

Dipped In It

My dad used to say if someone was particularly lucky or blessed, they were “dipped in it.” If I pulled out some unexpected victory, he’d shake his head with a grin, and emphasize each word as he said, “Bethany Anne, you are Dipped. In. It.” Dipped in what, specifically? I had no idea, but in these moments, I felt golden.

Though one of the humblest men I’ve ever known, my father always knew he was dipped in it. He would say it about me often, too, and I believed him. I was.

But am I still?

As morning creeps in, I lie here thinking about the past few years of my life. I realize that this breaking open I am experiencing has been building for years. My father’s death was the final blow. I know finding myself here in pieces is an entirely *human* experience. It is also an entirely uncomfortable one. I am exhausted. Steeped in sadness. I am often lonely even while surrounded by love.

How do people *do* this? How do they feel *all of this* and survive? I long to find my way back to the person I was before the cracks began to form. I wonder if I could even relate to her anymore. Memory paints her light as a feather—and here I am, dragging around my anvil collection.

I will my legs over the side of the bed, toes searching for the well-worn, cozy shearling of my father’s slippers. I look down at this priceless inheritance—coffee stained, with an errant thread threatening to disembowel one slipper with a mere tug. I shoved them into my overnight bag the morning after the funeral, obscuring them

beneath a sea of black, as if I would be searched on the way out. As if I'd be caught and shamed for attempting to abscond with a precious family heirloom. In the end I confessed that I was taking them, feeling a pang of guilt that this revelation came as a statement and not a question. I worried for a moment that my mother would try to pass off to me instead, the pristine pair he'd been given days ago for Christmas. I suspect she looked at me and understood that those would never do. Because *these* slippers—these warm and messy and perfect slippers—were what I needed to arm myself with that morning, as I walked out of his house and into a world that was shamelessly carrying on without him.

Two months have passed since that day, and putting my feet into these slippers each morning has become a necessary ritual for me. I am sure he would make a joke about me “walking in his shoes.” It's really more of a shuffle because they are way too big. That would be funny to him, too. His shoes are literally too big for me to fill.

I try.

L'Irony

Months ago, before Dad passed away and our whole world changed, I bought four tickets to bring my daughters and my mother to the theater to see *The Lion King*.

I am not known for my organizational skills, nor for my tech savvy. And so it happened that it wasn't until the morning of the show that I remembered I would soon need the e-tickets that had been emailed to me six months prior. Perhaps you would have printed them out right away, or taken a screen shot, or bookmarked them, but I am afraid this is not me, even in the best of times.

Opening my laptop, I found that for some reason I could not retrieve any emails. The e-tickets were lost somewhere in cyberspace. My stomach lurched.

It seemed desperately important that we go to this show. I needed to prove to all of us that we could enjoy something we had planned to do before we were robbed of Dad. *Life goes on, you see! We can still do all the things!*

I knew the best person to help me find the e-tickets was my friend, Austin. I texted him, with the sort of pleading you can imagine a woman might employ when she is desperately trying to orchestrate access to a show that starts in two hours, for a mother who has barely set foot outside her home in two months.

But pleading is never necessary with Austin. True to form, he showed up five minutes later. Not a call—he just showed up. Austin always shows up, eager to help me or my kids in any way possible. *Let me take care of that for you* is his perpetual gesture.

And so, we were saved!

Sort of.

It was only after we settled into the plush velvet seats of the theater and the house lights fell, that I remembered the *plot* of *The Lion King*.

The father dies.

Snakeskin

Alone for the first time in weeks, I have had a very bizarre weekend. I have experienced huge fluctuations in emotion—from giddily dancing around in my underwear to Stevie Wonder to bawling my eyes out on my couch.

When I feel truly happy these days, it is such an unexpected emotion that I feel a euphoric rush (cue Stevie Wonder). When I actually allow myself to sit in the anger and sadness, it feels paralyzing.

Holy mood swings.

I messaged my friend, Monica, and asked her if she thought it was possible that I am actually bipolar. She responded that I am the *least* bipolar person she knows. (That sounds really funny in hindsight, as if she had previously conducted an assessment of the bipolarishness of all her acquaintances).

