record:

"All paths lead to God."

"Who are you to judge?"

"What's good for you is good for you; what's good for me is good for me."

I wrote Matt off as closed-minded. Still, I was fascinated by the notion that there were people in our world who believed an actual God existed who had something to say and was actually involved in the world. Matt's words caused me to think for the first time about hell, judgment, and the afterlife. Oddly enough, the notion of hell awakened within me a kind of hunger—hunger for truth, for God, and for answers. The NPR God was a nice God. But that God was far too distant to actually address the real issues in a sixteen-year-old's soul.

One day, after a series of events and a brisk reading of Mark's Gospel, I "got saved," as the old preachers would say. There was Jesus, moseying his way into my life the same way he'd ridden into Jerusalem on an ass's back: slowly, awkwardly, making quite a mess along the way. And there I was—a sixteen-year-old progressive, sensible, sensitive, nonjudgmental kid who had come to believe in the God of the Bible. I found a church, started reading my Bible, and eventually burned many of my non-Christian CDs after hearing a sermon about the evil of the secular music industry.

I came out to my parents, so to speak. Telling them about my conversion was difficult. Neither knew exactly what to do. My mom worried I'd joined a cult because I started fasting. Dad stared. The only imaginable comparison would be when a gay kid comes out to

his really conservative parents. Here I was, a new Christian coming out to parents who had no idea how to handle their son's new faith.

They both accepted me for who I was, even if it was unbearably awkward.



There are two aspects of Christian belief that people struggle to swallow. For one, people resist the idea that Jesus is the *only* way to God. I did. I read and reread the part in the Bible where Jesus says he is the only way to God.¹ It was a heresy to my young progressive brain to believe that there was one single path to God and countless false paths. For some time, I believed I could follow Jesus and mentally white out that part of his message. But I came to agree with Bono, who said that either Jesus is who he said he is or he's a lunatic like Charles Manson. I came to believe wholeheartedly that Jesus *is* the only way to God. I think when many Christians say Jesus is the only way to God, what they're actually intending to say is that *their way* is the only way to God—that their church or denomination or theological preference is the only path. Jesus didn't say that. The religious system of Christianity or church is not the only way to God. Jesus Christ *himself* is the only way to God. I'm not a keeper of the way; I'm just a journeyer on the way.

Another struggle people have with Christian faith is the guilt associated with it. Guilt is viewed in our culture as the antithesis of good and mature spirituality, and having guilt is seen as nothing more than the burden of religious authoritarianism and oppression. I was quickly overwhelmed by a great deal of guilt over my sin—the death in the marrow of my bones—after becoming a Christian. It was, in fact, the first time I felt real guilt. Converting to Christianity does that to people. I'm sure a psychologist might say that it's harmful to a young person's psyche to tell them of their moral ineptitude and sinfulness—but boy, I certainly needed someone to tell me

the hard stuff. Like college students who bring home their dirty laundry, we receive from our divine parent a clean bed and a good meal in exchange for our dirty laundry that we soiled while at the college *they* paid for. When we are welcomed into Christianity, we will inevitably bring all of our dirty laundry with us.

Because it's inclined to reject any form of guilt, our culture has gone to great lengths to try to stop all forms of judging. But we can't do that. By condemning and judging all forms of judgment, we undermine our authority to speak boldly against murder, poverty, rape, or greed. Jesus said that you'd be judged as you judge.² Jesus judged and permitted judgment, although he judged with great grace. I think people today reject all expressions of judgment because if they make a judgment, they would themselves have to be judged. You can only judge if your own hands are clean. And because none of our hands are clean, we've ceased and banned all judgment. But that isn't good. We need judgment.

When I embraced Jesus and began reading the Bible, I started feeling guilt like I'd never felt before—conviction over my lust, my hypocrisy, and my addictions. Guilt over cheating on tests. Guilt over disrespecting my parents. All that was good guilt. Conviction was a God-sent correction of the nasty stuff in my life that needed to be dealt with. Some people say the Bible is oppressive. I think the Bible is oppressive in a good way, the way a cast on a broken bone is oppressive—it restricts to bring about healing.

Christianity forced me to deal with the evil inside me. I don't question that evil is out there in the world. Evil *is* out there. It's also in here. I see evil almost everywhere—in music, in culture, in art, in religion. Evil is out there. But by externalizing the darkness, we inherently internalize the light. By that I mean that to the degree we see the evil all around us we are too often less likely to see it in ourselves. Or to put it more simply, we externalize the cause of darkness and internalize the consequences of darkness. This is

the root of hypocrisy: the unwillingness to see the darkness inside ourselves. Christianity doesn't allow us to externalize darkness. It forces us to deal with the darkness inside our own hearts.

