

*New!
Readers Guide*

a Day with a Perfect Stranger



DAVID GREGORY

From the Best-Selling Author of
DINNER WITH A PERFECT STRANGER

a Day with a Perfect Stranger



DAVID GREGORY



WATERBROOK
PRESS

A DAY WITH A PERFECT STRANGER
PUBLISHED BY WATERBROOK PRESS
12265 Oracle Boulevard, Suite 200
Colorado Springs, Colorado 80921

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ISBN: 978-0-307-73018-3
ISBN: 978-0-307-44631-2 (electronic)

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The Library of Congress cataloged the hardcover edition as follows:
Gregory, David, 1959—

A day with a perfect stranger / David Gregory. — 1st ed.
p. cm.

ISBN 1-4000-7242-5

1. Jesus Christ—Fiction. 2. Imaginary conversations. 3. Married women—Fiction. I. Title.

PS3607.R4884D39 2006
813'.6—dc22

2006002836

Printed in the United States of America
2011—First Trade Paperback Edition

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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one

I NEVER THOUGHT I'd become the kind of woman who would be glad to leave her family. Not that I wanted to abandon them, exactly. I was just glad to get away for a few days. Or longer, in the case of one of them.

Maybe I should have been celebrating instead of escaping. That's what you do with big news, isn't it? And we had had plenty.

A few weeks earlier my husband, Nick, told me that he had met Jesus. Not the usual "getting saved" kind of meeting Jesus. I mean, met Jesus. Literally. At a local Italian restaurant.

At first I thought he was joking, of course. He wasn't. Then I thought he had been hallucinating. He had, after all,

been putting in seventy-hour weeks at work and getting limited sleep. But he stuck to his story, which left me with—I didn't know what.

All I knew was that my husband was convinced he had dined with Jesus, and he had turned into some kind of Jesus freak. It was bad enough that he had previously disappeared into his work. Now when we were together, God was all he wanted to talk about. That wasn't the "till death do us part" I had planned on.

Things had been strained enough between us without bringing God into the mix. It was as if someone had kidnapped the real Nick and replaced him with a religious Nick clone. There we were, plugging along in our marriage, and suddenly Nick, who wouldn't have been caught dead in a church parking lot, is best friends with deity.

It's not that I object to religion. People can believe whatever they want to. I just didn't grow up religious, hadn't become religious, and didn't marry someone religious. And I wanted it to stay that way.

So getting away from Nick for four days was a relief. What I hated was leaving Sara, my two-year-old. Granted, I looked forward to the break, as any mother would. But I had never been away from her longer than two nights, and even

then I found myself missing her by the second day. And that was with my mom coming down to take care of her. At least I trusted my mom. No telling what might happen with Nick doing the childcare. Not that he was a bad dad, when he was both home and off his cell phone.

But I had to take this trip. A client had built a resort hotel near Tucson and wanted me to design new brochures for it. The manager insisted on giving me a personal tour of the place. She said I needed to experience it firsthand to fully capture its essence. And get a free massage, I hoped.

I rarely had to travel for my graphic arts work, which was fine with me. Most of the business I had developed since we'd moved to Cincinnati was local. Sometimes I went back to Chicago on a job, but I could handle most of my old accounts online. This, however, was my biggest client—had been for six years—and I couldn't exactly say no.

The trip should have been a one-day there-and-back. Two at the max. But since you can't get a nonstop from Cincinnati to Tucson, I booked my flight through Dallas, which meant I had to take two travel days.

I could hardly imagine a less appealing way to spend two days of my life. I don't much like air travel, anyway. I'd rather just throw some stuff in the car and hit the road. In a car no

one has you stand in line or searches your purse or forces you to eat dry pretzels for a snack. Nor does anyone pull you aside, have you extend your arms, and run a baton all over your body. Why do I always get singled out?

Plus, I didn't feel the best this particular morning. I knew that getting on a plane without any breakfast wasn't a brilliant idea since they don't even serve those tasteless meals anymore. But I figured I could break down and buy a snack box if I had to.

Before heading out the front door, I wrote a note and left it on the kitchen counter.

Nick,

Sara's pajamas are in the top drawer, if you don't remember. You may not, since you haven't put her to bed this year. Her toothbrush is in the left drawer in her bathroom. I left plenty of juice, oatmeal, and cereal for breakfasts. Plus she likes toast and jelly. There's a macaroni casserole she likes in the fridge and some frozen veggies. After that runs out, she likes Chick-fil-A. Don't forget story time at the library tomorrow at 10:30.

You can reach me on my cell if you need me for anything about Sara. Hope you and Jesus have a great time together.
Mattie

I drove myself to the airport. Nick had volunteered to take me, but I declined. Riding by myself was preferable to Nick telling me about his latest discovery in the Bible, which he was now reading voraciously, or listening to Christian radio, a fate worse than death. I parked and walked into the terminal. The soft music and absence of Jesus talk provided a welcome relief.

