

“An unexpected combination of biblical truth and literary commentary, *What Cannot Be Lost* exposes the rawness of loss and longing while, at the same time, applying the only effective salve. Simply put, it’s one of the most honest books on grief I’ve ever read.”

Amanda Bible Williams, Co-founder, She Reads Truth; General Editor, She Reads Truth Bible

“The things that happen to us in life—whether things of gain or loss—become meaningful through the stories we tell about those things. The story Melissa Zaldivar tells in these pages finds meaning through the frame of the beautiful stories she has immersed herself in: the stories of Louisa May Alcott, the stories of people she knows and loves, and the truest and best stories of all—those of the Bible. *What Cannot Be Lost* is a beautiful testimony to the power good stories have to make our lives better, even (or especially) when we face great loss.”

Karen Swallow Prior, Author, *On Reading Well: Finding the Good Life through Great Books*

“Good writing is observation, and Melissa Zaldivar does it best. She’s careful with these tender stories of loss and wise in showing how they weave together. *What Cannot Be Lost* is a stunning book for every heart that aches to make sense of grief and longs to believe in a beautiful future.”

Lisa Whittle, Author, *The Hard Good*; Bible Teacher; Podcast Host

“As a man who’s had his world fall apart in a single day, I can attest to the all-sufficient God, who heals and refills a broken heart and provides his all-sufficient love in the most creative of ways. God was certainly creative in how he brought Melissa Zaldivar into my life. In my darkest season, she helped me see God’s all-sufficient love and helped me look for God in the midst of my mess. Allow her to do the same for you.”

Jonathan Pitts, Author; Speaker; Widower

“*What Cannot Be Lost* is a masterpiece of tears, belief, and the boring grit of the daily. Zaldivar’s writing, somehow both panoramic and immediately accessible, is the best kind of weird and the most captivating sort of ordinary. Here, the plain truth is a comfort. Here, grief coexists with delight. Here, Jesus and Taylor Swift whisper from the same page, and we find ourselves more human and closer to God. You will love this book.”

Shannan Martin, Author, *The Ministry of Ordinary Places* and *Falling Free*

“*What Cannot Be Lost* was a labor of love for Melissa, putting words to grief. It is a kind and gentle companion, full of the type of empathy that can only rise up out of walking through deep loss and being comforted by the Man of Sorrows himself. With honesty, Melissa kindly nudges those walking through grief to collapse into the strong arms of Jesus and find belonging and comfort, even in the pit.”

Ellie Holcomb, Singer; Songwriter; Author, *Fighting Words*

“Just as Melissa guides tourists through Louisa May Alcott’s historic home in Massachusetts, she gently leads us through the shadowy corners of our own grief, ever reminding us that we are never alone. There is a tremendous depth of comfort in Melissa’s words that can only come from a soul who has experienced profound loss; each chapter is a quilt to wrap around a weary heart. *What Cannot Be Lost* is a profound gift for any soul feeling the terrible sting of grief.”

JJ Heller, Singer/Songwriter

“When grief wraps itself around the goodness in our life, we often feel suffocated by senselessness. Melissa Zaldivar has an uncommon way of giving words to the unspeakable parts of our lives, and by doing so, she frees us to breathe again. This is a book we need.”

K.J. Ramsey, Licensed Professional Counselor; Author, *This Too Shall Last* and *The Lord is My Courage*

“It is a beautiful thing to form a friendship with an author from another time and find comfort in their story. Hand in hand with the century-distant Louisa May Alcott, Melissa Zaldivar walks through rooms of grief and promise to find what cannot be lost in the sad days and strange nights of grief. Beautifully told and heartfelt, this book bears witness to a friendship and what it means to give voice to our grief.”

Sara Groves, Singer/Songwriter

“I read *What Cannot Be Lost* with tears running down my cheeks. It helped me release the stored-up grief in my soul as I found comfort and a companion in Melissa’s honest reflections on loss. When sorrows threaten to overwhelm us, when death of any kind casts a shadow on our lives, *What Cannot Be Lost* is the reminder we all need to know that we have a God who stays with us in our weeping and who loves us to—and even beyond—the end.”

Grace P. Cho, Writer; Speaker; Poet

“Divisive times call for decisive messages, and I believe Melissa has such a message within her. If there’s something we can all agree on in this post-pandemic period, it’s that our lives have been annotated by grief during this time. In every margin, we read the story of hopes dashed, dreams deferred, and loves lost. In these times, we turn to the things that comfort us the most, and for millions of people, the work of Louisa May Alcott tucks us into our beds and nurses us back to health. What better guide could we have than Melissa? A bridge between our sisters in Orchard House and modern grief, she is the perfect person, with her own insights on grief and grace, to thread the needle that begins the painstaking work of mending our hearts. These stories are timeless for a reason, and she knows them intimately. *What Cannot Be Lost* is so, so, so deeply needed after this past year.”

