His Story

Janna Seeley

Principal’s Prize for Prose
Winner
Past denial, past anger, past bargaining. Beyond even the suffocating hopelessness, the impenetrable numbness that they had labeled depression. I am now left with nothing but this god awful pain, a cavernous hole in my chest so palpable I am sure I understand for the first time what it means to have a truly broken heart. And yet despite this consuming agony I am somehow tormented further by the cruel knowledge that He is gone; no one is at fault, I can do nothing to bring Him back to me, He is at peace; the torturous and yet absolute conviction that even this relentless suffering is nothing more than futile self indulgence. So this is Acceptance.

I remember denial. It had been spring and I had been happy. Floating down the stairs in one of my customary floral dresses, my long rose-red hair shower-damp and my green eyes squinting against the brightness of the morning, I hadn’t registered the concern in my mother’s voice as she called me to her. Walking across the wooden floor of our light-flooded living room, I had found nothing alarming in the gentleness of her tone and she asked me to sit beside her. Even as she had begun to explain. Even as I had come to understand that he was ill, that he was in hospital, that it was cancer, the severity of her tone had confused me. Because people recovered from leukemia all the time. Because twenty-three year olds didn’t die. Because Ricky wasn’t dying.

And then he had been there, joking with me about the stupidly serious, melodramatic concern of my parents and of His. Laughing His obnoxious, contagious laugh. Imitating, for my amusement, the Oncologist’s wholly unnecessary attempt to console his evidently unfazed young patient. Tears of laughter spilling down his handsome face, his emerald eyes had met my own for a brief moment. Distantly related though we were, he was my twin in appearance, and closer to me than any brother could have been. We had both understood then that though there was nothing to be afraid of, we would be unafraid of that nothing together.

I remember his anger. We had been practically inseparable throughout the initial months of his treatment. I had sat with him through the chemo, abandoning my classes to laugh with him during the day and forfeiting the comfort of my bed to hold his hand on the worst nights. His transition into that second stage of grief had been consciously and masterfully disguised, he had been adamant that no one should know he had finally recognized the severity of the disease he was facing; but he could not have kept it hidden from me. I had watched as his dismissive attitude towards the cautions of the doctors and his blasé disregard for his own comfort had been replaced by a sort of frenzied determination to beat the chemo, to recover for Christmas, to be out of the hospital for my birthday. No longer able to deny his condition, he had become consumed by a desperate anger that compelled him to overcome the disease.

Seeing him that way; my charming, notoriously nonchalant Rick so suddenly swallowed by that humorless anger, that fierce solemnity, had deeply shaken me. It’s negative impact on me had been severe and could never have gone unnoticed
for long. Rightly concerned, my mother had intervened; restricting and monitoring each visit in what I had then considered to be a heartless attempt to wean me off his company. Ricky’s anger and the earnest concern of my parents in that period had suffocated any lingering sense of denial and given way to my own consuming anger. I had hated my parents for keeping me from him, I had been infuriated by the uncomprehending pity of my carefree friends, and worst of all I had raged against God for his merciless refusal to heal him.

I remember our last summer. Weeks of emotional turmoil and self-exacerbated insomnia had manifested in such a thorough exhaustion that I had become physically incapable of producing further tears. No longer able to express my anger, nor to continue perpetuating my frustration through the constant meditation that had been my primary occupation throughout that period, I had been astounded by just how rapidly such anger could subside. In the insufferable heat of a late summers afternoon, I had been relieved to enter the sanctuary of his small, blissfully air-conditioned hospital room. He had greeted me with a laugh more genuine than I had heard since his second relapse and, fully aware that my emotional fatigue must have been less then flattering when reflected in my physical appearance, I had been glad to have provided him with that momentary comic relief. Collapsing into the large recliner by his bed with a sigh I had turned wearily to meet his mocking gaze.

‘My god, Scar,’ he had taunted, ‘anyone would think you were the one dying!’ ‘Rick, that’s not even a little bit funny’ I had mumbled. Though I had come to understand by that time that his dying was more than a possibility, I had not been able to bear him discussing his pending death as a certainty, even in jest. ‘I’ve been thinking,’ he had proclaimed, ignoring my rebuke. He had hesitated, as if unsure how his thoughts were likely to be received. ‘hmm?’ I had volunteered by way of gentle encouragement. ‘Well, do you think that maybe all this might just be a lesson. That maybe I’m meant to have some major epiphany in here, discover the value of life, find my true calling or I don’t know, any of the other clichéd revelations typical of every god damn cancer survivor the world over?’ Though the words had been delivered with a feigned, satirical indifference, it had not masked the earnest longing behind them. Unable to respond for fear I might cry, I had simply shrugged and laid my head on his shoulder. For a moment there had been silence. And then speaking to himself more than to me, he had sworn he would give anything if it meant he would recover. So would I. Laughing he had proposed pledging his life savings, consisting of a few hundred dollars and a rusty Toyota Corolla, to the Leukemia Foundation. He had even gone so far as to suggest a vow of celibacy. It had been my turn to laugh then, and I had told him I would join him if he could last so much as a week. We had laid there for hours, in the cool calm of our little hospital room, quietly laughing back the urge to cry. Each being strong for the other, each silently praying vow after pointless vow in the hope that he might be spared. However futile, however irrational, bargaining had been inevitable.

