

Things Will Get Better

Things will get better.
At least that's what people keep telling me.
When you died,
my entire world crumbled.
I stared at the ground,
feeling like it was rising to meet me
even though I was standing tall.
At that moment,
everything I believed in and had clung to
had irrevocably changed.

We had so many plans and dreams.
They vanished from my future in an instant,
just like you did.
My only saving grace is that we never
left any words unsaid.
We knew how we felt about each other.
Still doesn't change the fact
there is a you-shaped hole in my chest
where you used to be.

For two weeks after you died,
I was numb.
Food tasted like cardboard.
I couldn't laugh, smile, yell, or cry.
I sat in bed,
staring at the wall,
willing this day to end
so I could sleep,
hoping that when I woke up,
all of this was just a nightmare.
It wasn't.
You really were gone.

Then something inside me broke.
I started my day in tears,
and ended my night in even more tears.

Of course, I only did this in private.
Grief is scary,
raw grief even more so.
People want to support you,
to fix things,
but some things can't be fixed.
I locked my grief away
and only let it out when others
weren't there to see it,
as if my feelings were something to be ashamed of.

Things will get better.
That's what I keep telling myself.
I won't always feel this way.
The grief won't always be this sharp.
I don't know if it's true.
Part of me doesn't want it to be true,
scared that somehow,
if things get better,
that will mean it's okay you're gone.
That will never be true.

I didn't think it was possible,
But I laughed and smiled again.
The first time I did after you died was
when I held my baby nephew for the first time.
Being happy in that moment
didn't lessen me missing you.
It somehow made it all the sweeter,
because I knew you would want to be there,
holding my nephew, too.

My grief is no longer all-consuming.
I remember how to be human most days.
The grief comes and goes,
crashing on me unexpectedly
like a rogue wave.
I can think of you now without
feeling overwhelmed with grief and loss.
My heart still hurts when I think of you,
but it is a good kind of hurt.

It is the hurt from loving someone so much
that it splits your heart wide open.

When others lose their loved ones,
I can empathize.
I can give them the support or space they need.
How do I know what they need?
I ask - I am no longer afraid of loss and grief,
in others or myself.
I can stand next to others,
supporting them as they experience their worst losses.
And I can do that because of the gift you gave me.
Even though you are gone,
your memory will always live in my heart.
Things are not the same as when
you were still here with me,
but people were right,
things did get better than they were.

Canyon

Wind whistles through the trees.
Bitter, cold, unrelenting.
Rocks clatter as bighorn sheep prong over the cliffs,
defying gravity.
The canyon opens
while simultaneously swallowing me.
I descend into its depths.

It's cold in the shadows of the canyon,
heating up whenever the trail
jackknifes into the sun for a fleeting moment
before disappearing back into shadow.
Gravel crunches under my boots.
My bones jar against each other
with every step downwards.
Splashes of green, hardy scrub brush and trees
clash against the red, pink, and yellow hues,
life cutting through rock to reach for the sun.

Ravens tumble through the air,
divebombing each other and
unexpected visitors to their realm.
The rhythm of my breath
intermingles with my steps
and the gentle thumping
of my pack against my back.

Each leg of the switchbacks
brings me closer to the sun
beating down on the open plateau.
Sagebrush grows in pale knots,
surrounding me with its clean smell.
As soon as I hit the plateau,
I shed my top layers like a second skin.
I make my way across the flats,
until I reach the start of the next set of switchbacks,
going down, down, down
as it gets hotter, hotter, hotter.

The roaring and rumbling of the river
lets me know I'm getting closer.
I hear it long before I see it,
echoing off the cliffs.
Finally, I see it, peeking out behind giant boulders.
Roiling, turbulent.
Snaking through the canyon.
I spot a place on a beach where
the water is calmer.
A large, flat boulder
protrudes into the river.
I heave my tired, hot, sweaty self onto it.
My pack thuds on the rock behind me as I let it drop.
I pull off my boots, peel off my socks,
roll up my pants, and plunge my raw feet into the water.
Sweet, painful, ice-cold relief.
I lie back on the sunbaked slab of sandstone
and close my eyes
feeling completely at peace.

Diagnosis

Cold hands, dry lips.
Can't stop fidgeting.
Fluorescent lights flickering.
My world flips,
turning inside out.
I sit in a hard, plastic chair.
Vision tunnels
and I try to form words.
My lips make the motion,
but no sound comes out.
Finally: "I have cancer?"
The doctor says yes and keeps talking.
I hear nothing after yes.

Numb.
I must be brave.
All I hear is the pounding
of my blood rushing through my ears.
I still feel like I'm falling.
I don't know what the doctor said,
too many words to understand
when everything has changed.

After a long pause,
I stand up
and thank him for his time.
Hold it together.
Wandering on autopilot through sterile hallways,
I find my way outside and
in front of my car.
I don't know how.

I stand next to it,
looking at the keys in my hands.
Uncertain. Scared. Numb.
Detached. Wanting to scream.
Full of conflicting feelings,
all tearing through me in an instant,

leaving me in their wake.
Empty.

