



*the*  
**FORECAST**

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A COUNTERFEIT MEMOIR  
ABOUT EVERYTHING YOU  
KNOW IS TRUE.

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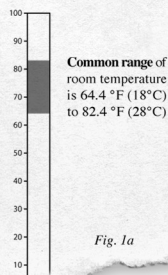
CAROLINE FERDINANDSEN

Current Weather Forecast:

## Room Temperature

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The non-scientific term to denote the certain temperature within an enclosed space at which humans are accustomed; however, the climate of a region may acclimatize people to higher or lower temperatures.



## CHAPTER 1

On a Saturday afternoon in the summer, at the age of 33, I declared my entire life to be room temperature.

A passerby would no doubt see my colorful impatiens in the yard, the children's sidewalk chalk designs, and our predictable SUV parked to one side of the domestic tableau, and declare the Clandons to be the warmest family in the neighborhood. But on days like this one, I cast aside my good fortune and wished for more. More actually meant less—less sunshine, less smiling at church, less happily ever after. In the place of so much plastic goodness, I longed for a gritty—possibly dangerous—connection with something bigger than the props in my *cul de sac* and I couldn't figure out how to find it.

An hour earlier my husband and I had played catch with our quiet, familiar weapons. "Willow!" My husband's voice always sounded the same when he needed something: flat and demanding. "Did you forget to wash my new khakis?"

"I washed them yesterday. . . they're in the basket. But I don't think—"

"Oh, c'mon, you didn't iron them yet?" I could hear him rustling through the basket in the other room, muttering to himself. "How am I supposed to look the part today with my crappy old pants?"

“You didn’t tell me that you needed them *today*. What about your black pants?”

“It’s May. I’m not going to a funeral—I’m going to a meeting.” With his back turned, he zipped up his pair of infinitely second-rate pants and moved past me as a ghost disappears into the fog.

And then that was it.

That’s the way it always was with our violent disagreements. One of us found the other immensely incompetent in some small, domestic way, and then we chatted it out. While other couples threw objects around or threatened each other with luggage or legal papers, we quietly lived out our life’s disappointments in the form of laundry accusations and boycotts of affection.

So I dreamed of forecasting the future.

I was certain that in time I would feel something like I did in my youth. I wanted the road I was traveling to arrive at a switch-back, to reach a sudden U-turn that would bring me back to the kind of God-consciousness I felt at the age of nineteen.

*May I reach the mountain?  
The morning mist that hangs around me  
Is like the one that Moses felt  
Wandering to the crest  
Unable to face the holiness of God*

I had read this melodramatic little poem of mine many times before, now taped to my *Mommy’s Mayhem!* bulletin board. I had written it in college one night after tugging with the Old Testament and its stories of Moses and the blinding holiness of God. Youthful angst has its way of making marks in the wet cement of adulthood, and I loved the deep grooves and etchings it left on my identity. But as the decade waned, I felt I had no more poems in my soul, and the concrete under my feet seemed entirely unromantic. Brick-hard sidewalks need jackhammers, you see, and I had no access to such violence.

My three children—all under the age of seven—contributed to my unrest with numbingly familiar routines that at one time I suspected would be so utopian. In the early days of baby showers and ultrasounds, I had imagined only the picturesque moments. Instead, my life was a series of crappy tasks. Quite literally.

*Mommy! Kendall put a piece of dog food in her bottom!*

Dog food pellets, along with other objects such as coins and bits of Christmas ribbon, were some of the items that I, her mother, had to retrieve from Kendall's digestive tract over the years. No one had given me a manual that listed "sorting through fecal matter" as one of my job requirements. Nor had I realized the kind of exhausting physical demands that this life required of me.

And so the sundial moved in primitive stages across the flatlands of my life with very little drama.

I watched from the window to see if Connor would glance up from the driver's seat and smile at me—the quick I-forgive-you gesture that would often get me through the day. But no, he turned his affectionate gaze instead to the cell phone, a companion who would never be so rude as to forget to iron his khaki pants.