Depression had come and gone quickly for him. It had been early winter and though I had spent more time at the hospital then than I ever had previously,
constant exhaustion and frequent periods of hallucination took him far away from me most days. He had wasted away to a pale and skeletal shadow of his former self, his skin, smooth from the chemo had become as translucent and as delicate as rice paper, bruising at the slightest touch. His immune system had degenerated to such an extent that a mild cold would have killed him and I had taken to all but bathing in sanitizer for fear I might contaminate him. I remember waking from a restless sleep late one evening. A storm had been raging behind the drawn curtains, but I was warm, curled in a blanket on the recliner that had been my bed for weeks. It had been a particularly bad day for him, for several hours he had screamed and moaned at invisible figures, inconsolable and completely oblivious to my presence. Eventually the morphine had subdued him and together we had slept through the afternoon. Studying his hollow, sunken face I had assumed from his silence that the drug induced slumber had not yet lifted. He had appeared positively comatose and I had been startled when he spoke. ‘I don’t understand, Scar.’ He had uttered quietly, without the slightest movement, likely paralyzed by the combination of his physical pain, fatigue and evident emotional torment. ‘If this was a test, what was the point if I’m just going to die.’ His voice had been horse, the words had seemed choked and only then had I noticed the silent tears falling from his bloodshot eyes. As I had reached for his hand and held it as tightly as I dared, I remember offering my final bargain in fervent prayer – take me instead God, take me instead. We had cried until each of us succumbed to sleep and by the very next morning he had found acceptance. It had seemed then that my Rick had been returned to me, from that moment he had joked and laughed, refusing to be slave to the pain. He had still been taken away, too often, by his hallucinations but when he had been conscious, he had taken to optimistically rebuking anyone in whom he had noticed sadness. It was not that he had simply resigned himself to death, but rather that he had if fact begun to look forward to the relief it would inevitably bring.

Perhaps most clearly of all, I remember my depression. The trip had been planned long before his illness had taken its devastating toll on our lives. We could not have foreseen his rapid deterioration, yet the cruelty of the timing had been unbearable. I had gone to see him the day we left. I had known the odds weren’t favorable, that his chances of surviving the six weeks until our return were slim. But I had thought that there would be some hope at the very least. The nurse had pulled me aside on my way to him. She had explained slowly, kindly. He had a week at best. I remember the first temporary numbness that had set in as she had continued, explaining that though I would be allowed to see him, I could not risk touching him. So I had simply stood by his bed, unseen, unrecognized. It had taken every ounce of my strength to whisper my goodbye, knowing as I did that he could not hear, that his mind had been far away from me and from that suffocating room. I had left his side, knowing that I had been walking out of that room for the final time. Then suddenly, fiercely, a terrific agony had ripped through my core, as if he was being physically torn from me. Shuddering uncontrollably I had heard horrific sobs, anguished screams. And then I had been frightened as I had realized that they were my own. When I was sure I would be killed by the pain of it all, suddenly there had been nothing. Impenetrable numbness. Though the tears had streamed down my face as
dad had helped me to the car, as we had passed through customs, as we had boarded the plane, I had felt nothing.

We had been in Strasbourg on the day he died. It had been warm, the cloudless sky had been a brighter shade of blue than any I had ever seen. Colour and life had beamed from every corner of the little town square as dad and I had walked together that morning. All around us beautiful French words had bubbled from the lips of happy strangers and from the bustling bakeries, tantalizing aromas had wafted on the clean, fresh breeze. Wordlessly he had directed me toward the shimmering fountain at the squares center. We had sat on its sturdy sandstone wall and he had told me. Rickey was gone. He had handed me a letter written, dad said, by Rick in a rare moment of consciousness during those final weeks. Under the pretense of finding breakfast, dad had left me then, to peruse the words in solitude.

‘Scarlet, I know its hard but please believe that it’s going to be alright. I love you so much, and I’m so sorry that I had to leave you. But you know as well as I do that this isn’t goodbye. I’ll see you soon scar.’

It had not been long, nor had it been particularly eloquent, but it had served its purpose. Just as the denial and the pain and the bargaining had past, so too the numbness began to subside. I understood. Despite my own devastating sense of loss, despite my newfound conviction that dying of a broken heart would be entirely possible and not at all surprising, I could finally accept that he was at peace and I forced myself to believe, for him, that eventually I would be alright too.

There is a universally accepted concept that governs the way in which we experience grief. It states that there are only five stages in the grieving process: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and finally acceptance. I believe this concept to be severely flawed. Though I suppose it ought to have been obvious, only now do I understand that no comfort or closure or contentment accompanies the progression to that last stage of the acknowledged construct. I realize this now, because I have reached acceptance, and I am still hurting. It is nothing short of cruelty that society’s understanding of our own grieving process ends with what is in fact still grief. This, more than anything else, convinces me that the 5-stage module is incomplete. I have come to understand that a final stage has been omitted from our accepted framework. A stage that offers consolation for loss, relief from pain and the possibility of an eventual return to normality. A stage which he had reached and a blessing which he had wished for me. The sixth and final stage.

Peace.

In loving memory of Ricky Jensen

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