

# *Breakfast at the Morning of the World*

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*BREAKFAST AT THE MORNING OF THE WORLD:*

**A MEMOIR & WORKBOOK OF HEALING**

by

Zoë Landale

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While the characters in the book exist, some identifying details, dialogue, places, and many names have been changed to protect people's privacy.

## *Dedication*

This book is dedicated to my daughter, Jocelyn Elizabeth Coburn. No one should ever have to "learn to live" with pain. This is the story of how I got around one such verdict. I hope you can use some of the ideas on your own very different spiritual journey.

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### **Chapter 1, Accepting the Good**

“Why are we reading, if not in hope of beauty laid bare, life heightened and its deepest mystery probed?” *Annie Dillard*

I stand at the start of the course, a bright orange traffic cone with RCMP written on it. “Any time,” Mark, the trainer, says softly, stop watch at the ready. I nod to show I’ve heard him. Ten seconds more. What’s happening is I’m filling up, I’m a cup, a goblet, and right now I’m opening myself open to the brightness behind the universe and accepting all the good I’m given.

I’m off. I note this time I’m running much faster; hope to heaven I can sustain this pace. Around the next cone I veer left, sprint toward my old nemesis the five-foot ditch, arms lifted. Jump.

“Good!” yells Mark.

That means I cleared it, a small deductive window at the back of my brain informs me. I’m too busy veering around the next cone and toward the stairs to pay much heed but it brings a instant of clarity, of gladness. Last time I hit the ditch three times out of six—and that was an improvement on my previous performances. But then, that’s not surprising. I’m forty-seven. That makes me twenty-five years older than most people who apply to join the RCMP. Mark laughingly calls me a geriatric applicant. And I’ve never been an athlete.

Up the steps, taking some of them two at a time. My buddies in bootcamp, Letitia and Anita, one on either side of the stairs, shout encouragements. They know how many times I’ve run this before and not made it. But just as I can feel the difference this time, they can see it. They bang their hands on the steps, cheer me on. I circle the next cone, go back up the stairs. Down the stairs, around the cone, over the two hurdles. I feel like I’m flying. Heady stuff for a

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previously sedentary poet. Not long ago, my idea of exercise was taking the family dog for a walk.

“On your front,” Mark yells, steadying the barrier, an overgrown sawhorse that on me is close to chest high. I fall over it and land on my front. Often, afterward, I will puzzle at just what sequence of movements I do to get over the barrier but at the time, it all seems blinding straightforward. I don’t bruise the way I used to. The first time I did the course I collected an astonishing assortment, with one liver-colored beauty the size of a dinner plate. You don’t feel them at the time.

We’re in the main gym at the YMCA in Vancouver, British Columbia. There are no age limits to joining the RCMP—all a person has to do is pass a truly brutal physical, the PARE, the Physical Abilities Requirements Evaluation, which is what I’m running now. It’s pass or fail. To pass, a person has to complete it in four minutes and forty-five seconds or less. The first part, an obstacle course, is laid out diagonally and takes up the whole gym. It’s six laps.

I come to, briefly, on my second lap, going up the stairs. “Awesome, Zoë,” Letitia is yelling. Not only have I made it twice over the ditch, I’m still taking some of the steps two at a time. This is good. While I’ve never considered myself vertically challenged, I’ve only once met an applicant as short as me.

“I know how important making this is to you,” Mark has said. But he doesn’t know why.

Over the hurdles, I speed up, saying *Thank you, thank you*, feeling that flow of good. I am grateful for Letitia and Anita, for the row of new applicants lined up along the gym wall who’ve gotten right into the spirit of things and are also cheering me on. For Mark, whose voice I follow like a string through a labyrinth, who has always told me I can do it though I’ve doubted myself relentlessly. But still I keep coming back. Once or twice a month for seven months I’ve made

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the long trip from Vancouver Island to this gym. And at home I've trained for one and a half to two hours per day, six days a week.

I fall over the barrier, scramble to my feet. Half way there.

Around the starting cone and off again.

I'm rasping hard now. This time, as I go over the ditch, there's no shout of joy from Mark. Missed it. Five second penalty. Up the stairs, down, around the cone. I wonder if the new applicants know what breathing so harshly does to your throat; there's a momentary lull in the gym and it's so quiet everyone can heard the loud sobbing of air as I head back toward the stairs. But it's not important. What counts is I'm doing it. I'm no longer close to blacking out as I run this thing.

There are glitches when you run the PARE, times when the world simply disappears in a funnel of pure concentration. There are only orange cones and rough plywood stairs and me rushing toward a ditch, two blue mats stretched out on the floor, my arms raised as though they're wings, and lo and behold, they pull me over, rejoicing, and I veer and once again try to take the stairs two at a time, and the strange sideways scissor movement of my legs over the hurdles, and there's the barrier with Mark calling, "On your back."

Finally Mark calls out, "Last lap." It gives me fresh energy.

"Good!" he encourages as I clear the ditch yet again, though really, I'm standing still and what's happening is the whole gym is getting pulled along with my strenuous movements, I'm causing it all to flow by, resting on my beating heart, and it's heavy but I can do it, yes.

