

On the subject of grief

Time doesn't behave normally following the death of a loved one. Days melt together in a slurry of emotions and numbness, with each moment dominated not by time, but by how long it takes you to stop crying. Anyone who has lost someone knows this, intimately. Myself, well, I've come to understand it too. Losing someone you love is raw and angry; an open, gaping wound that won't close no matter how many times you bandage it. It boils in your throat like a wet fire and it pulses through your blood like acidic, sticky bile. Grief is sickening. Grief is consuming. Grief is inevitable.

It has been just over two weeks since Viv and I found him. That's what the calendar says, at least. Thinking back on that day is physically painful, like someone has reached into my body to wrench out my spine. I try not to think about it. Viv doesn't bring it up, which helps. Sometimes I want to ask her if the images seep into her mind, into her dreams, but I already know the answer. I think I just want to hear that the nightmares flickering through my mind are not mine alone. Viv has been wordlessly teetering on the edge just as I have. She's been sleeping in my bed with me lately, something she hasn't done since we were kids, her small voice whispering that she had a nightmare and she was scared. We've been sleeping curled in each other's arms, the pillowcases damp with echoes of sobs.

I don't tell her this, but every day I wake up with the fear that she'll be gone too, eyes glazed over and mouth slack and bowels emptied and -

I can't keep thinking like this. I can't keep crying like this.

- - -

I opened my eyes to sunlight muffled behind curtains, curled up in my bed alone. Distantly, pipes creaked as shower water fell against the curtain and the bathtub. She was up early. Or I was up late. I fumbled a hand over to the nightstand and pulled my phone to me. My eyes were sore every morning since... for awhile now, but I was still able to make out the time. 9:02 am. I closed my eyes again, feeling mentally numb, and wished the day would be over already.

I didn't think time passed as I laid there, but I came to with a start with Viv flicking water at me from the ends of her hair.

"I made breakfast and fed Bennie."

Right. I had promised her I would take care of things this morning. I opened my mouth to apologize and she hushed me.

"It's fine, I make eggs better than you anyway." She teased with a half smile, leaving the door open on her way out.

I felt bad, *really bad*, that she handled things better than me sometimes. I was the older sister, it was my job to take care of her and make sure she was okay. And yet it seemed that she was handling it all better than me.

Well, I couldn't say that. I knew how hard she cried last night. Hard sobs, forced from her chest rather than her eyes, gripping my shirt as her throat stopped making sounds. That was the worst, when she cried so hard she stopped making noise.

I got out of bed, pulled on some halfway-clean clothes, and forced my legs to the kitchen. I avoided looking at the door at the end of the hallway.

Viv sat at the little table in the kitchen eating eggs and toast, breaking off a piece of bacon for Bennie, who had his paws up on her leg and was rubbing his cheek against her hand. She mumbled something about toast to me through a mouthful of food. I didn't need to ask for clarification, dropping the lever on the toaster without paying much attention. She always set it for me how I liked it, and I changed it back to her preferred setting once I was done. It was weird now, thinking back to how mad I would get when I didn't check the time beforehand and my toast would come out blackened and charred - just how he liked it.

Another irritation I'd give anything to experience again.

I poured myself some juice and sat across from her. We ate in silence, there was nothing to say. Bennie had moved to sit at my feet, purring lightly, and I found my eyes wandering to the waxy, saturated picture of a waterfall above our calendar, hanging slightly crooked on the wall. At some point Viv had gotten up and rinsed her dishes, moving to the door to slip her shoes on. I had been avoiding thinking about it, but looking at the day marked on the flimsy paper, I couldn't not address it: today I had to make a trip to the funeral home. The last visit in the foreseeable future, at least. This one was the hardest, and it was the only one Viv couldn't be there for.

"Maybe I'll get done early," Viv suggested as she tugged her lanyard over her head. She pulled me from my thoughts and continued them out loud. Sometimes I swore we were twins, for how in sync we were. "Frank said that if we're slow he'd send me home. I could meet you at the..." she paused, words catching on her tongue.

"It's fine, you need the hours. I'll go pick everything up and I'll meet you at the beach, like we talked about."