Erin Moon, Podcast Host; Writer

“From the creaky floorboards of Louisa May Alcott’s Orchard House, Melissa Zaldivar coaxes forth a story both tender and true. The very best of tour guides, Melissa infuses history with contemporary relevance and leaves us feeling as though we’ve come to know Louisa’s heart like a friend’s. *What Cannot Be Lost* reminds us that loss will touch us all; but in the midst of sorrow, divine Love endures with a beauty that death and grief cannot destroy.”

Clarissa Moll, Author, *Beyond the Darkness: A Gentle Guide for Living with Grief and Thriving after Loss*

MELISSA
ZALDIVAR

WHAT
CANNOT
BE
LOST



the goodbook
COMPANY

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To Jillian Christina Joy Gudim:

I stood with you on your wedding day, and I can't wait to see
you again at the Wedding on the other side

“We might die, but we don’t die forever.”—Jennie Allen

“Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.”

—2 Corinthians 4:16-18

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FOREWORD

By **Bethany Barnard**

I remember when the hospice nurse first showed up at my parents' house. The garage suddenly wasn't just for the lawnmower and Dad's handyman supplies, but a hospital bed, a lift, and an oxygen tank. We'd had a month to prepare; it was right before Easter, at the beginning of the pandemic, when the doctors said they had reached the end of the road of treatment. Dad had been fighting stage four cancer for the second time in a decade. The first time, he miraculously went into remission. But, as options started dwindling and his cancer spread, the hope of a happy ending slowly faded to silence.

The nurse left a pamphlet on the kitchen counter titled, "When the End Is Near," which gave a rundown of what happens to the body—signs to look for—as someone slowly slips away. I leafed through this tangible proof that it was the end, feeling more in denial than I ever had, and I wondered why I had no idea about any of this stuff.

I'd probably heard about it, but it wasn't the same as living through it.

Witnessing it.

Powerless to slow down or speed up or alleviate any part of it.

Powerless to protect myself or anyone else from the pain.

Words like hospice or cancer or chemo aren't one-dimensional to me anymore. They are triggers: vacuums that pull me back into those moments that are simultaneously a blur and never-ending. I have an involuntary, visceral reaction when I hear them. I am transported back to those days in 2020 before and after my dad died.

It's like moving out on your own for the first time, or the stage of life right before marriage or becoming a parent. You have a lot of information, advice from others, stories—you feel adequately prepared. And then... you're figuring out how to get your water turned on or how much appliance repairs cost, or realizing that no one else is going to make appointments for you or get your phone bill paid on time. Or you're married, and suddenly it makes sense why your vows say, "... in sickness and health, for richer or poorer; as long as we both shall live," because the actual living out of those promises is no cake walk. Or you're a parent, and a full night's rest is a cruel joke. You're up at midnight, and 3:00, and 4:00, and 6:00, just trying to keep this fragile person alive and not lose your sanity in the process.

After my dad's death, I was angry and broken and empty. The constant fuel of adrenaline and updates was gone, and I was not ok. It was hard to pray. Hard to listen to worship music. Hard to be in groups of people who were talking and laughing and going on with their lives. In my grief, I began looking for lament in the Bible, in songs, and in books. I longed for companionship, camaraderie, and being known in the place I was in. I still do. Maybe you do, too—and maybe you have found, like me, that those places of refuge are rare.

I read *What Cannot Be Lost* and felt the comfort of someone who knows. I was invited into Melissa's and Louisa's stories and was given an opportunity to examine my own. Reading this book is finding the gift of being understood. I felt as though I was having a conversation, not reading a page. It is a sacred thing to be invited into someone's loss. It's a kind of hospitality when they open the door and let you into the lowest moments, searing pain, and resounding trauma. Here, Melissa goes first; and it creates space for you and me to be a questioning, grieving, hoping mess, too.

I so appreciate that Melissa does not attempt to tie a pretty bow on it. I bet you're tired of Christians doing that, too. I'm grateful that she bears witness to the one who cannot be lost—and won't let go—when the dark times come. He's there. We're not looking for some harrowing story of heroic faith but one about how Jesus stays when we are falling apart.

Maybe you've been looking for something like this. I was. This book, these pages, this conversation is a safe place for you to not be ok. The shadow won't last forever, and you aren't alone.