She may be right. I tend to be even-keeled to the extreme. I once had a friend spend the better part of an evening trying to force me to “get angry!” (I never did.) When it comes to anger, I tend to be measured. I consider what my role is in the situation. I consider what might have led the other person to behave the way they did. I consider whether there is any point in engaging. (I usually decide there isn't.)

I shed tears with frequency but it's not often that I allow myself the release of a deep, primal cry. Cathartic as I know it may be, the complete release of control in that way is entirely unappealing. I am open, generous, and eager when it comes to expressing love and affection, joy and laughter ... but sadness and anger? No, thank you.

I will resist, avoid and shove down those emotions for as long as I possibly can. I am finally realizing that this may be a problem. Because despite my controlled outward response, I still feel. Deeply. My skin hasn't actually gotten any thicker ... and I'm growing less and less comfortable living in it.

I recently made an analogy to my friend, Michael, about wanting to shed my skin like a snake. I want to peel away everything that is making me feel uncomfortable in my body—the anger, the sadness, the loneliness. He replied that perhaps it is time to do just that.

And while what I really want is just to get rid of it, this uncomfortable skin—to unzip it and step out, unscathed—I have come to realize that the snake does not just shimmy out of her skin. She does not simply slip it off. She rubs herself against rough surfaces in order to release this sheathing that once protected her but no longer fits. It is uncomfortable. Instinctively, she knows there is no other way to be free.

It's Not Pie

There is a quote that has been circulating lately online: *“Equal rights for others does not mean fewer rights for you. It's not pie.”*

I have been thinking about how this applies to compassion. I used to imagine that if I expressed how I was really feeling, people would think, “Why does she think her pain is so much bigger than everyone else's? Doesn't she know that I'm suffering too? Can't she see that so-and-so has it so much worse than she does?”

I now recognize this largely as projection on my part—that I felt uncomfortable fully owning and expressing my own grief, because I was (and am) fully aware that there are *so many* people suffering greater tragedies than I.

Yet to me, my own grief is enormous. I'm learning that I am allowed to feel this grief fully. That this is okay. That feeling my own pain deeply does not make me blind and deaf to the suffering of others. In fact, I am learning that fully standing in my own feelings can open up a reserve of compassion like nothing else—because pain recognizes pain.

Just as love can be infinite, so can compassion. Offering myself a big serving of self-compassion does not mean I have less to offer to others.

It's not pie.

Peeling the Onion

(Part One)

Four and half years ago, my husband, who I'll call Charlie, and I headed into what would be the last couple's counseling session of our marriage.

I did not know this at that time. I thought Charlie had agreed to give counseling another try because he was still trying to save our marriage. That he was, like me, throwing up one last Hail Mary.

It occurred to me much later that he agreed to go because he wanted the support of the counselor—for both of us—when he told me what he needed to share. This was smart. Because honestly, had we not been there, in so official a setting, I may not have taken him seriously. How can a woman take it seriously when the man with whom she's been in an intimate relationship for the past twelve years—with whom she has two very traditionally produced daughters—tells her he is gay?

But the fact of the matter is this: whether it made sense to me or not was entirely inconsequential. The much more relevant point, of which I grabbed ahold with the raw desperation of a drowning woman, was this: I was free.

I was free—and it wasn't my fault.

I hadn't failed. There was a reason, an excuse—a get out of jail free card. When he turned to me as we sat side by side on that virtual stranger's couch, and said the words, "I'm gay," I remember the room spinning for a minute, as if I might faint. And then I heard

the words pour from my mouth, as if riding out of my body upon the wave of relief that coursed through me.

“I guess we’re getting a divorce,” I said.

Thank God, I thought.

Even now, writing this, I feel as though I should be ashamed of that—of my eagerness to abandon my marriage. I was raised to believe that divorce is wrong. Not in a “It’s a sin against God” kind of way, but in a “You made a commitment, and you are a person of integrity” kind of way.

A couple of months earlier, I had finally gathered the courage to tell my parents that divorce seemed imminent. This was a surprise to them, as I had kept my cards close to my chest on the matter of our unhappiness. I had never wanted to admit our failure. Not until I couldn’t bear to live that way anymore—pretending to be the perfect family.

