

Small Deaths

It's silent where I stand, the silence of winter. I've hiked far into the woods, up to my calves in deep snow, while everything is white and black, dark and wet, the trees half exposed, half buried. The only thing I hear is the sound of my own breath and the crunching of the snow under my boots; ahead of me a crow is cawing. I follow it, let it lead me. I watch for the bird overhead, and by the time I lose sight of the crow, I'm close to a stream. Pillows of snow swell next to the water, sculpted to the bank as if to cushion the flow. The stream is more hushed than usual, but I listen closely as the water trickles over rocks. There is chatter, quiet conversation underneath, voices and whispers at a distance like the sound of a funeral, people speaking with concern.

I look across the stream where a spot of light catches my eye. I can't see clearly, but I think there's a drop of water—snow melting from the branch of a bush—that shimmers in the sun and wind. This droplet blinks at me from across the stream and changes colors, a small sequin sparkling as if to tell me something, to speak in code. It reminds me of the crystal necklace you wore, the one I wrapped around your neck after you died. I stand by the stream for a long time and concentrate on the bead of light, sure no one else has seen it or will, its presence dependent

on luck and the right time of day, the angle of the sun, a person in a path to witness it. This drop is a moment, and I watch it as long as it exists. I listen with the invisible part of myself that understands these things. I say “Hello” to you out loud.

We’d been watching television. It was a game show, because I remember questions about Russia, and I was thinking of Siberia and snow, but I was too tired to play the game out loud. We’d been camped together for weeks, lying in bed, holding hands. I thought, *if I close my eyes for just a minute I won’t miss much*. I might’ve already started dreaming.

That’s when you tapped me on the shoulder. “Honey, please help me to the bathroom,” you said. Or maybe you just said, “Honey,” and I already knew what you meant because we’d been through the routine so many times. I came around to your side of the bed and eased you out, your legs as unsteady as a colt first trying to stand. You were wearing the silk pajamas I bought you when you first got sick. I thought they would give grace to your dying, make you feel beautiful or dignified. I hadn’t considered that soon there’d be stains on the silk, brown spots of dried blood that would leak out of your mouth when you coughed or vomited. I hadn’t counted on that; nor did I know that stains on silk would make your illness even more affronting. There was so much I learned the wrong way.

When you died, for instance. I didn’t notice at first because I was wiping your mouth, the long strings of spit that reached down to the toilet, like spider webs so thin and hard to break. I was cleaning your chin with toilet paper and telling you to spit. It was the last thing I said, “Spit!” And then I realized I didn’t hear your breath, the puddle sound of phlegm and fluid in your lungs. I looked at your face to find out what had happened, because there had been no sigh or suddenness.

I was holding up all your weight. I had my arm tight around your shoulders because you'd been too weak to spit or stand. Sometimes you were so frail I had to put my finger in your mouth to clear out all the extra pieces of vomit, like soft mud. It was disgusting, but I did it, and I would've done it again.

But you were not there. You had gone. For a moment I wondered if I still needed to put my finger in your mouth, or hand you a glass of water and say, "Here, Mom. Rinse." That was part of our routine, too. Then it occurred to me while I was holding you that something in the distance had finally become real. Death was no longer somewhere else, another week, a few days away.

You became much heavier in my arms when I realized it, and yet I couldn't let go. I wanted to put you back in bed, drag you into the next room where you could rest, but your body wouldn't cooperate, slumping as though you were drugged, had fallen fast asleep. I had no choice; I had to lower you onto the bathroom floor. I didn't want to leave you there. I wanted to clean you up, comb your hair, make you look nice. For what? For when I made phone calls and let everyone know?

I looked in the mirror and straightened my own hair then. I was preparing both of us, I guess, for what would come next. I saw myself and started crying very quietly, just for a moment. When I tried to pick you up again, you'd become much heavier. I felt like I was dragging a drunk, misshapen and inelegant. Your feet slid sideways, gathering the bathroom rug. "This isn't funny, Mother," I said.

It was and it wasn't. We had howled at the clumsiness of death for the last several weeks. Once, we couldn't stop laughing when I wiped vomit from your chin and pieces of toilet paper stuck to your face like a beard. It was absurd, and we couldn't breathe even when you said your stomach hurt and you started crying. We laughed at this dying and let it be an awkward forgiveness between us.

But that evening I was alone with the humor and tragedy, and I hadn't been able to pull you very far in the bathroom, perhaps two feet. I wished you'd been there to see it with me. "Such a nice-sized bathroom," we often said, yet when I tried to carry you from it, it seemed the door was unreachable, the bedroom miles away. I held you by the armpits; you'd lost a lot of weight, and I could feel how thin your bones were, as though your skeleton was waiting to come out. I dragged you with your bottom sinking toward the floor, your foot and the rug getting caught on the hamper, and I apologized, afraid I was hurting you, as if you'd turn purple and bruise. Your head rolled to the side, and when I looked in the mirror I saw both of us: a portrait of Mother and Daughter. And Death. It stopped me, and I had to rest you on the floor again.

I sat on the floor next to you, less eager to tuck you back in bed and begin the next round of events. I remember I looked around me then: there were things in the bathroom—tiny specks of mold dotting the faucet like freckles, and the towel rack coming loose from the wall—things that came alive for me, grew into existence suddenly. I looked at you, and I guess I hadn't noticed the moles on your neck or how thin your hair had gotten around your ears. I hadn't seen you wear earrings in so long. We had talked about that: which earrings you wanted to wear for the funeral, and I couldn't remember if you'd said gold or mother of pearl. I hadn't been paying enough attention. The routine of your sickness had become ordinary to me, and most likely I'd been thinking of something else, of feeding the cats or getting home to my own house for a rest and a shower. In the end, I decided on your favorite gold hoops for the undertaker. I kept the mother-of-pearl teardrops for myself.

And the shoes? I always loved the shoes in your closet, standing in rows, as though invisible women were waiting to dance. And so many pretty clothes. But I knew you weren't going to look like you-

self in the coffin no matter what you were wearing. The embalmers would make you into an imitation of yourself, with too much rouge and eye shadow: Death gussied up as Life, dozing in a coffin.

While you rested on the bathroom floor, the house seemed shockingly still. Even the television in the other room was far off, keeping track of the time with commercials. You'd died, but things had continued without pause. The sink in front of me was beating out its own time, dripping like it had for years, marking the passage with a rust stain on the porcelain. I found large balls of dust and hair caught in the corners of the bathroom that had been growing with your illness. I should've cleaned them for you; I meant to.

But what I did next: I straightened the rug and pushed the hamper to the side and made more room on the floor so I could lie next to you on the cool tile. Then I placed my head on your stomach like I did when I was your baby. The thump of your heart was missing, that was all.

Life for both of us had evaporated, had been disappearing gradually for months. Those microscopic moments, one dying into the next, all of them led to this spot where I stand in the snow, listening to the trickle of water, to the spirits chattering with each other while the chill of the wind reaches my bones.

I don't know what made me lie down with you—perhaps one last chance to pay attention—but it was gone as soon as I dragged you from the bathroom, propped you in bed and picked up the phone. It went on from there. That time on the bathroom floor was the part I hadn't been able to explain when they asked me. I told them how we held hands and watched TV, all the years resting between us. I told them that. But the rest was mine: the cold tile giving me chills, my backbone pressed against the floor. It was remarkable, the view from there, the underside of things. I knew I would never see from that same place again. Above us the brown water stain on the ceiling almost looked like billowing clouds.