We're all guilty of externalizing the darkness. I was listening to a debate between a fundamentalist Christian and a fundamentalist atheist arguing for and against religion. The atheist would have us believe that if people would just leave the comfy confines of their faith and come to reason and logic and rationality, then the world would grow up and be free from the trappings of superstition and stupidity. He of course failed to mention that it was a calculated scientific logic and rationale, perverted by sick nationalistic pride, not theology or religion, that came up with the atomic bomb and eugenics. Then the Christian guy was blaming the atheist for disbelieving the Bible, ignoring morality, and rejecting the claims of Jesus. Both sides sat there and blamed the other side for all the evil in the world. I wonder what would have happened had one of them just stopped and said, "Hey, you're right, I've got some work to do. I confess my sin." Had they, viewership would've tanked. Nobody would have made a lick of money. Because there's no money in humility.

Christianity doesn't allow us to export guilt to others. It forces us to deal with our own first.



Friday is the day we own up to our own part of the evil in the world. It's the day I admit my culpability, my part, my doings in the system of darkness. It's the day I look up at Jesus as the one *I've* nailed to the cross and stop blaming everyone else for the nails in his hands. On Friday, the buck stops here.

I can take responsibility because Jesus did. Theologians often speak of Jesus as the most evil person in history—not Hitler, not Pol Pot, not my neighbor whose figs have been falling in my backyard

since March. Jesus Christ is the most evil person in world history. Not that Jesus ever once did one evil thing. Not at all. Jesus is the most evil person in history because as he hung vulnerably on the cross for the world, every last pound and ounce of the world's sin and evil and injustice was laid harshly upon his back that he might bear it for us. And in that way, Jesus was the most evil person in history. He bore evil to break evil. He took responsibility for his world so we might learn to do the same for ourselves.

I see Good Friday the way I see *Scooby-Doo*—that lovable morning cartoon about Shaggy, Fred, Daphne, Velma, and their dog, Scooby-Doo. Nearly every kid I knew watched *Scooby-Doo* on Saturday mornings with an oversized bowl of sugary cereal at some point in their early development. “The Gang,” as they were called, were always getting themselves into trouble here or there—getting robbed, scared, lost. In each adventure, their task remained the same: discover and catch the villain. Whether the villain was a ghost, a witch, or any other ghoul, every episode would end the same way—the Gang would catch the villain. At the end, the Gang would pull off the mask of the villain to reveal their identity. And in every single episode, without fail, the villain turned out to be a person you'd never expect. We'd always assume the villain would be that really mean tour guide, or the obsessive park ranger, or the mean gasoline attendant from the beginning of the episode. But as the Gang ripped off the mask of the villain, it was always quite the surprise. The villain was always the really nice janitor, the sweet teacher, or the good guy.

Good Friday is also like this children's book I've read. On a shelf in his room, my son keeps a battered copy of one of those gold-bound children's books that every kid had a million of. It's titled *The Monster at the End of This Book*. The story is simple—page by page, loveable, furry old Grover, scared as can be, pleads with the young reader before him not to turn to the next page because, as

the title aptly claims, there will be a monster at the end of the book. Grover worries whether anyone will follow his timely advice. The reader, of course, never does. Curious children like my own (to Grover's discontent) interpret Grover's drama as a bit of a running joke, refusing on each account to follow his incessant plea. Then we soon come to the end of the book. With a quiet thankfulness, Grover discovers that there *is* a monster at the end of the book. But, thank heaven, it isn't a scary monster. In fact it's *he*, Grover, who is the monster at the end of the book.

Grover and *Scooby-Doo* teach us precisely what Christianity has been trying to teach us about Good Friday: the villain and the monster aren't who we thought they were. I know by experience that Christianity's view of humanity is a big hang-up for folks. *Depraved, evil, warped, bent, malicious, selfish*—these are just a few of the adjectives we consistently find regarding humanity in the Bible. I think lots of people think those words create shame and self-hatred. One friend told me this view of humanity made him depressed. My response is simple: one of my greatest problems with the general American sentiment is that we take too high a perspective on humanity, believing that we have endless potential to progress, that we've evolved, that we've improved. I just don't buy it. With all of our technological improvements, we are still fully broken people both inside and out. While we may be updating our human software here and there, the hard drive is as sick as it's ever been. For such an "advanced" world, I'm shocked at all the rape, pillage, and atrocity we still manage to come up with. For being so "evolved," we seem to still be able to do deeply evil acts.

In fact, my biggest beef with evolution isn't what evolution says about the past. My problem with evolution is what it says of the future. It ultimately suggests, "Hey, give humanity a few more years and we'll get everything cleaned up. We'll be better. We'll *evolve* into something better. Just give us more time." I can't see that happening.