"You're doing it," my buddies call. "Pick up the pace. Almost there."

Once more over the barrier.

"And around the cone," Mark says.

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This time I head in a different direction. Sprint. Every second counts.

“Push,” Mark says.

Once he told me that I came up on the weights like a lamb, afraid they’d bite. Today I am a tiger. I pause for an instant three feet from the handles of the push mechanism on the wall and fall against it, throwing all my weight, pushing those eighty pounds worth of metal disks way off the floor.

“Way to go,” Anita or someone cries. “Don’t stop now.” At some point recently Mark said, so quietly only I heard him, “You’re going to pass this time,” and although I didn’t quite take it in then, I remember now and this galvanizes me. I swing those weights around, body out at a forty-five degree angle, push and walk sideways in an arc. Once the weights get away and clang down. I wrestle them back into the air, tilt the handle down, grimly get those hips down, walking again. Six arcs.

“Touch the wall,” Mark directs. “And on your front.”

Chest to the floor, I scramble to my feet, smack the wall with my hand. Shoulder blades to the floor, up, touch the wall. People are yelling at me to speed it up and I’m trying, really I am, this is so hard.

“Pull,” Mark says.

This is the fun part. “Run it,” someone calls, and I grab the rope right up near the top with both hands, lean backward as far as I can and do just that, caught up in a wave of motion, actually feeling like this bit I can do, back and forth six times and everyone is stamping and clapping and the whole gym is rocking, all these strangers giving me goodwill and, “Touch the wall,” Mark calls.

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When I slam my right hand against the white-painted wood it's over. The stop watch stops ticking.

For a moment I can't hear what Mark is saying about my time, there's too much noise.

I stagger toward him.

"Are you all right?" someone asks.

I nod, sobbing for breath, head down, desperate for air.

"Four forty-four," Mark says. With a fierce grin he adds, "And that's *with* your penalty for not making the ditch."

So that's how I run the PARE successfully, finally, and I wobble down the length of the gym accepting high fives and hugs from people I know, congratulations from strangers dressed in white T-shirts and navy shorts. I stop at my water bottle, lean against the wall for forty seconds and head toward the body bag at the far end of the gym, along the edge. Someone else is already running the PARE and I cough and shout, "Good pacing," to whoever.

The next part of the test is untimed. Both Mark and I know I can do this. I flip the eighty pound body bag up to my knees and then to my arms. It's orange, filled with bags of sand velcroed in. I clamp my hands together around it, head toward the marker cone. Mark sees me and nods. Then around the cone and back to the starting point, breath slowing now, I've made it, this is just the last bit, the easy part, though it does get heavier but my hands are locked together, this I can do. It's a long fifty feet. "If I hear you put it down, I'll fail you," Mark has threatened us. At the white line, I let the body bag slide from my arms so gently even the applicant six feet away along the wall can't hear it, someone's dead dog or a torso perhaps.

After, I slip out to the washroom and throw up. Then at the trainer's direction—we *are* in bootcamp—we run eight k and bound up the seventy-four steps at Ferguson Point Teahouse

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twelve times. It is not until I am alone in my mother's car, several hours after passing the PARE, I allow myself tears of pure, exhausted joy. Coaxing her red Hyundai in and out of Sunday traffic over the Burrard Street bridge, I think life doesn't get better than this. It feels like Christmas and my birthday, I just keep taking the thought out like a marvelous present I'd forgotten for an instant and gazing at it in awe: I made the PARE.

For nine years I'd had such severe back problems that ordinary supermarkets had been off-limits for me. I hadn't been able to walk more than half a block. Nor had I been able to sit up longer than two hours at a time. "You're going to have to learn to live with it," well-meaning doctors told me about the constant pain. But I refused. Somewhere, I knew, was healing, and I was determined to find it. Eventually I did.

Now, in the car, in the weak May sunshine, I take a long breath, let it out, thankful, so thankful: I made the PARE.

I never told Mark that once I owned my own wheelchair.

This is the story of how I ended up in a wheelchair and how I fought and persisted and eventually learned to pray my way out of it. Along the way, I learned some ways of tapping into spiritual power that anyone can use—there's no signup sheet. I do not focus on religion. I do focus on the spiritual. Your practice is up to you. My own focus and belief is Christian. I also share teachings from many spiritual traditions. I honor belief.

You can read this book purely as a story. If, however, you want to learn to use the tools I discovered for effective prayer, do the exercises at the end of the chapters. It is a characteristic of adult learners that they want material they can immediately use for themselves. This is what I'm

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providing. It will work most effectively to read and respond to the material in order. Like in Pilates, we're building on what you've previously learned.

Are you up for the ride? If you choose to make it interactive, it will take you unexpected places.

I won't say *Hang on*, because we do too much of that in our lives. What I'll say is *Be willing to let go* of your old ideas of how the world works. Be willing to be like the phoenix who goes into the fire a creaking aching old bird and comes out made new.

You'll need a journal to write in. Buy one or create a folder on your computer to store work in: you'll use this from Chapter 2 on.