

One Day

by Amy Julia Becker

Her eyes have not shed tears today. The fight of fear and wishing and anger and denial has ceased, for now, and the calm reality of a body breaking down sets in. Her skin glows. Her eyes are yellow with an eerie beauty, like amber, or unpolished gold. She smiles slowly, and often, but laughs less. When she speaks it is usually garbled, but sometimes her clarity astounds me. She will open her eyes and say suddenly, with great conviction, “I think my life has hit the mark,” and then recline again. Other times, when her words don’t make sense, I wonder if there is a wisdom to the dying that I simply cannot access.

The Hospice booklet tells me that the end of life looks much like the beginning, that her brain and body will recede into more sleep, less talking, more primal needs. She must have known. Months earlier—before morphine, before jaundice, before her tumor-ridden liver started to fail and ammonia levels in her brain produced confusion—she gave us the funeral plans, her statement of faith. She wants music and dancing, a celebration. She met with the minister to ensure it, and took notes in purple ink: “peonies...pink bandanas...jazz band.”

She sleeps now. But swirling around her tranquility are all the rest of us, planning, measuring the medicine, carefully wording the obituary, changing the water for the flowers, beginning to mourn. And surprising ourselves by having to live, to eat, breathe, sleep, move, walk.

Most of the time numbness saves me, acting like a baseline drug to even out the pain. But then the pain spikes, breaks through like a fist below the base of my throat. Sometimes it pummels my whole torso. It arrives unexpectedly—with the bloom of an orchid, with the smoothness of her skin, when I let my eyes fall on a photograph where she kneels beside her son, my husband, age three. She smiles, not for the camera, but for him. And then the memories flash like lightening, crisp white light that hurts in its intensity, images of him gently touching her arm, watching closely to see if she needs help standing, looking away when the tears come.

Peter, my husband, 1,000 miles north, raised his voice on the phone tonight to say, “I hate it that you aren’t here,” and I know he also meant, “I hate it that I’m not

there.” I hate telling him the details of her decline. Slow, but happening in one more tiny increment every second, so that by the end of the day death has gained one more firm step. I am so frightened he won’t be here when she dies.

He tells me to rest. But I, childless, now sleep like a mother, always wary for noises in the night. I wake up in the darkness and stand in her doorway and look in just to make sure she is okay, still breathing.

I look at her body wasting away, scarred from surgery and chemotherapy and radiation and a disease that did not falter, and it is clear that optimism failed. Optimistic thoughts of vacations, of art class, of grandmothering, of a body that miraculously recovered. Optimism failed. It crashed into reality with all the mess of a car colliding with a brick wall. The pieces scattered and need to be swept up and thrown away.

But hope does not fail. Hope acknowledges that frightening place in us, late at night, that wonders who will come to the funeral, and where will we spend Christmas, and how will we feel on all the occasions that will happen without her. Hope permits us to imagine the loss. It sits with the loss and listens. And then hope reminds us of promise, of a reality that weds losses now and reunions then, pain here and beauty there. Hope connects this emptiness to heaven’s fullness, this brokenness to that wholeness. Hope pieces us together.

I believe in heaven—a real heaven. Not gold and harps and angels but reality, the place where the presence of God defines everything. I believe in a heaven where we are ourselves, and even more ourselves than we have ever been. I believe in a heaven where earth is more itself than it has ever been, fresher, bigger, more intricate and lovely. I believe that life is more alive in heaven. And I believe her death will take her there.

But I do not want her to go.

And so I sit in the shadows of her pale pink bedroom, watching her chest rise and fall, trying to allow the air to fill my lungs, trying to breathe, waiting for the dawn. I sit, knowing it will all be over soon—all the waiting for dying, and knowing it will all begin soon—all the waiting for living.