The malignant optimism and unfounded sentimentality we've told ourselves about ourselves won't do it for me. We're simply never going to evolve out of our brokenness—at least not until the kingdom of God comes in its fullness. We're bent. We're cracked. And we need something deeper than a couple more years of evolution to be renewed.

The Bible nails it. I agree that Christianity assumes a rather dark view of humanity—that we're sinners, hopeless in and of ourselves. That we are, well, powerless. But boy do we need that kind of honesty. In the end, we need that dose of reality. Perhaps the Bible is simply trying to do what nobody else down here wants to do—be honest about who we really are.



How does God overcome all this evil?

In the often-unexamined book of Hosea, we're told that God commanded a prophet named Hosea to marry a mysterious woman named Gomer. The backstory to the marriage of Hosea and Gomer is of great importance—namely, that Gomer was a whore. I deeply appreciate what this story does to us as modern readers—particularly, secular readers, as they might easily find themselves doing a proverbial double take to stories like Hosea's in the Bible. Even for believers, Hosea's story of a holy prophet wedding a woman of ill repute doesn't seem to fit particularly well into the confines of our belief in a safe and predictable God. Why would God do this? Nor does this story offer healthy guidelines for a successful marriage. Hosea is an aberration in our assumption of a predictable God.

Of course, marriage—like that of Hosea and Gomer—is a perpetual image in Scripture of both God's love for the world and the way in which the world treats God in response to his love. In the book of Malachi, God says in a rather long speech that he hates divorce.³ Some have taken this to mean that God hates when humans

get divorced (which does break God’s heart). But that’s not what Malachi is saying. Israel, God’s people, has actually been unfaithful to God and has divorced him. Malachi is actually saying that God hates divorce because he himself has experienced divorce. He literally hates it. He’s been there. God is a divorcé. God knows what it’s like to lose the love of his life to divorce.

Now, by giving ourselves time and space to allow the intent of Hosea to seep into the cracks of our belief systems, this can, as it has with me, quickly move from the category of “weird” to “provocatively beautiful.” Hosea, as the Jewish rabbis taught, is actually a picture of God’s love for his people. God brought Hosea and Gomer together for one explicit reason—God wanted to show off to the world what kind of love he himself was all about. God desired to offer a snapshot of his love for the world through a really weird, unexpected, scandalous marriage between a prophet and a whore.

What’s most fascinating isn’t God’s instruction to Hosea to undertake something peculiar, even unorthodox, in his name—God does those sorts of things here and there with seeming regularity throughout Scripture. At no point in human history has God satisfied himself to live within the boundaries of the etiquette books we’ve written for him to obey. God transcends etiquette. God does what God does. However, what’s most surprising is that if this story is about God’s love for Israel, God appears to be at odds with his own holiness. We’re dealing with the fact that God takes up whores as lovers. How can a holy God do that? Long ago, I read a breathtaking little book by A. W. Tozer called *The Pursuit of Holiness*. Tozer overwhelmed me with a new sense of respect and awe for God’s penetrating holiness. He talks about how God is so unrelentingly holy that he could never, even momentarily, look upon human sin with his own eyes. God is that holy. But that doesn’t seem to align with Hosea’s (God’s) love for Gomer (us). Certainly, God is holy—holy beyond all perceivable knowledge, wisdom, and understanding. But Hosea

throws us a curveball in our understanding of how a holy God deals with unholiness. Perhaps in other religions the deities deal with evil through finger-pointing, shouting matches, or even the silencing of a perpetrator. But in Hosea, God not only looks upon evil—God takes evil on a honeymoon. How does God deal with evil?

He puts a ring on it.

That's why Paul says the church is the bride of Jesus.⁴ Bride is a generous title. The church is more like the whore and Jesus is our Hosea. We're the new Gomer. And God conquers evil by marrying us. Why wouldn't we accept love like this? Jesus said, "Light has come into the world, but people *loved* darkness instead of light."⁵ Simple. We don't jazz to God's terrible love because we love the safety of darkness over the violence of the light. Light is scary. It exposes the monsters.

It's impossible to accept this love of God yet simultaneously reject the truth of our unfaithfulness.

Mom told me no monsters were under my bed. She was right. But there still are monsters. Jesus talked about monsters. Bad ones. Scary, big-horned ones, with warts and all. Turns out the monster isn't *under* the bed; the monster is *in* the bed. It's us. It's me. Christianity refuses to say that others are the monsters. I'm the monster, and God's placed his ring on this whore. Me. You. Us. And when this love comes, we all irrationally hold on to the darkness the way my uncle holds on to his old stacks of *National Geographic*, even if there's no sane reason to.

I'm the villain. I'm the monster. So are you. And we shouldn't be too quick to think some other monster will be at the end of the book.