

Reminders

My dog, Max, rests his big head on my thigh and stares up at me in a way only a dog can, telling me he wants to go for a walk. I look down at him and wish he would just leave me alone while I finish watching the movie. Actually, I don't really care about the movie. I'm just staring at the screen while I drink my fifth beer of the day and trying not to think about the fact that my wife is dead.

He moves his eyes over to look at the door and then back at me without raising his head. Sometimes I swear he's the more intelligent one, having to dumb it down to communicate with the lowly human who can't seem to get the message. I reluctantly put down my half-empty beer on the coffee table.

"Alright, you win. Let's go."

I take him on one of the familiar routes. He does his business in a small patch of woods, so I end up not needing the doggie waste bag I have in my pocket. The whole time we're walking, I'm on auto-pilot. I still can't believe she's gone. We pass the park, and Max wants to play, but I turn back towards the house.

Julie and I met in the park. She was playing with Max along with her best friend, Sam—short for Samantha. One of them threw the ball for Max, and it rolled up to my feet. I picked it up before I knew who had thrown it, and suddenly I see this one-hundred-twenty pound Rottweiler running straight at me. I froze. Max stopped about ten feet away, sat down, and gave one deep chuff as he looked at the ball. I rolled it

towards him, and he picked it up. Three weeks later, Julie and I were dating, and, well... now we're here.

Max sees another dog with its owner on the other side of the street, and he whines but doesn't pull the leash.

"Not now, boy. You can play in the park tomorrow, I promise."

As we head back to the house, the movie that's been playing on a continuous loop in my head ever since Julie died starts over. The whirlwind romance, the honeymoon in Jamaica, buying our first (and last) house, painting it together, Max stepping in the paint and us chasing him around trying to keep him from ruining the wood floors, the day Julie came home from a routine physical with bad news, the operation, the chemo, more bad news, another operation... then the funeral.

Max barks a short wake-up call, and I realize I've been standing at the crosswalk too long. I see the annoyed expression of the driver who's been waiting on me as I cross the street. I wonder if he's on his way to meet his wife.

"Sorry," I mutter as Max and I pass in front of his car. I step up on the opposite curb, and I hear the squeal of his tires behind me. He must be desperate to make up the five seconds he wasted waiting for a grieving husband to come to his senses.

When I get back to the house, I realize I want to be anywhere but here – too many memories. I grab my laptop, make sure Max has enough water before I leave, and then head down to the library to catch up on email and turn in a drawing I've completed for a job I'm working on. There are some advantages to being a freelance architect. It's been three weeks, and I know I should be working my full eight hours

trying to finish up some projects and drum up some new business, but my heart isn't in it. I just want the world to stop so that I can process everything, but I know it won't.

I manage to get some work done at the library, arriving back home a few hours later. As I let Max out into the back yard, my phone vibrates in my pocket.

10:00 a.m. tomorrow - Max and Sam in the park! Love
you!—Jules

I start to cry. I miss Julie so much.

A week before she passed, I was at her bedside in the hospital, and she gave me one of those looks. It was one of those *we need to talk* looks. I played dumb.

“Hon, I want you to promise me something,” she said.

I took her hand, realizing with dismay just how thin and bony it had become as I stared into her beautiful, brown eyes. Even after all that had happened, her eyes were still entrancing.

“Sure. What is it?”

“I want you to promise that you'll take Max to the park once a week and play with him... along with Sam.”

I felt like my heart just stopped. I wasn't prepared to have that conversation.

“But... but the doctor said there's a chance this operation will succeed—it... it's... too early to be talking like that.” I was starting to hyperventilate. “Come on,

babe....” I put my other hand on top of hers as I came even closer to her. “You’ve got to keep fighting. Don’t give up.”

She looked at me like she was staring into my soul. She didn’t protest, didn’t argue, she just put her hand on the side of my face and looked at me. Neither of us said anything for several seconds.

“Promise me.”

I thought about pushing back, about launching into a speech about the things the doctor said we could try, but I didn’t. I just stared back.

“I promise,” I finally managed to say, barely keeping myself from crying right then and there.

“Good. I put some reminders on your phone so you won’t forget.”