Bethany Barnard

A Note to Readers

The world of literature overlapped with reality in the case of Louisa May Alcott, one of America's most influential authors. She famously wrote about what she saw in her real life, in the mid to late 1800s, inviting others to find common ground in shared experiences. Because there can be, at times, a blur between literary characters and the very real Alcott family, we offer you this helpful guide:

Abigail May Alcott: Also called **Marmee**, Abigail was the matriarch of the Alcott family, the kind and hard-working mother of her four daughters. Her maiden name, May, was the inspiration for the fictional March family, as March is also a month that begins with the letter M.

Bronson Alcott: Bronson was the father, portrayed in *Little Women* simply as Father or Mr. March.

Anna Alcott Pratt: The eldest of the Alcott daughters, Anna was represented in *Little Women* as **Meg**. She married John Pratt and had two sons: Freddy and Johnny Pratt.

Louisa May Alcott: Louisa was the second born and writer of the family, author of *Little Women* (among many other books), and wrote herself into the story as **Jo**.

Elizabeth Sewall Alcott: Elizabeth had the most nicknames in her family. She went by **Lizzie**, **Betty**, and, most famously, **Beth**. She was the inspiration for the third sister of the family, Beth, whose death has influenced readers for generations.

Abigail May Alcott Nieriker: Named for her mother, May Alcott was the youngest daughter and a well-known and celebrated artist. If you rearrange the letters in her name, you get the name of her character in *Little Women*: **Amy**. She married Ernest Nieriker and had one daughter, aptly named Louisa May.

CHAPTER 1

The Process of Losing

“**E**very memory is biased,” she said with kind eyes. I was sitting in a counseling session, trying to figure out which of my feelings were “legitimate.” So much had happened over the last year and a half, but as I emerged from it, I found myself critical of my own experience, wondering if I was even allowed to be that upset. Was it really as hard as I remember? Did I see things accurately, or was I somehow blinded by my own imagination? “There’s no such thing as a totally perfect memory because you only see it from your perspective,” my counselor said with a reassuring nod, “But the feelings are real.”

When you’ve walked through the kind of story I’m about to tell you, it can feel a bit maddening, and you have to be compassionate with yourself. Someone always has it better; someone always has it worse. I don’t know what weight you’re carrying into these pages—what experience or heartache or hard conversation is taking up so much room in your heart. But when we try to make our stories of grief and pain and loss make logical sense, we can often rob ourselves by making comparisons and talking ourselves out of the reality of what went down. We cheapen our grief when we try to rationalize it away.

Much of life is paddling in and out of memories. It's making our way out on the water in calm conditions or stormy weather, but always coming back to the same harbor and anchoring ourselves in Truth. Sometimes it's a song or a word of encouragement that pulls us back. Making rhythms that move us in toward Christ has a way of slowing us down when our minds start racing. God's word and the narrative in it isn't just a tale we're told and cannot relate to. It's the compass that guides us and reminds us to keep moving along—despite doubts, imperfect memories, and darkness—toward light. And things had been very dark.

So I'll start with the start.

*"In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth."
(Genesis 1:1)*

I know. This is really the beginning. But it's important because when I become the most untethered, this is what I go back to. It's like hitting the reset button in my heart. I take a moment to look in the mirror and say, "Let's go back to when creation was new and things were right and retrace our steps."

In the book of Genesis—which literally means "beginnings"—God creates everything. Every star and critter and plant and mountain and hillside and river. Everything seen and unseen. And then, once the earth is filled, he makes humans in his own image. They have perfect communion with him, but all of that changes.

The first man and first woman sin, tearing apart the perfection surrounding them, and the literal Eden they are living in is ruined.

They are crushed, but God does not abandon them. No, he promises in Genesis 3:15 that even though it might seem that all of the light has gone, he will send a Savior who will defeat the dark because he will be the Light of the world (John 8:12).

This is the hope that we cling to, and we're not the first, last, or only ones to do so. The Bible is full of people who found themselves in darkness, but kept coming back to that promised hope. In fact, thousands of years after creation, a shepherd who became king of Israel, named David, wrote what would become one of the most well-known passages of poetry in history. This is what he said in Psalm 23:

"The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.

He makes me lie down in green pastures.

He leads me beside still waters.

He restores my soul.

*He leads me in paths of righteousness
for his name's sake.*

*Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow
of death,*

*I will fear no evil,
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff,
they comfort me.*

*You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.*

*Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD
forever."*

These verses have been heard—and memorized—by countless people. They paint a beautiful picture of peace and still waters and pastoral scenes, but then the attention of the psalmist gets a little more somber as he writes about “the valley of the shadow of death.”