Miraculously, I made it through security without any special groping and proceeded to my gate. Once there, I sat with my carry-ons and glanced at my boarding pass. *Oh, great*, I thought. *An E seat, in the middle. Why didn't I make my reservation earlier and get a better seat? Maybe I can switch to an aisle seat near the back of the plane.*

A minute later the agent at the gate picked up her microphone and announced, "Ladies and gentlemen, our flight to Dallas is full. To expedite your departure, please make sure you stow your bags and take your seat as quickly as possible."

Fabulous.

She then started hawking two two-hundred-dollar travel vouchers for anyone willing to take a flight four hours later. No one took them. When the offer went up to three hundred dollars, I stepped forward. *Maybe they'll have an aisle seat on the next flight.*

“When would that get me into Tucson?” I asked.

The agent looked up the connecting flight. “Ten twenty-two this evening.”

Nearly ten thirty. Plus taking a shuttle out to the hotel. That's after eleven.

I decided to pass; I'd be too tired the next day.

As they called first-class passengers to board, I remembered something I'd forgotten to tell Nick. I pulled out my phone and dialed his office. He answered.

“Nick, I'm at the airport.”

“Hey. How's it going?”

“Look, I forgot to tell you that Laura has Sara with their son Chris until about five thirty. She's taking them swimming at the Y.”

“No problem. I'm going to get home a little early and fix something for Sara and me.”

“What—you mean cook something?”

“Yeah. I'm picking up stuff for spaghetti and meatballs.”

“Miracles never cease. Look, I need to go—my row is boarding.”

“Call me tonight?”

“I’ll see, Nick. I might be pretty tired.”

“Well, have a great trip. I love you.”

“Yeah. Bye, Nick.”

I picked up my tote bag and suitcase and got to the boarding line just as my group was being called. I walked down the ramp and waited interminably while all the people already on the plane decided where to put their stuff. By the time I got to my row, there was room overhead for my suitcase but not my tote bag. I stowed my suitcase and looked at my seating arrangement on the left. The seats on both sides of mine were already occupied. Two guys. *Great. Sandwiched for the next two and a half hours between two men. Why couldn’t they have put me between two size 2 women?* The man in the aisle seat stood up to let me by. I squeezed into the middle seat, resigning myself to not having an armrest available to me on either side. Guys always hog those.

I leaned down, stuffed my bag under the seat in front of me, and pulled my shoulders inward to squeeze back into my seat. *This is really going to be a fun trip.*

The temperature inside the airplane cabin didn’t help. I

reached up and opened my air vent. That made things feel a little better. I leaned back and sat, staring forward.

I didn't bring anything to read. What was I thinking? I should have stopped and picked up a novel in the airport. I never do that. It would have been kind of nice just to have something to escape into for a while.

I glanced through the seat pocket in front of me. *Maybe someone left a magazine in here.* But there wasn't much to choose from: a *SkyMall* catalog selling expensive gadgets that no one needed, instructions on using my seat as a flotation device in case we landed in the Mississippi River, and the monthly airline magazine. I opened the magazine and started reading an article about living on some Spanish coast. The houses were huge, the beaches white, the water crystal clear, the cliffs spectacular. *Who are they kidding? No real people live like this.*

Just then my cell phone rang. I squeezed forward, leaned down, searched through my bag, and caught it on the fourth ring. "Hello?"

"Hey, traveler. What's up?" It was my younger sister, Julie.

"Just got on the plane. Waiting to pull away from the gate."

"Did you get Sara taken care of, or do you need my help?"

“Well, theoretically she’s taken care of. How Nick actually does with her, we’ll see when I get back.”

“What’s he going to feed her?”

“He told me he’s going to do some cooking.”

I heard laughter on the other end. “Nick? Cook?”

“I know.”

“Has he come back to earth, or is he still in the clouds?”

“Still in the clouds. He’s totally flipped out on this Jesus thing.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I’m not sure.” I hesitated. “I called a lawyer yesterday and set up an appointment for next week.”

“Mattie! You did?”

“I don’t know. Maybe it’s too soon. I just don’t feel like I can take this anymore. I mean, things were already bad enough before Nick got religious. There’s no way we’re going to make it like this.”

“I thought he’d been spending more time with you and Sara lately.”

“Yeah. He has. I’m just not sure I want him to anymore. It’s really confusing.”

“Why don’t you try counseling again?” she suggested. “Maybe a different therapist.”

“What’s the point? I mean, it’s not like the last one did

much good. Besides, this is a different issue—not like Nick’s workaholism. I just don’t see any middle ground on this religion stuff.”

I wanted to tell Julie more, but I heard an overhead announcement.

“I’ve gotta run,” I told her. “They’re telling us to shut off cell phones and all that. Can I call you tonight? I’ve got something else to tell you too.”

“I don’t know. I might be out.”