Julie was always putting reminders on my phone for all sorts of crazy things like, “Go kiss your wife, right now!” or “Now would be a good time to call your sexy wife,” or “Don’t forget—I love you!” But these reminders were different. I wanted to take out my phone and delete the new reminders right then and tell her she was going to be okay and she’d be there in the park with Max and Sam and me. But I didn’t.

One week later, she was dead.

I click on the reminder and draw in a sharp breath when I see the note Julie had entered along with it.

I know this is hard, but remember that I love you, and you're going to make it through. Also, be nice to Sam—she just lost her best friend.

Love—Jules

It's the second appointment to play with Max in the park since Julie passed. I text Sam to see if we're still on for tomorrow. She responds a few minutes later to confirm that we are. When I go into the kitchen to try and decide what I'm going to make for dinner, I see Max sniffing around the spot on the couch where Julie usually sat. He whines and looks up at me, then walks in a circle two times and lays down where he used to nuzzle up against Julie's feet.

"I know, bud. I miss her, too."

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I'm sitting on a bench, staring out at all the other happy couples playing with their animals or throwing Frisbees with their friends. Max barks to let me know Sam is here, and I turn my head in her direction.

She smiles as she comes up. It's one of those, I'm-smiling-because-I-want-to-cheer-you-up-and-I-feel-sorry-for-you smiles. I make an attempt to smile back.

"Hey," she says.

"Hey."

We've already talked about how Julie made her promise to do this thing, too. Just knowing that makes it less awkward somehow. We play with Max for half an hour and then sit back down on the bench.

"How are you holding up?" she asks.

"Oh, I'm okay... just okay," I lie. Then I break down and cry, covering my face with one hand and hoping no one else is watching.

She scoots over and puts a consoling hand on my back.

"Hey... hey... I know it's hard."

After about a minute, I wipe away my tears with a tissue. I've started to carry them with me constantly since Julie's death. It seems I never know what's going to send me off crying again. Sometimes it's seeing a place that triggers a memory. Sometimes it's a smell that reminds me of her. Grief sucks.

"She reminded me that you lost your best friend, too," I finally manage to say, "...in the note she left on today's appointment. How... how's it been for you?"

She stares off into the park.

"I'll be serving customers sometimes, and I'll turn to say something to her that I think is funny, but then I'll realize she's not there, that it's just one of the employees that I scheduled to come in and work her shift. But I can't stop to process it because I've got this guy's latte in my hand, and I have to ring him up."

She looks down at her hands and picks at a fingernail. I can see tears brimming in her eyes.

“God, I’m so sorry. I’m so selfish to think I’m the only one who’s going through this. This whole thing sucks, big time. How do you deal with it?”

“I wait until it slows down, and then take a break and go into the bathroom and cry.”

Julie and Sam ran an indie coffee shop not far from our house. They were the dynamic duo—started it straight out of college. Now it’s all on Sam. I hadn’t even thought about helping out with Julie’s half of the business responsibilities.

“Geez. I’m sorry. I’ve dropped the ball. What can I do to help?”

“Nothing right now... really. Julie made sure to schedule all of the orders three months in advance when she found out she was going in for surgery again, and we already hired extra staff to cover her shifts for when she’d be out.”

“She thought of everything it seems,” I say.

“Yeah.”

We part ways, and I go back home and make myself lunch. Every time I open the refrigerator to get something, I’m reminded of Julie. I see her favorite coffee creamer and move it aside to get the mustard. I take my coffee black, so the creamer will just go bad, but I can’t bring myself to throw it out. Not yet. As long as I keep stuff like that around, it’s as if part of her is still here—like she’s not really dead.

But she *is* dead.

There’s a magnet with one of her favorite Bible verses on it stuck to the refrigerator door.

"I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die." –Jesus, John 11:25-26.

I wonder if Jesus was right, if there really is a heaven and eternal life. Part of me wants desperately to believe there is. Julie was convinced there was, and for her sake, I hope she's right.

We would talk about God on occasion. One day I brought up the fact that the world's greatest minds couldn't prove there was a God.

"Well," she responded, "It wasn't too long ago that the world's greatest minds didn't believe the world was round, either, but just because they couldn't prove it yet didn't mean it wasn't true."

"But how can you be so sure?" I asked.

She put her hand on my cheek and stared deep into my eyes.

"I just can't look at something as wonderful as you and believe you happened by mistake."