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"Mommy, why did Jesus have to die? I think God was being awfully mean."

Carly's honesty reminded me of the popular atheist professor who flatly declared God to be a masochist. Apparently he wasn't the only one who had picked up that vibe.

"Well, baby . . ." I was picking my words carefully since you don't mess around with childlike innocence. "God knew what he was doing all along." *C'mon, I think I can nail this.* "God knew the happy end of the story—not just the sad part."

"But why couldn't he have just gotten to the happy part first—and forget about the killing part."

*Crap.*

"Because . . . because the really sad part had already happened. The sad part was that the people he created had turned away from God—people like you and me. So he sent Jesus to set things straight and give us a second chance." Carly looked me full in the face, trying to get clarity as I continued. "I know God's plans are really hard to understand sometimes."

I paused with the enormous weight of my answer. I hated living on the parental side of the theological divide, having much preferred spending my childhood days in the ignorance hemisphere. I often recited biblical answers to my children with a sort of mnemonic reflex, but I would've much rather responded out of pure and unwavering belief. I watched Carly's mind turning over

my response and waited patiently for her next theological question. Would she ask how God created heaven and earth in less than a week with no mention of dinosaurs? Would she ever wonder why she couldn't pronounce half the words in the book of Leviticus? Would she one day question the clueless Israelites and God's troubling commands of violence?

"Ty says that bubble gum is made out of eyeball juice. Is that true?"

I had been rescued from the mysteries of the universe, and we moved on to discuss the science of Dubble Bubble. But through the day, in between vegetable chopping and Lego building, I thought about Carly's questions, tucking them away quietly. For I was the peddler of information, a mother with definitive answers on the narrow ledge between life and death.

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My marriage to Connor was a moving Venn diagram, with our individual circles moving sometimes closer, sometimes further away. When we were near to each other—in spirit and proximity—there was more shared space in the center, but as we drifted off to each side, we sometimes risked no overlap at all. At those times we were just two big zeroes floating in space.

If you were to shadow us during our waking hours on a random Thursday, for example, you would discover that our edges barely touched at all.

*6:15 a.m.*

Connor rises to shower and talk to himself. He plans the daily meetings in his head, anticipates the Branch Manager drama at the brokerage firm, and thinks about numbers. The patterns spin in his brain like a kaleidoscope, and he memorizes them all.

Willow has been awake since 5:30, having gotten up twice to subdue one or more of the children. She considers the responsibilities, scans the mental spreadsheet for missing fields, and thinks about lost sleep. Her head is filled with pieces of cotton—soft, fluffy routines shaped like stuffed bunnies.

*9:20 a.m.*

Connor has put out a corporate fire this morning and perspired through his pale dress shirt. He spins in his black ergonomic chair and applies hand sanitizer to his palms. The glowing pixels

from a hundred digital-demands are at his elbow. A tiny 3-D vein runs from his temple, disappearing into his hair.

The chaos called the Morning School Launch has left a mess. Little Kendall satisfies herself with the moving colors and sounds of PBS, while her mother re-arranges the family props and scrapes dried, amorphous substances from flat surfaces around the house.

*1:47 p.m.*

A young phone receptionist bursts into tears (having found out via text message that her boyfriend was dealing Ecstasy) and two of the senior brokers leave early for client-golf. Connor, whose job it is to stabilize the atmosphere, sends Cherry home and fields the calls himself.

Willow—between school pick-ups—takes Ty and Kendall to the grocery store to stock the shelves with weekly rations. The sound of the retarded wheel on the grocery cart, and its tendency to lean to the left, approximates Willow's *wacka-wacka* brain waves.

*7:31 p.m.*

Connor scans the mail after dinner. He is alone with the three children, irritated by their plastic gadgets but deeply in love with their movements around his feet. Shoulders tight, Connor watches cable news and monitors the tenuous bank account from the glow of his laptop.

His wife has fled to a Big Box store to be alone for one hour. It is, sadly, Willow's happy place. She picks up random objects and turns them over in her hands. Soft blankets, spa candles, paperback novels. Lousy substitutes.

