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FOUR TAMARS

SEARCHING FOR MEANING IN
DIFFICULT CIRCUMSTANCES

Contents

Acknowledgments	9
Chapter 1	11
Chapter 2	27
Chapter 3	45
Chapter 4	59
Chapter 5	65
Chapter 6	77
Chapter 7	93
Chapter 8	103
Chapter 9	109
Chapter 10	121
Chapter 11	131
Afterword	135



Chapter 1

The woman shook her head apologetically as she handed me the tickets. “I’m sorry, ma’am. We weren’t able to seat the two of you together,” she explained. I groaned and handed Nate his boarding pass.

“But we chose our seats online, right next to each other,” I argued with the Delta ticket agent, “and we aren’t late checking in. This just doesn’t make any sense.”

“Honestly, I really am sorry,” she nodded. “I’m not sure how this happened, but we don’t have any seats together.” I wanted to keep pleading, but Nate put his hand on my shoulder.

“It’s okay, hon,” he said. “It’s only a three-hour flight. We’ll survive. We brought books.”

A few hours later, we boarded our flight. Our destination: a ministers’ retreat in Louisiana. This would be our first time going to any conference as ministers. We buckled into our seats, five rows apart, and I turned and strained to see Nate. My husband had begun pastoring in 2013, only a year before. He still wasn’t comfortable parking in the clergy parking while making hospital visits. We weren’t sure we belonged at this conference. But a neighboring pastor had talked us into going, and before we had time to change our minds, I booked the trip.

As the plane took off, I pulled out a book I’d been trying to read for two months. Every time I’d tried

to read this book, or any book for that matter, something more pressing interrupted. One of my children's owies needed a band-aid. Another one of my kids' hungry tummies wanted a banana. A student in one of my classes emailed me wondering when I'd have his essay graded. A member of the church my husband pastors had an emergency. By the time I got to bed each night, my to-do list was longer than when I woke up, even though I'd been busy all day.

In the forced silence of our flight, I read the back cover of the book I'd brought along, and then I opened to the first chapter. With each page I turned, my mind tugged toward my own memoir, long since shelved. In 2005, as part of my master's degree, I finished my first version of the stories from my childhood—the stories in the book you're now reading. I was signed by an agent in New York, and we had interest from an editor at a large New York publishing house. The editor told my agent she cried through the whole manuscript, that she wanted to publish it. I was stunned when my agent relayed the news to me.

"They want to take your book, Tina," he announced. "You just need to connect the stories and make the timeline clearer. It jumps around a little too much, and it's hard to follow in places."

So I tried. I called my agent after staring at my computer screen for two days.

"I just can't make the stories less hectic," I admitted. "It was hectic when it happened. I can barely make sense of my early experiences. I just don't know how to make sense of it for someone else." He listened, and then he agreed.

“I know it was hectic, but that’s your job as the writer, to make it so your reader can understand it. You’ve got to frame it for us,” he urged. I vowed to keep working on it, and we hung up.

Then I got a full-time teaching job. I spent hours teaching others to write, and the thought of my own manuscript faded into the background. I had my first child, and then two years later, my second; then I had my third—right on schedule—after two more years. Between work and mothering, the only writing I managed was short, private journal entries about my babies.

At some point in the blur of young motherhood, I reread the pages I’d written about my early life, and I decided to put it away. It was too graphic to share. The pages were filled with my shame. So I boxed the pages and stored my life stories on a flash drive, and I raised my kids and loved my husband. I taught at the community college that took a chance on me just two years after I graduated with my master’s degree. I fed our dogs and helped my husband feed the cows and chickens and goats on our three-acre farm. I ignored my manuscript. But I never forgot it.

I remember one moment in particular when my two youngest children were one and three. I was washing dishes, and strands of my dark, unruly, unbrushed hair fell around my neck. I was wearing the exact same clothes I’d worn the day before. My house was a mess. I hadn’t cooked a decent dinner in two days. I was tired. I stood, washing sippy cups and cereal bowls, and I watched through the window as the children played in their wooden sandbox. Our two grumpy old dogs lay nearby, raising their heads and growling whenever a stranger walked by.

For a few minutes, I watched the scene absent-mindedly. Then I really *saw* the moment. I paused, motionless, water washing down the drain, my hands frozen mid-scrub, and I watched my babies play. There was something so lovely about the view from my kitchen sink that I wanted to capture it. I felt tugged toward a pad of paper on the kitchen table. *I need to write this moment*, I thought. *I don't want to forget it.*

Adrian's blond hair curled around his ears. Clara's small hands reached toward him. My two youngest babies played and laughed. And I never wanted to forget it.