In the original Hebrew, this can also be translated as a “valley of darkness and shadow of death and dying.” So, it’s a real upper. I heard that verse as a child, and I remember not liking that part because it felt far away and overly dramatic. Of course, at that point, my primary distress was that I had washed a Giga Pet in my jeans pocket, which, of course, rendered it useless.

But as time went on and life got more complicated and things got truly dimmer, those verses started to hit different. An all-encompassing shadow known as grief had crept in and was covering every corner of my world. We’ve all had moments where we just can’t catch a break, but this was a series of losses that threatened to end life as I knew it and offered no comfort of getting any better. Just when I began recovering, something else showed up like an unwelcome guest at my door.

It started when a friend died on my birthday that summer.

I turned 30 and I got the call hours before I was going to sit down to dinner and blackberry cobbler with friends. I told them all to come anyway because I didn’t want to be alone, and they were gracious when I cried through the evening surrounded by charcuterie and their kindness.

The following month I lost my job due to budget cuts. As a single woman trying to pay off student loans, make rent, and stay afloat financially, this was a worst-case scenario in my mind.

A few weeks after that, I got a text from Jill, a beloved friend from college.

I don't know if u are awake or not, but I need some serious prayer for my health tonight.

I sat up and read it again.

I could hear the desperation in her voice as I read the request on my screen. I felt angry that I’d gone to bed early

and couldn't respond right when she sent it. That morning, we started walking an 86-day journey from guessing to knowing the outcome of her sickness. From uncertainty to the understanding that she was going to die.

Just a few months prior, I'd driven a U-Haul across the country to Massachusetts, where I was still settling in near the Atlantic coastline. It was a long-awaited move to a place where I could stay after years of moving around the country, but the thrill of a hopeful future was cut short when things started to fall apart. The shock of so many losses that summer left me in a daze. It felt like everywhere I went, I bumped into grief. My own, my community's. It was like being perpetually sunburned—tender on every surface.

Maybe you've felt that sore, fragile sort of way. Words are spoken or a diagnosis is given and suddenly the colors turn and the tone changes, leaving you lost and wanting to lie very still, avoiding anymore contact with the world around you.

As the losses stacked up, I got used to the ache of never feeling totally at peace. I made a habit of waking up and tell myself things like, "The first few hours of the day don't count" because I was so often overcome with fear or anger or uncertainty that made me want to give in and crawl back into bed.

But it was summertime. Everything was bright and warm and flourishing, except for me. I didn't feel like the birds that sang or the fireworks that lit up the sky or the joyful picnics after a day at the lake. I felt myself disconnecting from the world around me because my own pain wasn't reflected on any surfaces I could see.

Sometimes it's easier to get quiet and distant until something else brings you back to earth. For me, it was the day I stepped into the dining room of Orchard House. It wasn't my first time visiting the place where *Little Women* was written—I had passed through before, the way that tourists do. I'd seen

the 1995 movie and grew up with the nostalgia of that film, but this trip was different. I was seeing it through new eyes. Sitting quietly in Concord, Massachusetts, this brown house has become an icon to those needing to be reminded that our stories matter. Its halls are soaked in the story of four sisters who all grew up within its walls—sisters that live on through the timeless tale of Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy March. Standing there that afternoon in early autumn, the space felt different. No longer seeing it as a random historic site, I found that it suddenly felt intensely personal. I looked around at the Alcott family's paintings on the walls and their china in the cabinet. And it was as if I was beholding it for the first time, weary and war-torn, waiting to hear what was to come for Jill.

There are very few places where I have physically stood that bore witness to specific moments in history that hit right at the core of my personal life. One was the Mount of Beatitudes in Israel where Jesus said, "Blessed are those who mourn" (Matthew 5:4). Another was a hillside, near where I live, which was one of the sites where the Great Awakening was preached. And now, lingering in the dining room of Orchard House, surrounded by the belongings of the Alcott family, I could almost see Louisa pacing around, trying to find the right combination of words for the chapter she was working on and the emotions she was working through.

I imagined her grabbing a snack in the kitchen because she was putting off the inevitable task of putting pen to paper. She was intensely disciplined but also hit ruts and got stuck in the swamps of writer's block. This ground is familiar territory for many of us writers or creatives, and we know the terrain well. But she was on a whole other level of commitment. For example, Louisa taught herself to write with her left and right hands so that she could go on for up to 14 hours when inspiration struck: a "vortex," as she called it.

She was unusual, and so was the house.