Then she smiled as she stood up on her tip-toes to kiss me, and we ended up making out on the couch. I wish I could have one of those conversations with her again so bad it hurts.

I slog through the next two weeks, dreading getting up each day. I go to bed early each night, trying to sleep off my grief, but it doesn't help. I keep the next two weekend appointments with Sam to play with Max in the park. I'm numb. It's like I'm

living in the movie *Groundhog Day*, only I'm living the same week over and over instead of just a single day.

Friday at 5 p.m., one of Julie's faithful reminders pops up on my phone.

Read this—Julie.

I open the appointment and read the note Julie had entered.

You're down the hall right now, getting me a fizzy drink from the vending machine. You're so thoughtful—I love that about you. By the time you read this, I've probably been gone for a while, and you're probably still grieving, but I want you to do something this weekend that I think will be fun. I want you and Sam to go to the retro-theatre and watch "The Sting". According to their schedule, it's playing this weekend. If it's not, then go there and watch another movie. Please do this for me, and don't over-think it!

I love you!

—Jules

I cringe inside as I read it. Going to see my favorite movie of all time with my dead wife's best friend sounds like a recipe for deep depression. Eventually, I'd like to reach the point where I'm not reminded in every waking moment that the love of my life is gone, and I have a huge hole in my soul.

I sigh. I guess this weekend is not the weekend that will happen. Max comes over and puts his head on the couch beside my leg, looking up at me. It's what he does when he's asking permission to jump up on the couch. I slap my palm on the cushion twice, and he's up in a flash. He can move fast for a big dog. He curls up next to me, and I massage one of his ears while I dial Sam.

"Hey," she says.

"Hey. Did Julie tell you what she had suggested we do this weekend?"

There's silence on the other end of the phone for a few seconds.

"Yeah.... She put a whole bunch of reminders on our shared calendar at work. I just saw it pop up."

"So, about that—"

"Listen, if you don't want to go see the movie, I totally get it," she says. "Not everyone is into old movies."

"I was actually thinking you might not like it," I say.

"Are you kidding? *The Sting* is only, like, my favorite movie of all time."

"Really?"

"Really."

We catch the late show and have a great time. In one of the tense scenes, Julie reaches over and grabs my hand. She's totally engrossed in the scene, but all I can focus on is her hand. Her warm and alive hand gripping mine. When the scene is over, she realizes what she's done.

"Oh, sorry," she says as she let's go.

"It's okay."

She smiles and looks a little embarrassed, then quickly looks back at the screen.

After the movie, we go by the shop and Sam makes us both a cup of coffee. We each share our stories about the first time we talked Julie into watching *The Sting* with us. It's weird that Julie never told either one of us that we shared a love for this movie. I guess she didn't want to be forced to watch it every few months when the three of us got together for movie night.

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It's been just over five months now, and the reality of Julie being gone for good is beginning to feel like the new, awful, normal. Some days I still expect her to walk in the bathroom when I'm brushing my teeth, with that cute bed-head and the I-just-woke-up look, and ask me to leave so she can pee. But most days, not. She's slipping away from me, and I hate myself for it.

I'm back into some semblance of a routine with work. I've landed a couple of new gigs within the past month, one for a re-furbish of what used to be an old drug-store downtown, and another for a new home about a mile outside of the city. Work

has been good for me. I'm able to focus on the job and not think about the loss. Julie would be gone most of the day at the shop, anyway, so I'm used to working in the house alone.

When the reminder from Julie pops up on my screen today, I don't have that once-familiar stab of grief, just a flicker of it. I text Sam, per usual, to confirm we're still on for our dog-play appointment tomorrow at the park. We are.

I show up at the park, and Sam's already there. It's overcast, and I hope we have at least thirty minutes or so before it starts raining. We walk up, and Max nuzzles her, leaning hard against her legs in a dog-hug, forcing her to step back with one leg to steady herself. We're about to go onto the greenspace when it starts to sprinkle.

"Ooo. Looks like this might not be a good idea today," I say.

"Yeah, I guess not. I was hoping it would hold off."

"Do you want to wait in my car for a bit and see if it blows over?"

"Sure."

