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WALLY LAMB

THE RIVER IS WAITING

A NOVEL

“I could not put this novel down and predict that you won’t be able to either.”
—ANDRE DUBUS III, *New York Times* bestselling author of *House of Sand and Fog*

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THE
RIVER
IS
WAITING

A Novel

WALLY LAMB

MARYSUE
RUCCI
BOOKS

New York London Toronto Sydney New Delhi

For Christine, the love of my life

Suffering comes to us as an interrogator. It asks, “Who are you?”

—David A. Fiensy

PART ONE:

The Unimaginable

CHAPTER ONE

April 27, 2017

It's six a.m. and I'm the first one up. Spotify's playing that Chainsmokers song I like. *If we go down, then we go down together...* I take an Ativan and chase my morning coffee with a couple of splashes of hundred-proof Captain Morgan. I return the bottle to its hiding place inside the twenty-quart lobster pot we never use, put the lid on, and put it back in the cabinet above the fridge that Emily can't reach without the step stool. Then I fill the twins' sippy cups and start making French toast for breakfast. *If we go down, then we go down together.* I cut the music so I can listen for the kids, but that song's probably going to play in my head all morning.

Emily's up now and in the bathroom, getting ready for work. When the shower stops, I hear the twins babbling to each other in the nursery we converted from my studio almost two years ago. My easel, canvases, and paints had been exiled to the space behind the basement stairs. It wasn't much of a sacrifice. I made my living as a commercial artist and had been struggling after hours and on weekends to make "serious" art, but after the babies were born, the last thing I felt like doing was staring at a blank canvas and waiting for some abstraction to move from my brain down my arm to my brush to see what came out. Maisie was the alpha twin; Niko, who would learn to creep, walk, and say words after his sister did, was the beta. In the developmental race, Niko always came in second, but, as their personalities began to emerge, his sister became our more serious, more driven twin and he was our mischievous little laughing boy. I loved them more deeply every day for who each was becoming. How could some artistic indulgence of mine have competed with what our lovemaking had created? It wasn't even close.

“Yoo-hoo, peekaboo!” I call in to them, playing now-you-see-me-now-you-don’t at the doorway into their room. “Daddy!” they say simultaneously. Their delight at seeing me fills me with momentary joy—my elation aided, I guess, by the benzo and booze. I lift them, one after the other, out of the crib they share. The twins often hold on to each other as they sleep and sometimes even suck each other’s thumb. I lay them on their backs on the carpet and take off their diapers. Both are sodden and Maisie’s has two pellet-sized poops. As I wet-wipe and rediaper them, I say, “Hey, Miss Maisie, where’s your nose?” We were playing that game yesterday. “Very good! And how about you, Mr. Niko? Where’s your ear?” He puts his finger to his nose. “Nooo!” I groan in mock horror. “You can’t hear with your nose!” Both kids giggle. I start singing “Wheels on the Bus,” that song Emily sometimes sings with them when they’re in the tub. Maisie listens attentively and does a few of the gestures with me while her brother kicks his legs and blows spit bubbles. I lift them up, one in each arm, and walk them into the kitchen just as the smoke alarm starts screaming.

The room is hazy and smells of burnt French toast. Frightened by the blare of the alarm, both kids begin crying. From down the hall, Emily calls, “Corby?” and I call back, “Everything’s good. I got it!” I slide the kids into their high chairs and snap their trays in place. Point up at the alarm and tell them Daddy’s going to stop the noise. “Watch,” I say. Climbing onto the step stool, I reach up and silence the damned thing. “Daddy to the rescue!” I announce. Jumping off the stool, I do a little dance that turns their fear into laughter. “Daddy funny!” Maisie says. In my best Elvis imitation, I slur, “Thank you. Thank you very much.” Of the two of us, I’m the fun parent and these two are my best audience. When I give them their sippy cups, I blow raspberries against their necks. They lift their shoulders and squeal with delight.

By the time Emily comes into the kitchen, I’ve already put her coffee and a stack of French toast on the table, the older pieces on the bottom and the fresh slices I’d made to replace the burnt ones on top. “Mama!” Niko shouts. Emily kisses the top of his head. “How’s my favorite boy today?” she asks. Then, turning to his sister, she kisses her head, too, and says, “And how’s my favorite girl?” She loves both of our kids, of course, but she favors Niko, whose emerging

personality is like mine. Maisie is clearly her mother's daughter. She's less silly, more self-sufficient. Niko and I are the needy ones.

