

Well on Your Way

an assistant professor's companion

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nodramaturg publishing

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Chapter 1

You are not alone.

Origami spirits

We fold our souls like
paper boxes. Hidden, till
rain soaked, they unfurl.



I want to be clear from the start. I know we can never fully understand another person's experience. We each have our own stories and perspectives. Even when we've been in exactly the same place at exactly the same time, our experiences will often differ—in some cases, dramatically. So it would be both foolish and insensitive of me to claim that I've been where you are today or that I know what you're going through. Yet that's precisely what I want to do. I want to tell you I've been there, I know how you feel, and I have the scars to prove it.

So how can I respect your unique experience while honoring my longing to connect through shared struggles? I guess I'll start by simply repeating the title of this chapter: you are not alone.

I am willing to bet there's no feeling you've felt, no nasty phrase you've uttered to yourself, no stupid mistake you've made that hasn't been felt, uttered, or made by other assistant professors (and quite possibly by me . . . more than once . . . or maybe close to a thousand times).

My emotions were all over the map when I was working toward tenure. I felt anxious (often) and audacious (occasionally), exhausted (always) and empowered (sometimes), devastated (a handful of times) and even delighted (once or twice). Most of all, I wasted a lot of time trying to figure out how I was *supposed* to feel and wondering why I didn't. When I looked around, I felt completely out of place.



I can't tell you how intensely I want to save you and other assistant professors from that painful experience. I realize, however, that's not only unrealistic, but misguided. The only person anyone can hope to save is themselves, and that's work enough for a lifetime. So my true goal in writing this is to provide a form of companionship, to reach across the distance to ease any loneliness, anxiety, and isolation you may be feeling.



There's an episode of *The West Wing* that perfectly captures the deep sense of camaraderie I hope to infuse throughout this book. In one particular scene, Leo tells Josh a story about a guy who falls in a hole and can't get out. The man in the hole notices a doctor walking by and shouts up at him, asking for help. The doctor writes out a prescription, tosses it down, and continues on his way. Later, a priest comes along. Hearing the man's cries, he writes out a prayer and throws it down the hole before walking on. Finally, a friend walks by and hears the man pleading for help. The friend immediately stops and jumps in the hole. Incredulous, the man questions his friend: "Are you stupid? Now we're both down here!" The friend calmly responds, "Yeah, but I've been down here before, and I know the way out."

I wish I could promise I know the way out of every hole and will impart that great wisdom here. I'm afraid I don't, so I can't. I can tell you, however, that I've been in my share of deep voids. The demands of adjusting to a job with nebulous expectations, the sense I was frequently under scrutiny, and the concern I wouldn't be able to build a tenurable record often left me stressed out and overwhelmed. I also gave birth to my first baby eight weeks before starting my faculty position and was in the midst of a divorce seven years later, when 40 percent of my department colleagues voted against me for tenure. Not exactly the unanimous support that is expected for a successful tenure case.

I'm sharing that and other stories in this book in hopes of normalizing these experiences. I so often believed I was the only person in the world enduring the intense worry, fear, and uncertainty that dominated many of my days as an assistant professor. I now know I was far from alone, and I want you to know that too. I hope the observations I share, along with the poems, questions for reflection, and prayers will provide comfort and warm company.

So upon further reflection, maybe rather than saying "I've been there" or even "You are not alone," I want to say *I'm with you*. And it's an honor to be here.