So I turned off the faucet, dried my hands, and started toward the dining room, searching the piles of junk mail and bills for a pen. Then the screams came. I turned toward the sliding glass door and rushed to their side. Little Clara could not yet speak, couldn't tell me that her big brother had dumped sand in her eyes. But her gritty hair, her bright red, tear-filled eyes, told for her. By the time I got her cleaned up and doctored, we were all hungry for lunch. By the time lunch was finished, I'd forgotten exactly what it was about that moment that needed to be written.

My life was littered with moments like these. So I relished the quiet of the airplane and devoured someone else's moments at thirty thousand feet. In my seat, I cried for the author's story and for mine, and I whispered a prayer: "God, You see my own manuscript and my desire to please You. I can go on with my life and ignore the pages I've written if that's what You want. But I just can't shake it. It's always there, sneaking into my thoughts. When I bathe my daughter, when I wash the dishes, when I drive to work—I am never free of it.

Please, Lord, give me direction, and it has to be clear. Shut doors, and I won't try to break them down. But if You open them, I will walk through them if You'll help me."

We landed in Louisiana, and I forgot all about my prayer and my book for a few days.

Then God spoke into my life.

The second night of the conference, there were no vacant seats together. The building was already almost at capacity although we arrived early. I took a deep breath and looked at my husband. *What is it about this trip that we can't seem to sit together?* I silently wondered. Nate and I tried to hide our irritation.

"You two can sit together later," the usher whispered with a smile softening her face. "There's a couple of seats over there." She motioned toward flimsy white folding chairs, pushed against a wall near the balcony stairs. "You'd better hurry," she urged when she saw our hesitation, "even those seats won't last long."

Resigned, we weaved through the crowds and claimed our seats. At six feet seven Nate struggled to keep his feet out of the aisle. He settled directly behind me, crunched in a chair with no padding and no leg room.

"We paid money to attend this conference. You think they'd make sure they had enough room for everyone," I grumbled quietly. Looking around, it was clear. We could either sit where we were, or we could leave. There simply were no cushioned, comfortable seats together.

As I tried to get comfortable in my chair, I thought I heard God speak: "I've already anointed your seat for you. I've told people to pray for the woman sitting here tonight." That thought troubled me. I didn't want

anyone to pray for me. I was so frustrated by the long lines we'd waited in just to get into the sanctuary. Then once the doors opened, the jostling, pushing, shoving, all at the hands of ministers, were almost enough to cause me to wait in the car for service to be over. I didn't want prayer. I wanted to sit next to my husband and listen to the preacher. I shrugged. *Either way, we're here*, I reasoned. *And maybe I could use the prayer*. I smirked, a bit embarrassed at my bad attitude.

A woman approached me during the first song, and my stomach tightened. Maybe I hadn't made it up.

"Would it be alright if I prayed for you?" she asked shyly. I nodded and smiled, closed my eyes, and bowed my head. I heard her words climb over the sounds of the music: "God protect her family and give her strength to do what You've called her to do." She prayed, and I listened, mouthing my agreement. Then she walked back to her seat, just a few rows behind me. I looked around, curious to see if others were leaving their seats to pray. No one was.

Then the next song began, and before the first verse was over, a young man rounded the corner right in front of me. He must have come down the stairs that our chairs were tucked against. He had a woman in tow, his hand grasping hers. As soon as he turned the corner, I looked up, and he stopped midstride. Then he pointed at me. "Her," he spoke loud enough to be heard over the music. His eyes met mine, and then I looked away, almost afraid of him. He was quite young—maybe nineteen or twenty years old—and his face was pocked with acne. He was thin and immature-looking, but I felt a twinge of fear as he locked eyes with me. My own insecurities rose to the surface. *Maybe they think I took*

something, I speculated. *Maybe he knows me from somewhere. Maybe I'm in his chair.* I struggled to make sense of his finger pointing at my chest.

The young man stepped the final step toward me and cupped his palm against my forehead. He closed his eyes and prayed. All the while, I stared, wide-eyed, waiting for Nate to intervene. After all, this young man didn't ask if he could pray for me. He didn't ask if he could touch me. I didn't want his hand on my head, his words in my mind. Yet, he aggressively pushed into my forehead as he prayed. I stared at him, and I didn't feel a thing. No goosebumps. No tears. Not even anger. It was surreal. And it felt empty. But years of being in the altar at Pentecostal services had trained me well. After a moment of him praying *at* me, I closed my eyes and bowed my head. And I heard every word he said without really *hearing* him.

