

## Holiday

"This is it."

It's one of those phrases that echo in your mind. So final, so definitive. *This is it*. The words sprawl across the room. It's in the way mom says this time it was different when dad fell—the way his eyes rolled back into his head was different—that crushes you like a slow-mo tsunami of truth.

"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* in front of you. Everyone's happy—in the holiday spirit. *This is it*—it chokes you. 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 explain. And your boyfriend is so kind and handsome standing there before you, and you wonder why you don't love him anymore. Maybe the trauma of cancer has carved 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. Six time zones. Zero sleep. Infinite grief. Did you know that grief is an infinity symbol that you wear, invisible, on your heart? At times it's molasses-slow and others, it accelerates like the loop-de-loop of a rollercoaster.

Dad's friend Ricky D picks you and your boyfriend up at the airport in his truck. It's too late to visit dad at the hospital so Ricky drives you home. 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?

A trip to the hospital the next day lets you know it's the end and, like, *really* real, when the doctors say there's nothing more they can do. Slow-motion lips.

*Nothing more we can do.*

Five blinks later, a woman with micro-bladed eyebrows and crimson lipstick tells you about your 'options.' They're *all* Hospice, of course—he's dying. That's the only option: keep him comfortable as he dies. So you watch your dad be wheeled into a van and shuttled to Hospice where he withers. Where you realize he will never see his home again. Where you realize he will never sit in his blue recliner again. Or make his famous ribs again. Or call you his 'little bee' again. Petals falling from a dry rose.

He sleeps and sleeps and when he awakens, he looks at you and says: "you're beautiful." He puckers his lips for a kiss when you leave at night. You have to feed him his last meals because he cannot do it himself. Nurses tell you he cries at night that he doesn't want to die. He regrets drinking and not listening to doctors' instructions. He wants to meet his future grandchildren and dance at your wedding. He wants to live—to *really* live. Your heart constricts like barbed wire.

The worst part is that you could have saved him. You had the chance to donate part of your liver. Doctors touched your abdomen and marveled at how soft your giant, healthy liver was. They told you that they rarely see women with such wide ribcages come in for testing. His sisters begged you to do it while your mother begged you not to. Tug-of-war. In the end, you kept your enormous, healthy liver.

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 don't say goodbye because you can't—it's too hard. This you later regret.

You hear the phone ring on January 6<sup>th</sup> at 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's there for you. But you know he won't *really* be there for you; there's an impossible distance between you now, continental drift. You know he loves you in his way, but he doesn't understand. Not yet, at least. Somehow it's not fair to let his untethered love seep like melting butter into the cracks of your barbed-wire-heart.

You go through the motions. Death announcement. Phone calls. Flowers. A wake. The funeral. Drinks, lots of them. The vodka goes down so smooth, fills the emptiness. You tell people you're fine and then watch the slideshow your cousin's husband made for dad's funeral and wonder if a person can die from crying. Against all odds you wake up the next morning.

You fly 4,000 miles back home and return to your normal. But it's not really normal. Is not knowing how to answer the question 'what do you want for dinner?' normal? Are brain fog and pulling the blankets over your head normal? Is wandering through your life in a stupor normal? Is pretending to be normal, normal?

You break up with that loving boyfriend—he knows it’s the right thing, too. Still you both hold each other and cry.

You try to ignore grief, but it only makes you heavy and wretched. Like an unexpected assailant, it stabs you in you back when you least expect it. By summer you have at least a thousand gaping wounds and wonder if anyone notices. Who sees the blood pouring out? The crusting scars? Anyone? You realize they see but they don’t know how to talk about it. Instead they offer platitudes.

“The first year is the hardest,” they say.

“Losing a parent is a big one,” they tell you.

“You’re strong, you’ll get through it,” they reassure.

Christmas comes around again, and you realize it’s been a year (a whole friggin’ year!), and you’ve gained fifteen pounds and lost so much hair you could’ve sworn you were going bald and written a depressing novel and moved into your own place and seen on Facebook that your ex found someone new and prettier when you can’t even fathom meeting anyone. BUT you’re on the upswing—you know it! You can just feel it! Things are looking up. Plus, it’s the holidays—the most wonderful fucking time of the year.

When you look closely, though, scrutinize, Christmas stares at you with its eyes tilted to the side, like a broken-neck Teddy bear that’s been stuffed into the closet, watching through the cracks. “Remember how things used to be,” it says. “Christmas is a joyous time, Amy. A blessed holiday.”

Indeed.

*Merry effin’ Christmas.*