When I told them, my father looked so disappointed. “Please give it one more try,” he said. And so I did.

Of course, I knew he would love me anyway. He would embrace the new normal. He would be supportive. But that *look*. I never wanted him to look at me like that again. Disappointment was not an expression I was used to seeing on my father’s face—especially not when it was directed at me.

Revisiting the conversation months later (and now armed with this ironclad excuse), I had the courage to tell my parents emphatically, “I am getting a divorce ...” (again, the dreaded look—but, oh, Dad, *wait for it*) “... because Charlie is gay.”

It was a completely perverse triumph. There it was, the raw truth: I’d rather have a gay husband than a disappointed father.

My mother later told me that the next morning my father woke up, rolled over to face her, and said wryly, “I had the *strangest* dream about Bethany.”

So, what does one do next, you wonder? Well, in my very limited experience, one gets entirely schnockered. My brothers,

sisters-in-law, and cousins took me out for what continues to rank up there as one of the most fun nights of my life. We all got rip-roaring drunk, laughed a lot ... and then went dancing. Well, to be accurate, the women went dancing while the men stood at a safe distance so as not to be associated with us. I cannot remember the last time I had so much fun.

That is, until the next morning, when the reality of my life came surging up from my belly straight into the toilet.

The weeks that followed were some of the most tender in our entire married life. I know this may be hard to believe. I think it's because it was such a relief to have made a decision after being unhappy for so long. We were able to love and appreciate each other again—perhaps with a bit of nostalgia for who we once were to each other, and tenderness for who we hoped we'd always be.

But it wasn't all relief and optimism. There was our mutual devastation over what we were about to do to our children. We had no illusions about that. They were so little. When we sat down to tell them we would be living in separate houses, what they heard was that *we* would now have *two* houses. They were delighted.

And so, for those final weeks of cohabitation, we savored our family time, bittersweet as it was. He and I slept in the same bed, taking turns being the one sobbing quietly in the dark—so the girls wouldn't hear—while the other clung closely, offering comfort. Knowing there was no place for us to go but forward.

Armpit Heart

My daughter, Ruby, handed me a warm, soft, beautiful heart, made of beeswax.

“This is for you!” she beamed.

“Oh, that’s so sweet,” I said, “Thank you!”

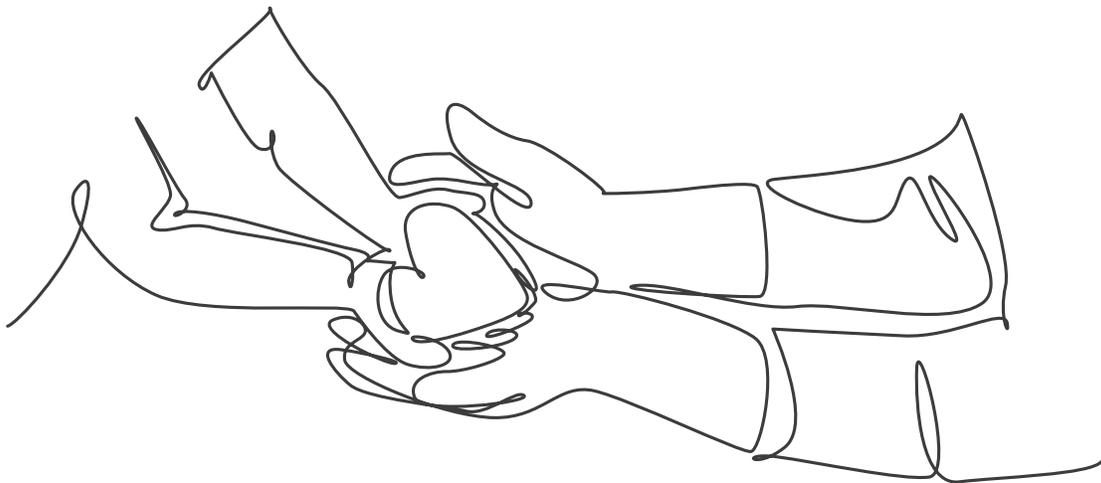
“I warmed it up in my armpit!” she exclaimed.

“Oh, um ... lovely?” I smirked.