Then he walked away, climbed the stairs into the balcony, and I never saw him again, although I spent the rest of the conference trying. Even though we were there for two more days, that was the last time anyone came to my seat to pray for me.

Nate and I sat through the rest of the service, went out to eat with a couple we knew from a town near our own home in California, and then we went back to our cabin and settled into bed. In the dark, lying in bed together, my husband of fifteen years grabbed my hand.

"Hey, what did that guy pray tonight? What did he say?" Nate asked. I scrunched my nose and punched his arm playfully.

"If you saw it, why didn't you do something?" I snickered as I thought back to the moment. Then something shifted in my spirit.

“I don’t know, really, what he meant,” I admitted. In the dark, as I relived the moment, all of the feelings I should have felt while the young man prayed for me flooded over me. My palms began to sweat, and my heart beat fast.

“I can’t believe I actually remember every word,” I muttered. I was stunned with the depth of detail that rushed at me as I recalled the moment. I saw the young man’s face, his striped tie, the woman standing bashfully behind him.

“Well?” Nate asked, growing impatient. “What did he say?” Though it had been nothing but a nuisance when it happened, somehow the telling of it mattered. I was almost afraid to say it out loud.

“He said, ‘Stand tall, Tamar, thou palm. Let others find refuge in your strength.’”

Nate dropped my hand and rolled toward me. I wondered if it meant something to him, that maybe he used to date someone named Tamar, for instance.

“Why would someone call you a Tamar?” he wondered aloud. “I mean, this is a minister’s conference. You don’t just walk up to someone and call her a Tamar, you know?” I listened while Nate spoke, realizing he was right. I nodded.

“You do know who Tamar is, don’t you?” Nate persisted, clearly growing agitated and defensive of me. I nodded again. And then it dawned on me. I knew who three of them were.

I thought back to the Scripture passages I’d read about Judah’s daughter-in-law. Judah—the fourth son of Israel. The brother who convinced the others not to kill Joseph when they cast him into the pit and then spent the next several years under an intense crushing

and reshaping by the Lord. That Judah had a son who married a Tamar. The son, Onan, died before they had children, so, as was customary, Onan's brother was to marry her to provide an heir. Tamar's brother-in-law performed part of his duty. He brought her into his bed, but he used her for his sexual pleasure. She gave herself to him willingly, hoping for a child. Then he swindled her. She was a broken woman with no one to protect her. And her brother-in-law took what he wanted, but he refused to give her what she wanted, spilling his seed on the ground rather than chancing a child with her.

Judah's Tamar was so desperate, so broken, that she prostituted herself to Judah, her own father-in-law. She lured him to what he thought was a harlot's bed, made sure his seed landed where it should have, and bore the shame of carrying a child with no man to walk beside her—all to get what was rightfully hers. And what did her prostitution get her? Did she end up stoned to death? Was she ostracized?

No. Judah repented and made things as right as could be in the situation. Her actions got her a son and a place in the lineage of King David, which, by extension, planted her in the bloodline of the Messiah. Judah's Tamar wasn't even a Jew. She'd been brought into the people of God through marriage. *Maybe I'm that Tamar*, I wondered as I wrestled with the details. After all, I married a man who had been raised in the church while I converted as a young adult. This Tamar, though she clearly had behaved craftily, perhaps even deceitfully, had only done so because she didn't see any other option to get out of the misery she was in. She didn't create her bad situation. But she fought to get out of it. As I considered her actions, hope rose in me. *Maybe I'm going to*

be okay, I thought. I didn't always do right, but I did the best I could. And I fought to escape my darkness. Maybe my past won't always hurt me.

I remembered another Tamar, King David's daughter. David's Tamar was raped by her own brother and then cast off. Rape is a strong word, but it's fitting for the harm Amnon did to her. When David's Tamar realized what Amnon planned to do, she begged him not to. "Please marry me instead of violating me," she pleaded. "Don't steal my life." But he refused. In the heat of passion, because he couldn't control himself, he controlled her. He stole her virginity. Then he despised her.

This Tamar begged not to be used. She was pure. She was chaste. She was upright. And what did her attempt at purity get her? A prince to protect her? No. A brother who dishonored her and a father who refused to punish him. She lived a miserable, broken life. She was the daughter of a king, but she was loathed by her brother because of her wisdom and chastity. *Am I her?* I questioned. *I'm not pure. I've been defiled, but I have also chosen badly on my own.* I wrestled with the thought and struggled to see how this Tamar had anything to do with me.