Max whines when he sees we're about to get into the car without having playtime. I have to tell him twice to get in before he obeys. We sit in the car and talk about our week for a few minutes, and then the bottom drops out, and it's raining so hard I can't see past the end of the hood of the car.

"Wow, I guess that's our answer," I say.

"Yeah," she says, laughing.

"Where'd you park? I'll drive you to your car."

"Oh, I walked from the shop. Bad decision, I guess."

On a whim, I invite her back to the house to play with Max and have tea before I drive her back to the shop. She agrees to the idea, and within fifteen minutes, she's playing tug with Max in the living room, struggling to keep from being dragged across the floor. I watch from the kitchen as I brew tea for us both, and I laugh. It feels good to laugh. I haven't done much of that lately.

She comes into the kitchen to wash her hands after playing with Max as I'm finishing up the tea. The kitchen is small, four feet across from one side to the other. I turn around from the brewing station to grab some sugar from the cabinet for Sam's tea. She's just finished drying her hands and is turning to leave. We both turn at the same time, facing each other and narrowly avoiding a collision, brushing up against each other in the process. She looks up at me as we both say, 'sorry' at the same time. She blushes, and I suddenly notice, as if for the first time, how good her hair smells. It's all over in less than five seconds, but something has shifted. I feel guilty like I've done something wrong.

I finish preparing our tea and carry it into the living room, setting hers down on the coffee table in front of her. She's sitting on the couch, so I opt for the chair. It would feel wrong to sit too close after what just happened in the kitchen. What did just happen?

We talk while we drink our tea and then play a few more games with Max. We end with one of his favorite games, running around the couch playing keep-away with a little stuffed pig. Julie and I used to play this game with him all the time. When he gets close to catching one of us, we throw it to the other person. For the next five

minutes, the house is filled with our laughter and Max's big bark as he tries to capture the pig.

Max decides to take a short-cut and shoves his way between the couch and chair so he can catch up with Sam instead of running around the opposite way. Sam is forced to change directions to avoid getting caught, but I'm slow to follow suit, and we end up running into each other. We lose our balance and fall backwards over the arm of the couch, landing on the cushions facing each other, with Sam on top of me. Max takes full advantage of the situation, grabbing his pig out of Sam's hand and shaking it as he growls, totally consumed in the mock-hunting aspect of our play.

It only takes a second to realize the awkward position we're in. Sam pushes herself up, sliding one leg onto the floor as we extricate ourselves from the couch. I say something stupid about Max to ease the tension, but it does the opposite.

"Well, I guess I better get back to the shop," she says. "It's almost time for me to start my shift."

I drive her back to the coffee shop, and we make small talk on the way. By the time I drop her off, we've managed to segue back into non-awkward friendly banter. After I park to let her out, I turn to say goodbye, and she leans in for a quick hug. Sam's always been a hugger, but this hug seems to last a little longer than normal. She clears her throat when she pulls back, her face a bit flushed. She bites her bottom lip.

"I guess I'll see you next time."

Part of me wants to pull her back to me and kiss her, but then I remind myself that this is my wife's best friend, and guilt washes over me. I look away from her, down at the radio, as I reply.

"Yeah, next time."

"Right," she says, then she quickly exits the car.

On the way back home, all I can think of are three things. What a jerk I am to be attracted to my wife's best friend barely six months after Julie died, the fact that I am definitely attracted to Sam, and wondering if Sam has the same feelings about me.

Over the next few days, I wrestle with these feelings, wondering what to do about them. Is it too soon? Of course, it's too soon. Maybe it's not. I'm a jerk. I'm only human. I'm a horrible person who should never feel attracted to another woman ever again.

I finally decide I'm not qualified to process the situation on my own, and I make an appointment with the grief counselor that the hospital recommended to me following Julie's death. My appointment is the following afternoon at three.

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I meet the grief counselor. It's a man, thank God. It's uncomfortable enough as it is, let alone if I had to talk to a woman about these feelings. Maybe it shouldn't matter, but it does. I explain the situation, being as honest as I can, then sit back and await the verdict, relieved that someone else is at least attempting to help me bear the burden of what feels like a crushing emotional load.

He says nothing for what seems like an eternity. I look at the clock. We've only got ten minutes left. I look back at him, still nothing.

"Well?" I finally ask.

"So, what do you think is wrong with this scenario?"