We giggled, but I was thinking (stay with me, because who doesn’t love metaphors about armpits?) ... is the beeswax heart a less tender offering because of where it has been? Can we assume that *every* heart has been through something? What if we are open and honest about what our hearts have endured? What if we speak of them in clear, unwavering voices? What if we take the risk to say, *“Here is my heart. Let me tell you of the dark places it has been ...*

“Do you still think it’s beautiful?”

“Will you keep it?”



Nourishment

Between his heart attack and his passing, my father was in a coma for ten days. During that time, I would sit with him for long periods, often overnight. I had very little thought of food, and would come home periodically only to shower and to nap. Sometimes I would come home to find that friends had left me soup, a casserole, cookies, fruit, energy bars, or my favorite coffee.

There may be no gesture more beautiful than to say, *I know you are too overwhelmed to take care of yourself right now, so we are going to help you. We want to nourish you.*

I was so grateful.

After the funeral, life went on around us. I went back to work and I resumed my usual life patterns and responsibilities, even though doing so felt disrespectful in some way, even perverse. How could we all just proceed as if the world had not been irreparably changed?

Somehow, I felt as though I was supposed to bounce right back. Suck it up, warrior on. During this time, it felt strange to accept offers of meals. I'll even go so far as to say I felt ashamed, worried that it meant people thought me weak, or incapable.

I was not those things. What I was, though, was exhausted. And sad. And preoccupied by worry over the emotional well-being of my family. Yet, my pride wanted me to say to these gracious offers of food, "No thank you. I've got it handled."

Then, someone near and dear to me said something very important. She said, "Just shut up and *take the food!*"

She was right, of course. People wanted to do something, and this was about the only thing they could think of to do. It was needed. And it was so lovely.

The beautiful thing about meals that come from a place of love and compassion is that they nourish more than the body. They nourish the heart, and the soul, too. So, I encourage you that if you find yourself in a place in which you are utterly exhausted by life, and somebody offers to nourish you—body, heart, and soul—*please* just say, “Thank you.”

Then, shut up and take the food.

Two Shits

I have always thought of myself as a lucky person. Maybe it had to do with, as my Uncle Ed would say, “being born in the right cradle.”

I was not spoiled with material things growing up, but I never wanted for much. My parents paid in full for my four-year degree, a privilege I didn’t fully appreciate until years later when I noticed friends struggling with school loans.

I took the first job I was offered after college, an entry-level gig I thought would be a summer job. Five years later I was given the opportunity to run that business (a private preschool). When Charlie and I had our first child, and then our second, I wanted to stay at home, and I did. Five years later, just weeks after learning we could no longer afford for me to continue to do so, the opportunity to open my own preschool seemed to fall into my lap. Beau went off to kindergarten and Ruby came to work with me. The timing and the nature of my work made perfect what I thought would be a sad transition.

I felt “dipped in it,” even in crisis. When Charlie and I had our moment at the therapist’s office, I immediately saw the silver lining. The dissolution of our marriage set me free. When divorce became a reality, I knew I did not want to stay in our family home. I needed to escape, to be the one to inhabit a new space—but as a new business owner, there was not much money.

I called a few realtors who were not optimistic about matching my income with anything inspiring—and the idea of moving my kids into a gloomy place felt awful. Then, I looked on Craigslist.

The very first listing that popped up was a very beautiful (and very tiny) guesthouse on a farm—a dreamy little haven nestled under hundred-year-old beech trees. Even better, it was within my budget. The property owners were wonderful and embraced the girls and me like family. I knew this home would be healing for all of us.

It was easy to believe in silver linings—in things “happening for a reason”—when I always managed to land on my feet. At times throughout my life, I’ve worried that things for me have been just too easy—that life could not possibly continue to go so smoothly.

In a way, I was right. But not in the way I expected.

When my father died, I bottomed out. I lost faith. I cannot imagine a reason, nor a silver lining, in his death. It just feels cruel.

My grandmother once said to me, “Bethany, nobody likes to be shat upon.” I marveled at—and was highly amused by—her ability to express this sentiment in an eloquent and dignified manner.

Right now, in the wake of Dad’s death, I feel shat upon by the Universe.

As they do, children tend to give us reminders about the beauty of having a positive outlook. Ruby said to me recently, “Mom! Did you know that it is actually *lucky* when a bird poops on you?!”