Then I thought of the final Tamar. She was King David's granddaughter. This Tamar was the daughter of Absalom, the only brother who truly loved the sister Amnon assaulted. He loved her enough to kill for her, to avenge for her. Then he named his own daughter in honor of his broken sister: Tamar, daughter of Absalom, granddaughter of King David, and "of a fair countenance" (II Samuel 14:27). That's all we know about this Tamar, Absalom's daughter. Nothing else.

In the silence, I struggled with the young man's words. More accurately, I wrestled with what I was beginning to realize were God's words.

I'd read these passages before, more than once. *Lord, I questioned silently, am I a Tamar? Is that what You're telling me?* He didn't answer. He didn't have to.

I struggled to breathe. Hesitantly, almost afraid, I whispered, "Which one am I?"

And I knew. I was all of them.

I reached for Nate's hand again, grateful the lights were off and the moonlight was weak.

"I know why you'd call someone a Tamar at a ministers' conference," I said. Even in the dim light, I could see Nate lower his eyebrows and purse his lips.

"God told him to," I whispered these four words, almost afraid to say it out loud.

"Huh?" Nate winced.

I knew it didn't make sense. While I still saw myself through the eyes of my brokenness, Nate saw what was before him—an Apostolic pastor's wife, the mother of his children.

"Remember the airplane ride," I began. "How we had to sit apart?" I told him about my difficulty deciding what to do with my manuscript, about my tears. Then I told Nate my airplane prayer. I shared with him my struggle to make sense of the urge to write coupled with the content I felt was unshareable. As I finished speaking, I waited for him to laugh, to say how silly I was. I half expected him to mutter that Tamar had nothing to do with my prayer, that the man who palmed my forehead wasn't sent by God. I waited for him to say out loud what was screaming in my own mind.

But he didn't. Nate slipped his arm under my waist and pulled me close. In the silence, I bit my lip, and I tucked into my husband. And then I prayed a silent prayer, wanting to do what I knew God was asking me to do, but afraid of getting it wrong, and, probably more than anything, afraid of failing and of baring my shame.

Okay, God, I hear You, I vowed. I'll finish it, but not until You tell me to. Not until I know it's the right time. Once I committed to God that I would walk where He asked me to, and write what He directed me to, I sighed. Though the prayer was silent and had only been a few words, it exhausted me. Within a few moments, I fell asleep, warm in my husband's arms.

But I thought about my manuscript every quiet moment for the rest of the trip. When our flight home landed at Sacramento International Airport, I'd already formulated my plan to write. I'd carve out time and make space for it, no matter what. We got our luggage, rolled it to the curb, and watched for our minivan to round the corner to pick us up.

We'd been gone for a week, and I'd only talked to my children once. I had three kids under six years old, and none of them had wanted to talk to me. I'd tried, but they refused. Several times I called, and my mom never could get them on the phone. "Sorry honey but the kids are playing and don't want to come in," she had relayed. When I kept calling to talk, my mom scolded me. "Would you two just enjoy your trip, Tina? Let us handle this. They're fine." A week with grandma and all of their favorite aunties was enough to keep them busy and happy. "Honestly, they aren't even asking for you. Just have fun. You'll be home soon enough."

Soon enough had come. My mom pulled up to the curb in front of us, driving our Toyota Sienna, and my whole world tumbled out of my minivan and hugged me. On the ride home together, the kids made up for the week of silence, laughing and fighting for my attention.

I was home.

That evening once everyone was settled into bed, I downloaded the manuscript onto my laptop and made my plans. I'd write a little each day before work. I set my alarm for 6 AM, found my French press, and set it next to the coffee grinder.

The next morning, I snoozed the alarm. When I finally dragged out of bed, I hurried my kindergartener, Benson, out the door, came back home, got dressed for work, and put the laptop away. As life would have it, I wouldn't look at the pages again for over a year. I put the manuscript up, and then I didn't pull it back out. I thought about it. But life intervened.

Still, the memories tugged for my attention. My hectic life, teaching, mothering and wiving, helping pastor—all of it was regularly interrupted by a pull to write. I heard in my mind almost daily the voice of my mentor from years before: “You have to write every day, Tina. Every. Single. Day.” He'd tapped his fingers on his desk when he told me, each word punctuated by a tap.

I didn't write every day anymore. But I thought about it.

Then when I finally stopped trying to write, when I couldn't remember where I'd even stored the flash drive with my life etched into it, God reminded me that He'd asked me to do something. Two years after our trip, God tapped me on the shoulder.