As Emily sits down to eat, I feel a surge of guilt thinking back to a morning a few weeks earlier. Emily told me she and some of the other teachers were going to Fiesta's after school for drinks and an early dinner. "I'll be home by seven, seven thirty at the latest," she'd said. I reminded her that Friday is family night. "I'll have had them all day. Not to mention all week. Did it occur to you when you were making your plans that I might need a break?"

She gave my shoulder a sympathetic squeeze. "I know you do, Corby, but Amber's really struggling right now. People have already RSVP'd to the wedding. She's been fitted for her dress. Their honeymoon is booked." Amber's a fellow teacher who was going to get married next month until her fiancé told her he was gay. "He completely blindsided her. She just really needs our support right now."

"And I don't?"

She stared at me, shaking her head. "If you're going to make a big deal about a couple of hours, then fine," she said. "I'll tell the others I can't make it."

"No, you go ahead, babe. Fiesta's, that Mexican place, right? Enjoy yourself. Have a margarita on me. What the hell? Have three or four. Get hammered."

She was almost out the door when she pivoted, her eyes flashing. "That's your thing, not mine." Touché.

She said goodbye to the kids but not to me. At the front window, I watched her get into her car, slam the door, and drive off. My regret kicked in a few minutes later—probably before she'd even pulled into the school parking lot. I texted her: *Sorry I was being a jerk. Go out with the others and help your friend. No worries.*

Her terse return text—*K Thx*—let me know she was still pissed, which, in turn, pissed me off all over again and made me feel justified in taking another Ativan to calm down. That was what that doctor prescribed them for, wasn't it?

Emily didn't get home that evening until after nine. I heard her in the kitchen before I saw her. "Hi, Corby," she called. "I got you an order of chicken enchiladas if you haven't eaten yet." I hadn't eaten but told her I had. "Okay, I'll put them in the fridge and you can have them tomorrow." She entered the living

room with that tipsy glow she gets on the rare occasion when she has a second glass of wine, but her face deflated when she saw Niko asleep on my lap instead of in the crib. “He’s sick,” I said. “Earache.”

She sat down on the couch beside us, stroked his hair, and asked whether I’d taken his temperature. “A hundred and one,” I told her. The thermometer actually read one-hundred-point-four but I’d added the extra sixth-tenths of a degree. Yeah, I can be that small.

“Did you give him any Tylenol?”

I nodded. “About an hour ago. So how did group-therapy-with-nachos go?”

Instead of answering, she stood and picked up empties from the coffee table. She’d mentioned before that she doesn’t like me drinking beer at night if I’m watching the kids, but she didn’t call me on it that night. Her guilt was at a satisfactory level.

I’m sure Emily is keeping track of my nighttime beer consumption, but I’m confident she’s unaware that I’ve started drinking the hard stuff during the day. Tuesday is when the recycling truck comes down our street, so I’ve begun hiding the empty liquor bottles until then. I wait until she leaves for school, then take them out of hiding and bring the blue box out to the curb, feeling embarrassed by the evidence of my growing reliance on alcohol but proud of myself for pulling off my daytime drinking deception. She knows I’m taking that prescription for my nerves, of course. In fact, she was the one who urged me to see someone because I’d become so edgy and sleep-deprived. What she doesn’t know is that I’ve begun taking more than “one before bedtime and/or as needed.”

I tell myself that “and/or as needed” is the loophole I can use if that doctor questions my need for an early refill. I’m not too worried about my growing reliance on “better living through chemistry.” It’s just a stopgap thing until my situation turns around. It’s not like I’m addicted to benzos *or* booze. There was that DUI, but there were extenuating circumstances: namely that I lost my job that day. Everything will right itself once I get back to work. And okay, maybe I’m not looking for another position as hard as I was at the start, but I’ll get back on the hunt soon.