Viv chewed her lip, clearly torn. I stood, careful not to step on Bennie's tail, and moved the short distance across the living room to her. I pulled her hands up into mine and stood on my toes to kiss her forehead briefly before pulling her into a hug.

"I'll be okay. We'll be okay."

Her breathing shuddered against me and she pulled back with her chin quivering. I stepped back and gave her room to collect herself, and she flashed me a grin laced with shaky confidence before opening the door, giving her love to me and Bennie, and closing it behind her.

I was alone then. The funeral home appointment wasn't until noon, and ordinarily I would have relished a few hours to kick back and watch a movie with Bennie sprawled across my lap. But I couldn't do that anymore, no. Not when the door down the hall was visible from the couch. I didn't mean to look at it, just then, but I did. Whispers shivered up my spine, depositing their unwanted thoughts deep into my skull.

I snatched my keys from the table by the door and left the house too.

- - -

The waves crashed in a calming, rhythmic way today, dancing with the seagulls swaying above them. The sand beneath my legs was still warm and soft, almost pillowy. Salt hung heavy on the wind and the sun lay low in the air. Not quite sunset, not just yet. It was peaceful. A shadow crested over my vision and lowered itself onto the sand beside me.

"Hey." whispered Viv.

"Hey." It came out quieter than I expected. There wasn't much power behind my voice these days.

She opened her mouth to say something but it drifted shut again, and she turned to look towards the waves too. The rhythm of the ocean beating into the sand, churning the sediment and

depositing it in an eternal cycle. I closed my eyes and focused on the sound of water, the smell of salt, the feel of sand. On any other day I could have spent hours here meditating and ridding myself of all earthly worries. But the drawstring bag that rested behind us sent a pang through my heart every time I remembered it. It wasn't easy to forget.

"He would have loved this." The words were gentle, coaxing. But I knew Viv well enough to hear the strain in her voice.

I screwed my eyes shut as they prickled with their own water and salt. I felt my chin tremble and I bit down on my bottom lip; a small whine escaped me regardless.

Viv shifted over and pulled me into her arms, but I couldn't relax into them. Not now. I couldn't break into pieces now. I was the one who wanted this. I talked her into this. I knew how much it pained her to not keep them, but I was adamant. The least I could do was follow through.

Didn't think it'd be this hard, though.

I'm not sure how long it took me to open my eyes again, but when I did, the sky was shifting to oranges and purples, clouds scattered across like an oil painting. I stood up, somehow, Viv right at my side gently holding my elbow. I turned to her. Her warm brown eyes were soft but the clumped eyelashes and tear streaks made it hard to keep looking at her. I took her hands in mine. "Are you ready?"

Her mouth drew into a pained smile and she nodded, eyes wide and glossy.

I reached down and picked up the drawstring bag. My other hand held tightly to hers, we walked to the pier. Wood slats with stray splinters mocked us but I couldn't imagine wearing my plastic sandals out for this. Barefoot was the only way, Viv clearly thought so too. We didn't seem to be walking quickly but the end of the pier came into view faster than I thought it would. Closer than I wanted it to be. The wind whipped my hair about my face and into the corner of my

mouth, but I didn't want to take my hand from Viv's, and I certainly couldn't release the tight grip I had on the rope of the bag.

We stood there for a moment, in silent understanding. It didn't feel right to move until it did, the wind shifting to billow my hair from behind us, and I drew the bag onto the railing ledge. Viv removed her hand from mine and put her arm around my shoulder, body tight against my side.

I stood there for a moment, hands on the bag, motionless, before eventually I unwound the rope and opened the bag, removing the tin jar. I expected to feel more, to be frozen to the bone and unable to even breathe. But the warm, salty wind and the oranges and pinks and yellows of the sky gave way to peace. Viv pressed her lips to my shoulder and I felt her tears on them. It was time.

In one swift motion, I uncapped the tin and emptied the ashes into the sea. Viv stifled a sob into my arm and held tight to my torso.

"Bye, Dad." I whispered to the waves. There was no reply but the world seemed to know, the sun dipping into the horizon and turning the waves an ethereal gold.