“Is that so?” I replied, amused.

“Yes!” she exclaimed, “and I’ve already been lucky twice and I’m only seven!”

Ah, perspective. I’ll get there.

Birthday Candle Sunrise

Today is Ruby's eighth birthday. Last night, when I was snuggling her into bed, I said, "This is the last time I will see you as a seven-year-old. Do you think you will still want to snuggle me when you're eight?"

"Yes," she said, thoughtfully. "I think I'll snuggle you until I'm sixteen. After that I'll be busy driving around with my friends."

(I have no doubt she's right.)

In the middle of the night, she crawled in with me. So, for the start of her eighth year, we woke up together, cozy in my bed. Outside my bedroom window the sky was ablaze with the most vibrant sunrise I have ever seen. It was completely stunning. It felt as though this show of Mother Nature's was entirely for us. She had lit Ruby's birthday candles all across the horizon.

I have a friend who says she can see and hear angels. I believe her because she just ... *knows things*. She has always said that Ruby is surrounded by angels wherever she goes. I believe that, too. There's just something about her that is magical, otherworldly.

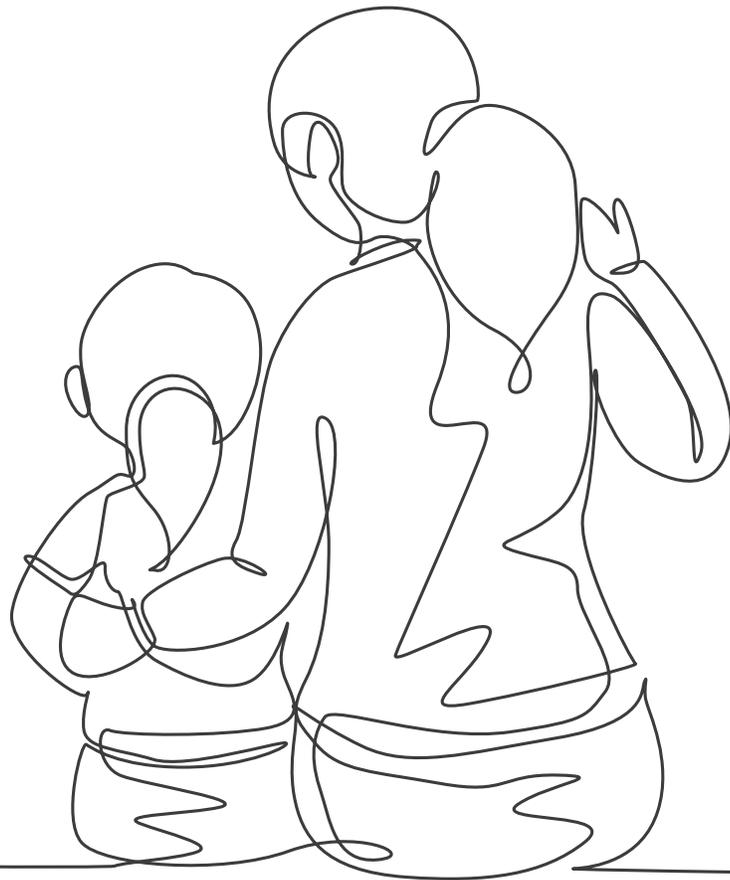
She's the child who senses when I could use a little tender loving care and wordlessly brings me a cup of tea, quietly curling up nearby—offering the warmth that her proximity provides. I often joke that she will be the one to take care of me when I'm old (well ... I say I'm joking, but really I'm not). She is a natural nurturer. She seems intuitively connected with the emotions of those around

her. She feels her own storms deeply but allows them to pass quickly through her. And she is often the one to sit calmly with others while they experience their own passing storms.

One sleepy evening Ruby said to me, “Mama, you make *everything* better.”

I thought my heart would burst.

It is actually Ruby who makes everything better. I am just grateful to have been invited along for the ride.



Imagination

“The bravest person in the world must not have a very good imagination,” says my ten-year-old daughter, Beau, as we lay in bed together.

“Hmm, what do you mean by that?” I ask, intrigued.