The morning after Niko's earache, he was back to his rambunctious self and Maisie wasn't sick yet. I let Emily know I wasn't over it yet, communicating in single syllables. Emily took the kids to lunch and then over to the playscape in the park while I watched basketball. March Madness. Gonzaga versus Xavier, Oregon versus Kansas—but I didn't have skin in either of those games. Back when I worked at Creative Strategies, Declan from Accounting was always in charge of the brackets pool and he or Charlie, one of the salesmen, would have the rest of us over to watch the games. I haven't been gone that long, but neither had bothered to see whether I still wanted in. Out of sight, out of mind, I guess.

I stretched out on the couch with my six-pack of Sam Adams on the floor for company. What was that TV show where you could "phone a friend" for help? Who would I have called? My friendships at Creative hadn't lasted past my being employed there. My high school and college buddies and I hadn't stayed in touch. I had never been that close with the guys on my softball team. Try maintaining your male friendships when you've got two-year-old twins and have lost your job. While every other dude is out in the world, working during the week and hanging with his bros on the weekends, I'm Mr. Mom twenty-four seven for a couple of toddlers.

By midafternoon, I was half in the bag. Emily and the twins were still out—probably over at her mother's. When I got up to take a piss, I swayed a little on my way to the bathroom. Mid-pee, I saw the envelope she'd left, propped against that stupid doll with the crocheted skirt that covered the toilet paper roll. We'd both laughed at it after Emily's great-aunt Charlotte gave it to her one Christmas, but for some reason it's survived several purges of domestic detritus.

Inside the envelope was a letter on lined paper. *Hey Babe. I'm sorry about yesterday. You were right. I should have asked you if you minded my going out after work instead of telling you I was going. I hope you realize how much I appreciate your caring for the twins while you look for another job. I know it's hard. And I know you're going to find another position soon, Corby. I hope you realize what a talented artist you are and a great dad, too. Let's do pizza tonight. Hope we can have some close time after the kids are asleep. XOXO, me.*

I appreciated what she'd written, particularly her offer of "close time"—code for makeup sex. And sure enough, we had it that night, but it was a bust. As

usual, we did her first, but she was taking so long that I gave up, got on top, and plugged in. Went from zero to sixty and was pounding away when she grabbed my wrist and whispered, “Hey, take it easy.” I stopped cold, began losing my hard-on, and pulled out. Threw on my robe and headed out the door, thinking, shit, man, I can’t do anything right. Can’t find work, can’t get through the day without drinking and drugging, and now I can’t even satisfy my wife. “Where are you going?” she said. “Come on. Let’s wait a few minutes and try again.”

I appreciated the offer. I still love her. Still want her. A dozen years and two kids after that summer we met, I still can’t believe she said yes when I asked her out that first time. Or that she committed to me when I drove cross-country to California and showed up out of the blue at her college apartment. And that she’s *stayed* committed. Of the two of us, I definitely got the better deal. And here she was in our bed, offering me kindness and understanding. So of course I sabotage myself. “Not feeling it,” I told her. “I’ll take a rain check.”

I went downstairs. Walked around in the kitchen, opened the fridge. I microwaved those enchiladas she had gotten me but kept them in so long, they were dry and tough. After a few bites, I scraped the rest into the garbage. Reached up for the lobster pot and made myself a stiff drink instead. By the time I got back to bed, Emily was asleep. In all the years we’d been together, I don’t think we’d ever been this much out of sync.

But the next day, things got better. We sat on the floor and played with the kids. Danced with them to that silly “Baby Shark” song. When they went down for their afternoon naps, we went back to bed and tried again—successfully, this time, for both of us. We cooked supper together, the twins watching us as they wandered around underfoot. Things have been better since then. The usual minor ups and downs but nothing more. Marriage is all about that seesaw ride, isn’t it? We’re okay.

Now Emily cuts two slices of French toast into bite-sized squares, dotting each piece with syrup. “Yum, yum, yum,” she says, divvying up the finger food between the kids. I love watching her with them, more so when I’m feeling

relaxed like this. Maisie resembles her mother: dark hair, dark eyes, Em's dad's Mediterranean complexion. At her twenty-four-month checkup, she was in the thirtieth percentile for both height and weight, so she's probably going to be petite like Emily. Niko's got my reddish hair and lighter skin tone; his height and weight are a little higher than average, the pediatrician said, but compared to his sister, he looks like a bruiser. Turning to me, Emily asks why the smoke alarm went off. I hold up the two burnt pieces I threw on the counter, dangling them like puppets. "Here you go," I say, sliding the new stuff from the pan onto a plate. "Be right back." I head to the bathroom and brush my teeth so she doesn't smell my breath. I wait half a minute or so, then flush and walk back into the kitchen. She asks me what I'm smiling about.

