

Holiday

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“This is it,” mom says. “This is it.”

It’s one of those phrases that echo in your mind. *This is it*. It’s so final. THIS. IS. IT. This time she says it was different when dad fell; the way his eyes rolled back into his head was different.

“He’s... dying,” she says. And you know she’s right.

But you’re at Christmas Eve dinner with your boyfriend’s family, four thousand miles away, with a glass of Merlot and a plate of raclette. *This is it*. You excuse yourself to go to the bathroom, hoping not to puke, thinking shitshitshitshitshitshit. A knock at the door ten minutes later reminds you they’re all wondering.

“I have to go home,” you tell him. And your boyfriend is so kind and handsome and you wonder why you don’t love him anymore. Maybe the trauma of cancer carves too deep a canyon between you. Maybe you hate that he’s so fucking normal when you’re barely holding your pieces together.

One suitcase. Two doses of sleeping pills. Three flights. Four cities. Five films. Zero sleep. Infinite grief. Did you know that grief is a loop of infinity that you wear, invisible, on your heart? You can ignore it, but it will make you heavy and wretched.

Dad’s friend picks you up at the airport in his Ford Truck—drives you home. It’s too late to visit dad at the hospital. You try to sleep, but it’s jagged and punctuated. You wake up every thirty minutes and wonder if this is really your life. How could *this* be your life?

You know it’s the end, and real, like *really* real, when the doctors say there’s nothing more they can do. You watch their lips move with those words.

Nothing more we can do.

Slow-motion lips. *Nothing more we can do.*

Five blinks later, some woman with micro-bladed eyebrows and magenta lipstick tells you about your ‘options.’ They’re all expensive, of course. They’re *all* Hospice. That’s the only option: keep him comfortable. So you watch your dad be shuttled into a van and taken to Hospice where you watch him wither more and more. Where you realize he will never see his home again. Where you realize he will never sit in his blue recliner again. Or laugh again. Petals falling from a dead rose.

You never tell him how much you love him because it’s too horrible to fathom him not in your life. He’s your dad. Your DAD. Half of your DNA. Half of your roots. How will you live without him? Who even are you if he no longer *is*?

You hear the phone ring on January 6th—it’s 9:15 am. You already know who it is and what they’re going to say so you force your eyes shut and fantasize about screaming. Blessed, horrifying yelps.

“He’s gone,” mom calls up the stairs, minutes later.

Your boyfriend rolls over and hugs you and tells you he’s sorry and that he loves you so much. But you can’t accept his love. Not anymore. In fact, it sickens you. And it’s not fair to let that unwanted love seep like melting butter into the quaking cracks of your heart. It’s not fair to take these condolences from someone who doesn’t understand—who’s never shaken death’s boney hand or seen their parent’s corpse.

You go through the motions. Death announcement. Wake. Funeral. Drinks, lot of them. They go down so smooth into your empty stomach. You return to your normal. But it’s never normal. You break up with that loving boyfriend—you can’t really explain why, but you have to.

Christmas comes around again, and you realize it’s been a year (a whole friggin’ year!) and you’ve gained fifteen pounds and written a novel about how horrible it was to lose your number-one-fan, but you’re on the upswing—you know it! You just feel it!

But when you look closely, Christmas stares at you with its eyes tilted to the side, like a broken-neck Teddy bear that sits in the closet and watches through the cracks, wishing to come into the light. *Begging* you, to let it see the light.

But you look away, thinking: *fuck you, Christmas.*