*10:52 p.m.*

The LCD clock's blue numbers speak of lost time. It is the only light on Connor's face, and it renders his skin a shade of death. He adjusts first one leg, then the other. His wife is far from him. He sets his daily burdens out to the sea and drifts to sleep.

Willow rests on the dark side of the bed. One child has been asleep for several hours now; the other two, succumbing much later. She hears Connor's throat-rattle, the sound of repose. She reaches for his hand under the covers, but it is too late; he has left the building.

Tomorrow will be much like today. No change in the weather forecast.

My dear Ava was one of those rare friends who morphed from childhood buddy to lifetime comrade without either of us realizing it. It's hard to recreate instant history with new acquaintances, so the friends who knew you when you were young and evolving become part of your permanent archives.

Ava's history book had its own colorful pages, and she had settled into her domestic life a hundred miles away with a man she had met in college. She and Mister Jim, as she called him, had spent their twenties dabbling in missionary work. The two of them had lived the model spiritual life, and God had seen fit to return the favor with two miscarriages. But Ava had none of my cynicism. In the years following their grief, her maternal heart grew bigger and now they enjoyed a young adopted son, two years old. Ava never believed that adoption was a better gift than biology, nor did she believe the reverse. Instead, she lived as though she had no right to arm-wrestle God for the privilege of sovereign rule. I never coveted Ava's looks, husband, house, or son, but it was her faith that made me jealous.

Ava and I had a sweet agreement. We had a certain disdain for the chatty girlfriends who gossiped up a storm and exchanged meaningless text messages out of sheer boredom. So instead, we simply understood that we had each other's back—even during long patches of silence. When we did speak, Ava could fire off wisdom in quick retorts. I learned to find Ava's best advice and keep it hidden away in my back pocket.

For someone who hated the concept of "best friends," I had found mine. Her unwavering optimism was the perfect counterbalance to my annoying doubt, and I loved the quixotic way she brought me back to the light of God—even when I wasn't in the mood to bask in it. In the grand opera of our phone conversations, our playbill would look something like this:

- Act One: The Overture—*Happy Banter*
- Act Two: Hints of Despair
- Act Three: Willow's Solo (*The Pain! The Pain!*)
- Act Four: Ava's Retort (*God is Good!*)
- Act Five: A Quiet Interlude (*Talk of Pets*)
- Intermission—
- Act Six: Willow's Logic (*Why?*)
- Act Seven: Ava's Finale (*But God is Good!*)

My faithful friend could find beauty in suffering when so many could not. I clung to her through adulthood perhaps more for this reason than any other.

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When Connor returned late in the day, the sun had gone down and my three little muses had been beautifully subdued. When he walked in the door, I couldn't help but make a crack about his lousy pants.

"Geez, couldn't you at least wear some new pants for this meeting?"

I knew his weakness. The gentle humor melted his firm resolve to stay angry, and he poked me in the ribs like he had a crush on me. "It's been a long day, Will. I know I was keyed up this morning."

Right about here I was tempted to begin the speech I had rehearsed all day long. It was a good one, too, with its careful logic and manipulative sub-points. But I looked at his face and found a dose of mercy I didn't think I had. "Yeah. You were." He waited for me to strike. "But I was, too." Ah, maturity had triumphed.

I followed him to the bed, and we lay quietly beside each other as I stroked his arm without saying a word. In a few moments, he spoke softly. "You want to know what we talked about at our meeting?"

"Ways to snag new customers with hypnosis?"

"Will . . ." His long pause freaked me out. "Willow, they asked me to transfer to Texas."

I didn't move. For some odd reason the first thing I thought about wasn't the school districts, our church family, a new salary, or even if I wanted to go to Texas. Instead, I panicked about the moment two guys with a moving van would lift my couch and see four years of hard toddler-living exposed along the hidden baseboards and carpet fibers. This fear confirmed what I had suspected all along: motherhood had made me a nut case.