"What?"

"You're smiling. What are you thinking about?"

"What am I thinking about? I don't know. Nothing much." I'm smiling because, thanks to the rum and Ativan, I'm pleasantly buzzed.

Maisie, the more fastidious eater, finishes without making a mess, but her brother's bib is saturated with milk and he has somehow managed to get syrup in his left eyebrow. Half of his breakfast is on the floor. Emily looks at the clock, then starts cleaning up the mess. "You know something, kiddo?" she asks Niko. "I think Mommy and Daddy should get one of those Roomba things and program it to follow you around all day. Would you like that?" Without having any idea what she's talking about, he nods enthusiastically. I tell Emily to leave it, that I'll clean up. "That would be great," she says. "I'm running a little late." She heads back to the bathroom to brush her teeth and blow-dry her hair.

Just before she leaves for work, Emily addresses the twins. "Be good kiddos for Daddy and Grammy today. No naughty stuff, okay?" She models the correct response, a head nod, which they both mirror back to her.

"Too bad we can't get that in writing," I quip. The day before, Niko led his sister in a game of crayon-scribbling on the kitchen linoleum and it was a bitch to scour off those marks without scratching the surface, which I did anyway.

"Okay, I'm off," she says. "Wish I could stay home with you guys. Love you."

"Love you, too." I made sure to start the breakfast dishes when I saw she was about to leave. Better a sudsy-handed wave goodbye than a boozy kiss. "Have

fun on your field trip.” She’s just finished a dinosaur unit with her third graders and is taking them to the Peabody Museum to see prehistoric bones and footprints.

“Good luck with those leads, babe,” she says. “Maybe today’s the day, huh?”

I shrug. “Maybe.”

Theoretically, I’ll be job hunting today, although, truth be told, I’ve pretty much surrendered to the status quo. When I hear Emily’s car back down the driveway, then accelerate, I say, aloud to no one in particular, “There goes the family breadwinner.” Then I reach up for the lobster pot, take it down, and refresh my coffee-and-Captain cocktail. Get the twins dressed and pack the diaper bag. “Guess what?” I tell them. “Today is a Grandma day.” Maisie claps her hands, but Niko shakes his head and says, “No Gamma! No Gamma!”

“Dude, I feel your pain,” I tell him, chuckling. Emily’s father once referred to his ex-wife as “the iron butterfly.”

I lied to Betsy, telling her I’d drop them off somewhere around eight thirty so I can chase down a couple of imaginary leads, one of them in Massachusetts, north of Boston. Traffic permitting, I said, I’ll pick them up sometime between three and four. I added the “traffic permitting” caveat as a cushion in case I need an extra hour to sober up.

I’ve lied to Emily, too—told her that after I drop the kids off at her mom’s, I’ll send out another round of résumés, make some follow-up calls, and then drive over to Manchester because Hobby Lobby has advertised an opening in their framing department. In truth, having been defeated by several months’ worth of humiliation in my search for employment, and now dreading the possibility of actually *getting* the Hobby Lobby job and having to mat and frame people’s shitty, mass-produced poster art at a big-box store, I will *not* be driving to Manchester or doing anything else on my make-believe agenda.

When I was laid off from the two-person art department of the advertising firm where I’d worked for five years, Rhonda, my manager, delivered the news at lunchtime and told me to take the afternoon off. In fairness, she didn’t realize she was shitcanning me on Maisie and Niko’s first birthday, for which we’d planned a party with the two grandmas, plus a few of our neighbors, and some of Emily’s work friends. (The year before, it was Rhonda who had arranged for

the lunchtime celebration of the twins' birth: cake, gift cards, packs of Huggies, jokes about sleeplessness.) "I want you to know that it's not about the quality of your work, Corby," Rhonda assured me as she raised the ax and let it drop. "It's about the company's bottom line. It was a difficult decision, but I was told I couldn't keep you both." And, of course, she wasn't about to lay off Brianne, the golden child who'd been hired three years after me but had been getting assigned to the bigger accounts. Like me, Brianne had been a scholarship student at the Rhode Island School of Design, but unlike me, she had graduated with honors and won awards for her work, whereas I'd quit midway through my senior year and driven across the country to secure Emily's love.