“Julie, for once, don’t go clubbing. It’s bad news for you.” One of the flight attendants walked by and gave me the eye.

“I’ll call you tonight,” I said. “Be there, okay?”

“Okay.”

I clicked off the phone, put it in my bag, leaned back, and closed my eyes. *I can’t believe Nick and I aren’t even making it to our fourth anniversary.*

The plane taxied to the runway and took off.

two

“HAVE YOU CONSIDERED the possibility that your husband might be on the right track?”

The guy to my right, in the window seat, had folded up his *Wall Street Journal* and turned slightly to face me. He looked like the typical business traveler: thirty-five or so, wearing a blue suit, a light blue shirt, and a patterned red tie. He was average size, trim, with dark hair.

“I’m sorry?”

“I couldn’t help but overhear some of your conversation. Has it occurred to you that your husband might be right?”

I looked at him incredulously. I couldn’t believe this perfect stranger was butting into my personal business.

“Right about what?”

“About God. About Jesus.”

“What do you mean?”

“Again, I wasn’t meaning to eavesdrop, but it sounds like your husband may have found God.”

You were eavesdropping, and you are starting to tick me off.

“The only thing my husband has found is another excuse to go off and do his own thing. And excuse me for saying so, but this is none of your business.”

I turned away from him and looked straight ahead. I could sense him doing the same. We both sat silently. *This is really uncomfortable. I’ve never had an incident with someone on a plane. I can’t believe he had the gall to say anything at all.*

He lifted the paper out of his lap and held it toward me. “I noticed you were looking for something to read. Would you like to share my *Journal*?”

“No,” I responded. “Thanks, though.”

He put two of its sections back on his lap and opened the third. I flipped open my airline magazine once more. After a moment he lowered his paper. “Do you mind if I ask you another question?”

I used my finger to hold my place in my magazine while I closed it. “No, I guess not,” I replied, trying to maintain a level of politeness. *I’m going to regret this, I know.*

“Have you ever thought about having a personal relationship with God?”

“No.” I tried to respond without any emotion. “I’m not really into religion.”

“I’m not talking about religion. I’m talking about a relationship.”

“You’re talking about God. That’s religion.”

“I’m talking about knowing God personally.”

“Yeah, well.” I opened the magazine again. “Whatever.”

“Do you believe in God?” he asked.

“Not really.” I buried my head a little deeper in the magazine. *I don’t want to blow up at this guy.*

“So you don’t think God exists at all?”

“Who knows? Look—”

“Let’s assume that he does. Then we’re talking about reality, not religion, aren’t we?”

I looked up at him. “As I started to say, anything that has to do with God is religion. And I don’t want anything to do with it.”

He locked his fingers in front of him and stared at them for a moment before looking back at me. “Okay. Let me ask this. If you were to die tonight, do you know where you would go?”

“No!”

Two people in the row in front of me turned my way.

“No,” I repeated. “I don’t think I’ll go anywhere. I don’t know if I’ll go anywhere. I’m not worried about life after death. I’m just trying to make it through this life.” I held my magazine up to my face and shifted my body toward the aisle.

“I know,” he persisted. “I just hate to see you throw your marriage away. I think if you—”

I slammed the magazine on my lap and turned toward him.

“Look, you don’t know anything about me, my marriage, or my life. But here you are, trying to cram your beliefs down my throat. The last thing I need is more God talk. I was hoping to escape that on this trip.”

“Why do you want to escape from part of your husband’s life?” he asked.

“Because it’s not part of who I am,” I snapped back. “It’s not part of who I want to be or what I want my family to be. If that’s who Nick wants to be, fine, but he can do it without me.”

I rose out of my seat. “Excuse me.”

The man by the aisle got out of his seat and let me by.

The people behind us were staring at me. I walked to the back of the plane. Both bathrooms were occupied, and a woman appeared to be waiting for the next opening. I stood with my arms crossed, steaming.

I can't believe I was talking to that guy. I might as well have invited Nick along. I can't believe he would talk to me that way. I told him how I feel about religion. And then for him to say anything at all about my marriage!

A boy came out of one bathroom, and the woman entered.

Now what am I going to do? I can't stand back here the rest of the flight. But I certainly don't want to sit next to him again. I glanced at my watch. More than an hour and a half to Dallas.

I thought through my options. It was certainly too late to ask anyone to switch seats. I looked around for the flight attendants. Both were at the front of the plane starting to serve snacks and drinks. *I really need to get something into my stomach to settle it down.* A man came out of the other bathroom; I went in. *I guess I'll just go back and read. I can ignore him. Surely he won't say anything else.*

I returned to my seat as inconspicuously as possible. “Hey,” the window-seat guy said as I sat down. “I’m sorry if I made you mad. I only—”

“Sure,” I said matter-of-factly. “Let’s just drop it.”

“Okay. I hope the rest of your flight goes well.”

“I’m sure it will.”

I closed my eyes, and, mercifully, he shut up.