He pressed me further. "What do you think? Are we crazy if we did it?"

"You gotta give me a minute here." I lay on the bed, growing stiffer as I thought about the enormity of moving five people and all their accoutrements to a massive state about which I knew next

to nothing besides the fact that a guy named JR was killed there in the eighties.

“C’mon, am I crazy for even thinking about it?”

“Yes. Yes, you are. And I love that about you.”

“So you think we could pull this off?”

The right answer, of course, was that we should pray about it. I sat up and stared at him. “I know nothing right now about this. You’ve dropped a big load on me without any details.”

And so in the light of one reading lamp beside the bed, we stayed up half the night stretching and pulling our options in every direction, discussing everything from the eminently practical (pay raises and pensions) to the enormously trivial (will I be able to plant begonias?). Our process of negotiation highlighted our inherent differences. If my mind were a philosopher, then Connor’s was a manual laborer. I spun and twirled ideas; he hammered them onto fenceposts. I conceived the blueprints; he took out his T-square. I speculated; he clinched. It’s the beauty of synergy, is it not?

After a quick prayer together that might have been entirely for show, I fell against my Eastern pillow with the gut feeling that this time next year my children might well be developing a Texas accent.

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We waited for an answer from God.

That’s what good Christian couples do when they face monster decisions like relocation, church membership or purchasing guest towels. We were steeped in evangelical idioms like “Let go, and let God” or “God will give us peace about it,” yet my self-focused faith seemed unable to discern what this might really look like. Connor was dutiful, the follower-of-protocol, and he led us into decision-making with proper spiritual language, if nothing else. We decided we would give God three days to make himself clear.

During those three days, I found myself chasing some vague peace. Would this be akin to a spa treatment? Would I feel a tremor if I looked at a map of Texas? How does anyone know what a peaceful decision of supposed to look like? I mean, what if Lucifer, Stalin, and Kim Jong Il felt peace before their tough decisions? I was lost.

Even so, we pulled the trigger on the third day and took aim square in the middle of Houston.

We were headed south. Telling the children was no small feat.

“What does Texas have?” My logical kindergartener Ty demanded the imaginary spreadsheet that laid out the benefits of Southern living.

“Well, Texas is totally cool,” said my husband, pointing proudly at the shape of our new home state on the map as though every state in the union, except maybe Florida, was secretly jealous of Texas’s enviable contours. “We’re going to live here . . . kind of near the Gulf of Mexico.” He drew an imaginary circle around Houston with his finger.

“I don’t like Texas!” Carly was never one for diplomacy. “I think it stinks.”

“You know, honey, everyone feels a little scared sometimes about moving to a new place. That’s totally natural,” I said.

“I’m not scared. I said Texas stinks.”

Connor stepped in, seeing how I had completely misread Carly’s meaning. “Have you ever been there? How do you know it’s bad?”

“I just know it.” She busied herself in the fabric of her doll’s clothes, refusing to look at Connor’s maps and bribery brochures of Astroworld and NASA space center.

“Well, I know the schools there are very good.”

Silence.

“Yes, that’s right! And just think how exciting it will be to decorate a new room. Daddy and I will let you pick out whatever color you like.”

Okay, this felt coercive and I hated it. I moved over and sat quietly beside her, pressing my finger to my lips to signal that any further logic from Dad would be futile. These emotional adjustments would simply have to come in time.

Little Ty was a lawyer looking for the evidence as he scanned the map as though he knew what he was studying. Kendall, of course, in all her toddler ignorance, knew nothing of our plans. But she subconsciously sensed the tension between the Children’s Union and the Parent Company and ramped up the whining. She hovered near my legs, as she was prone to do, occasionally latching on without warning. This wasn’t working like we had hoped.

Connor did what every good man does when he knows his plans aren't well received: he decided to alphabetize our CD collection. Tomorrow wouldn't do—it must be today. While he prepared for our exodus by solving real problems (Band names first; album titles second), I was left to solve the fuzzier ones.