For a while now, I've been nurturing this scenario whereby a bigger and more lucrative agency lures Brianne away from Creative and I get my old job back and excel, showing them what a foolish mistake they made when they let me go. What's that called? Magical thinking? Meanwhile, my unemployment benefit has run out, and we've refinanced our mortgage and done three sessions of marriage counseling. Last month, we acknowledged the twins' second birthday with presents, cake, and candles but skipped the expense of a party. Hey, it is what it is, as they say. With an assist from rum and Ativan, I've lately held panic at bay by embracing the Alfred E. Neuman philosophy: What? Me worry? So after I drop off the kids, I'll be heading to the liquor store for another fifth of the Captain, then back home to consume it while watching some daytime TV: CNN, *The People's Court*, *The Price Is Right*, and, if I can find it again, that station that carries reruns of *Saved by the Bell*. Once my rum-and-benzo minivacation *really* kicks in, I might watch some porn and jerk off, maybe grab a nap. I'll pick up Maisie and Niko at Betsy's sometime around four. Start cooking supper by the time Emily gets home or, more likely, pick up Chinese or Chipotle for dinner, plus McNuggets for the twins. There's starting to be an embarrassing number of Happy Meal toys gathering on the windowsill in the playroom. That's my plan. But none of this will happen.

I put the bag I packed for the twins' day at their grandmother's on the bottom porch step, then go back inside. Brush my teeth and gargle twice so that Betsy won't smell anything when I drop them off. It's a chilly morning, so I put the kids' hats and spring jackets on. Lock the front door and walk them out to

the driveway. The usual order of buckling the twins into their car seats is Niko first because he's the more restless of the two. But the order gets turned around this morning when I see Niko on his belly, watching a swarm of ants in the driveway crawl over and around a piece of cookie that got dropped the day before. I buckle Maisie in. Then I remember the bag on the porch step and hustle back to get it. I place the bag on the passenger's seat up front. Wave to our across-the-street neighbors, Shawn and Linda McNally, as they pull into their driveway. Linda gets out of the car shaking a paper bag. "Mr. Big Spender just took me out for breakfast," she calls over to me. "Egg McMuffin to go. Woo-hoo!"

I laugh. Promise Shawn I'll return the maul I'd borrowed from him. The weekend before, I finally finished splitting and stacking that half cord of wood that had been delivered a few months ago. "Yeah, good," he says, instead of "no rush" or "not a problem." Some guys are so possessive of their tools. Linda's outgoing, but Shawn always seems standoffish. Suspicious, almost. Toward me, anyway. He's a recently retired state cop. That probably explains it. I have the feeling that "Make America Great Again" sign on their lawn last year was his idea, not hers.

"How are my two little sweetie pies?" Linda asks.

"You mean double trouble? They got ahold of some crayons yesterday and scrawled all over the kitchen floor. When I busted them and asked, 'Did you two do this?' Maisie looked at her brother and he shook his head, so she did, too. The little monsters were still holding on to their Crayolas."

"Gonna be artists like their daddy," she says, laughing.

"Or politicians," I say. "They've already got the fibbing thing down."

Linda concurs. "When he was three, our Russell took a Magic Marker to our brand-new duvet. Swore up and down that he didn't do it—that it must have been his sister, Jill, who hadn't even started to creep yet. He almost didn't live to see age four." I roll my eyes and laugh. Ask her how Russell likes living out in Colorado. "Fine," she says. "He's been taking classes and bartending part-time but he just got a 'real' job at a TV station in Fort Collins."

I tell her to say hi from Emily and me next time she speaks to him. "Well, I better get going," I say. "Have a good one."

I climb into our CRV, start it up, and put it in reverse. When I feel the slight resistance at the rear right wheel, I figure a piece of the wood I stacked must have fallen off the pile; that's what the obstruction must be. What are they yelling about over there? I pull ahead a few feet, then back up again, depressing the gas pedal just enough to make it over the obstacle. In the rearview mirror, I see them running toward us, arms waving. What the fuck, man? Why is she screaming?

And then I know.