"What's wrong with this?" I ask with a bit more sarcasm than I intended.

"What's wrong with this is that the love of my life is barely cold in her grave, and I'm getting the hots for her very-much-alive best friend! That's what's wrong with this!"

"Okay, that's better. Now try that again but without the hyperbole this time."

I take a deep breath and exhale, trying to calm down and give it a shot.

"My wife died just over six months ago, and I'm feeling guilty because I'm starting to have romantic feelings for her best friend."

"Much better," he replies. "Let's work with that. Why – specifically – do you think you feel guilty?"

I take about thirty seconds to think about that before I respond, trying to come up with another answer than the one I gave just a few minutes before.

"Because I feel like, if I go down this road, it's a betrayal of my love for Julie, like I'm somehow breaking my wedding vows or something."

"That's good. Very good. So, are you?"

"Am I what?"

"Are you betraying your love for Julie or violating your marriage vows?"

I stare at a bronze statue of a stag reared up on its hind legs that's positioned directly across from me on the credenza.

"I don't know."

Almost as if on cue, I hear the gentle ding of the timer on the counselor's phone.

"This is a great place to stop. Why don't you think about that question this week and schedule a follow-up appointment with the secretary on your way out."

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When Julie's reminder pops up on my screen on Friday afternoon, I'm conflicted.

Read this—Love, Julie

I click on it.

Mark,

I hope, by now, you're beginning to move on, to live life again. On that note, I have a confession to make. Please don't be mad at me for doing this, and don't be mad at Sam, either. I'm asking you to do these things because I know you'll both need to have someone to help you work through things. I really hope it has helped. But there's another reason. Mark, don't shut this window before you finish reading what I have to say.

They're coming to get me for my surgery now, and this may be the last thing I ever get to say to you, so listen up. I already told Sam it was okay, but I knew you weren't ready to hear it. I hope you're ready now. What I have to say is, I don't want you to be alone, and I think you and Sam would be a perfect match. If you have any feelings for her, I'm letting you know that it's okay with me if you and Sam end up together. In fact, nothing would make me happier than to know that my two best friends are together to take care of each other after I'm gone.

The nurse is here now and about to take me away. Sorry I swiped your phone from your jacket to type this when you kissed me goodbye a few minutes ago. I'm going to ask the nurse to give it back to you.

I'll always love you,

--Jules

I cry. I cry like a little girl. I cry like a little girl who just lost her best friend, her parents, her favorite puppy, and got sprayed with pepper spray. When I'm done, it seems like twenty minutes before I can breathe through my nose normally again.

Then I pour myself a drink.

I go out on the back porch where Julie and I would spend time each weekend having a cup of coffee together, and for the next hour, I tell Julie how much I miss her and how much I wish she were still here, talking to the chair where she used to sit like she's sitting there right now. I cry some more, but not so much that I can't talk.

And then I do what I couldn't do for the past six months. Then I do the thing that Julie—God bless her—finally gave me the strength to do just now with her note.

I say goodbye.

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The next morning, I get up late, make myself a big breakfast, and sit out on the back porch like Julie and I used to do. This time, when I look over at her chair, I don't feel guilty. I feel peaceful. I feel closure.

I talk with Julie, like she's still there, telling her things about my week. I don't cry this time. I wonder if she can hear me wherever she is? I have this weird sensation that she can.

After I clean up from breakfast, I pick up the phone and call Sam. She answers on the first ring.

"Hey, Mark."

"So... uh... I got this note in my reminder from Julie this week...."

"Yeah?"

“And... here’s the thing. And don’t think you have to give me an answer right now or anything. But, would you consider going on a date with me sometime?”

The seconds tick by like they’re each a week long.

“Okay.”

“Is that a yes?”

“Yes – that’s definitely a yes.”

I hear what I hope is excitement in her voice.

“Great. How about tonight, maybe 6 p.m.?”

While we’re making our plans, Max comes over and puts his big paw on my foot. I feel his weight grinding down on my pinky toe. I look down, and he’s looking up at me expectantly with his ball in his mouth.

“By the way, are we still on for meeting in the park at ten? Max is standing on my foot to remind me.”

She laughs.

“Yes. I’ll see you in the park at ten.”

“I can’t wait,” I say.

*** THE END ***