

Prologue



Mid-October 1997

Things are slipping. The most obvious being my husband as he edges into another realm far from the one I live in.

All too often lately, our newborn's diapers go unchanged, our toddler's teeth go unbrushed, and the bills go unpaid. I'm a month late for both the baby and my post-natal follow-up visits. I assume it's okay. She's hearty and I'm pretty sure my stitches will disintegrate on their own.

Tom's scraggly hair is low priority and I figure anything beyond keeping his pain managed is frosting. Every time I go up to our bedroom though, I can count on a ruse of guilt. It's bad enough I haven't cleaned up his mismatched hairdo after the radiation bald spots have grown back coarse and curly, but his facial hair doesn't seem to know he's dying. It's taking over his fading face, making him look Christ-like. I've convinced myself it's fitting since he's the closest thing to Jesus in my life.

The calendar reads Monday. I imagine others beginning another predictable cycle—brewing coffee, reading the paper, and driving to work—while I'm caught in a holding pattern, waiting out an undetermined amount of time in grief limbo. Patience is not one of my strong suits, so I focus on the endless task list in my head: *fill sippy-cup, call pharmacy, dog—oh my god, feed the dog!*

When I check on Tom and the baby, they are asleep on the bed, nose-to-nose. Her chubby little hand lies inside his sunken palm. She looks like a mini-Tom, eyes flaring up at the corners, dark curls and full cupid lips. For a moment, I watch, taken by the beauty of two beings so close to the place we are born from and die to. Grief starts to knock from my insides. It's too big and I'm too busy.

I bustle about, emptying the diaper pail and whisking up empty water bottles when I hear his raspy whisper: "Could you shave me?" I stop, shocked that he's actually

talking to me, and not one of the many invisible characters visiting our bedroom lately. But he's looking right at me. I wait, wanting him to ask me by name, just one more time.

"Sorry, the electric razor's broken. I'm afraid I'll cut you with the real kind," I say, turning away to pick up some soiled laundry. It's true. The razor jammed on me a week ago and it made no sense to buy a new one, so I opted a beard for him on his deathbed.

"Fix it." He sounds exasperated. Taking a deep breath like he's preparing for a lap underwater, he says, "Get the shave kit, the small Phillips-head, and a tissue. Bring them here."

My pace is broken, partly because I'm taken aback that he remembers the name of the tool when he hasn't called me by name for over a week and partly because his demanding tone is unfamiliar.

I huff heavily, drop the laundry and march to the bathroom for the requested items. I'm not sure I want our last exchange to be spent fixing a damn razor, but he's insistent and there's no arguing with a dying man.

Quickly, I gather the paraphernalia of male-morning-routine and spread it along his side of the bed.

"Take your time," he says.

As if we have time! I shout in the privacy of my mind, while I search for scraps of anything to pick off the floor. Tissues that haven't made it to the trash, dust balls—anything to keep from stopping.

He waits for my shifting eyes to return to his. "You can do this," he says with certainty. "I'll walk you through it step by step. It isn't so bad."

This time, I hear him and I am transfixed; plucked out of a speed-grind. These are the kind of words I've been struggling to be calm enough to say to him in his final hours and he's saying them to me. It doesn't matter that it's over a razor, though I'm curious to see where this shaving thing goes. Suddenly, I'm aligned with him—caught up in his world entirely. In these moments no baby cries, no toddler needs help, and no doorbell rings. I don't give God credit for stopping time. This is pure grace; something I've learned tends to happen when hearts are in sync.

Tom lays back into his pillow, watching me as I look inside the razor, and speaks slowly, taking a breath between every few words. He describes tiny pieces of the machine with accurate precision as he instructs me in its disassembly. It is as if he can see through my eyes. In front of me are about twenty parts all smaller than a dime and it's a miracle I'm not the least bit intimidated.

"Pick up smallest disc . . . lay it on top of the tissue. That's good. Now squeeze one drop of oil on it," he says. He goes on with each and every piece, guiding me methodically. I give in to each step being its own everything. I am reminded of how we used to climb hundreds of feet up rocks to have the insignificance of our lives fall away. Now, it's a razor.

A steady hum responds to the flick of a switch and I'm elated. "It works! I really did it!"

Fixing things, especially small things that require focus and patience, has always been Tom's job. Now it's mine. Carefully, and ever so slowly, I shave him, caressing his throat, rolling carefully over his chin, and gently plumbing the hollows of his cheeks until

every bristle is mowed clear. When I finish, I kiss each of his eyelids. Tom smiles, his smooth skin stretches sharply over the underlying bones.

“Thank you,” he says, fighting to hold his glossy eyes to mine. I don’t wait for my name. It seems so irrelevant now. He knows me far beyond what I am called. Pangs of grief soften as I welcome each one into my heart, sensing that they, too, are children that need tending.

“And thank *you*,” I whisper into his ear as I lay along side and watch him drift off into other realms. He has shown me how to be with each moment left until he is gone and how to be with this grief, long after. I hope I can remember.