What next?
Taking a trembling breath,
I try to unlock my door.
My hands are shaking so much
I drop the keys,
and sink onto the curb next to my car.
Staring at nothing.
The keys are next to my foot.
But I don't see them.

I don't know how long I sit there.
Phone rings. Perky, happy ringtone.
I answer it as quickly as I can only to make it stop.
I forget to speak.
"Honey, are you there? Are you okay?"
I let out a shuddering breath.
No words come,
but she hears my breathing.
She waits for me to speak.
Always patient.

"Mom. It's cancer. I have cancer."
It comes out in a rush,
Almost a relief.
There is more silence,
then tears.
Hot tears, streaming down my face.
I sense people walking near me,
but I don't see them.
And I don't care.
We both cry,
I absent-mindedly shake my foot against the front tire,
and kick my keys under my car.

"Honey, we're going to figure this out."
I take a deep breath and believe her.
I believe her because I have to.
We say "I love you" and hang up.

And I finally know what to do.
I crawl under my car to get my keys
so, I can drive to meet her.
We'll figure this out.
Together.

Sheets

Stained, torn rags.
Dozens of sheets never to be used again.
Safety hazard.
Mouse nests, packrat haven.
Simple solution, right?
Throw them away.

It's never that simple.
Unexpected vitriol and shattering pain.
Yelling, accusations.
Grabbing rags out of piles,
returning them to safety
as if they were treasures to be guarded,
hiding them from me
and my garbage bags.

If I throw them away,
I'm throwing away her past.
Every period of her life is marked
by what sheets she bought
for the people she loved.

It's not about throwing away the sheets.
It's about holding onto her past as tightly as she can,
before she loses it, too.
She storms out,
leaving me reeling.

I'm left with a pile of raggedy, dirty sheets.
I put them back in the linen closet.

We will sort through her memories on a different day.

Losing My Mind

Some mornings are calm,
some are turbulent.
Calm ones involve mom sitting on the couch,
reading a book,
drinking one of her five cups of coffee
leftover from the previous day.

Turbulent mornings involve tears,
suicidal threats,
hiding from me under the covers,
storming out of the house in her pajamas to sit with the chickens,
self-flagellation that she wasn't a better daughter, mother, sister, or wife.

Filled with regret,
she begs her deceased mother for forgiveness.
She wishes she had done better,
had been more patient,
more understanding.
Dementia is hard.
It strips away everything you are,
piece by piece until only a body remains;
her greatest fear realized.
To her, it is the greatest self-betrayal.
Deep resentment, anger, and fear.
Fear is the strongest even as
she hides it behind a fiery temper.

Moments of lucidity
punctuated by periods of
vacancy, fear, complacency.
When she is lucid, she wants to die, hating what is happening to her.
When she is vacant, she wanders off somewhere in her mind.
When she is fearful, she is railing against what she is becoming,
terrified everyone she knows will grow to hate her.
When she is complacent, she is happy to read and just be.

I came home to just be here with her as she journeys
through the most painful transition of her life.
It is the least I can do.
She has been there through all of mine.

I am here to help (or *try* to help).
I don't always know how.
It is hard to know the right thing to say.
On most days,
I wonder if there even *is* a right thing to say.

Sometimes I support her
by keeping her safe.
A gentle reminder,
"No, mom, metal can't go in the microwave."
I take away the metal pitcher
and give her a microwave-safe mug instead.
Or "Here, let me cut that for you",
as she cuts towards herself with a sharp knife,
hiding the cut on her knuckle from me.
I help her clean it and put a bandage on it.

Often there is anger when I do this.
I don't blame her.
There is deep resentment
when I "correct" her.
It comes out in bursts of anger
directed at me,
but I know that she is truly
angry at herself.
That's why I try to do it as gently as possible.
But how do you tactfully tell someone
you love that what they are doing is dangerous?
Especially when they feel you are taking away their independence?
Any way I approach it leaves her feeling less than.
That is never my intention.

Keeping her company is important.
When she gets stuck in thought-loops,
I try to be patient and be kind.
"The weather is nice today, isn't it?"

“Yeah, mom, it’s a really pretty day.”
One minute later,
“The weather is nice today, isn’t it?”
“You bet, maybe we can go for a walk later.”
And it goes on and on.

Other times,
all I can do is listen.
She looks at me,
tears streaming down her cheeks.
“I’m losing my mind!
You have no idea how that feels!”
I hug her and listen,
trying to validate her experience.

Inside I’m thinking:
you’re right.
I don’t and I can’t
unless I find myself
in your shoes one day.
I hope I don’t.
That tiny fear is there
in the back of my head,
but I push it down.
This isn’t about my fears right now.
This is about my mother’s.

As hard as it is
to see her go through this,
it is astronomically harder for her
to be the one going through this,
to be losing herself each more
day by day.

That is why I am here.
I am here because I love her,
and I don’t want her to go through this alone.