“Well, they are probably so brave because they can’t *imagine* anything bad ever happening. They don’t even know what to be afraid of.”

Considering this, I ask, “So, would you rather be the bravest person, or the one with the best imagination?”

Without hesitation (and perhaps with just a hint of surprise) she replies, “The best imagination! If you can’t imagine the bad stuff, you can’t imagine the good stuff either! You’d never know what to hope for. You’d never be proud of yourself, because you could never imagine that you might have failed or might have been scared. You’d never learn anything, because you could never imagine there was anything else to know. Life would be very boring.”

Then she kisses my forehead and rolls over to go to sleep.

I lay there, stunned, willing myself to remember every word of what she’d just said, because it was the most profound thing I’d heard in a long time.

It is conversations like this one that leave me with little doubt that Beau will ultimately teach me *way* more about how to live a rich life than I could ever teach her. She is an impassioned poet, a writer of love songs. She is a bedtime philosopher, and a giver of infinite hugs. She is a girl of powerful resolve, a fiery fighter of injustices—real *and* imagined. She is the safe harbor and the tempest, both. She is one of the most intuitive, profound, and complex people I know ... and she has only just begun.

And I Love You

My brothers and I stood side by side in the receiving line at Dad's wake. Dad's elderly aunt, who is beginning to experience dementia, was going through the line. She stopped in front of me. Remembering my face, but not my name, she smiled and hugged me. Ryan was next, and not recognizing him (though she's known him well his whole life) she introduced herself. Ryan, ever full of compassion and warmth said, "Yes, I know who you are. I'm Bill's son, Ryan ... and I love you."

She smiled broadly, and he gave her a warm hug.

The next day we stood together on the altar, my brothers and I, giving our father's eulogy in tandem. Ryan had doubts that he would be able to do this—that he could get up and speak about our dad without falling apart.

He spoke about our dad's strong character, his integrity and lack of ego, his loyalty and kindness. Ryan said, "To be the man that my father was would be a difficult task. But, if we always remember his principles, and strive to live our lives as he did, I truly believe our lives will be as full of happiness and love as the life my father lived."

What I find so beautiful about Ryan and his aspirations to be like my dad is this: he doesn't know that he already is.

Brave Face

A few weeks ago, my girls and I were visiting a friend. She and I talked quietly about how I was coping with my father's death, while the girls colored nearby. Beau drew a portrait of a woman, her face split in two. One side was smiling, with golden hair and bright colors. She wore a crown of flowers. The other side of her face was bathed in blues and purples. She wore a frown and a crown of thorns. When I looked at it, I saw myself. *Is this the person she has been living with for the last three months?*

Then, last week, I heard from an old friend who shared that her biggest regret as a parent is that she never showed her children how to be vulnerable. She thought she'd been protecting them by always showing them a strong façade and hiding her pain, particularly throughout her divorce. In hindsight she thought, "How can a child learn that it's okay to feel deeply if they've never seen that modeled for them?"

I haven't really talked about grief much with my kids. They may see me cloud up or tear up, but I usually hold it back, push it down. I wait to cry until I'm in the shower or alone in my car. As parents we want to protect our children from—well, from *everything*. Even from feelings.

But I am not fooling my children by pushing back tears and putting on a "brave face" (whatever that means).

Please don't misunderstand me: as parents, perhaps our most important job is to reassure our children that their foundation is solid. They need to feel safe. We can't be a hot mess all the time. However,

I understand now that it is okay for my children to see the tears flow. More importantly, it's okay to talk to them about how I am feeling.

Our children already know when we are sad. We don't want them to learn sadness is something they should feel ashamed of—something that should be pushed down and buttoned up. We should not shelter them from seeing us feel, from seeing us grieve. What a gift to allow them to see that true healing takes time and self-compassion, and that it involves a whole spectrum of emotions that are *all* worthy and important.

Risk

I have had quite a bit of experience with the unexpected. Not situations where I took risks that didn't pan out, but rather situations in which I had become comfortable with the seeming stability and predictability of things and was then unceremoniously reminded that there is no such thing.

I can understand why it has become instinctual to cling not only to my loved ones, but also to patterns of behavior—habits that provide the illusion of predictability and control. Taking risks, in life and in love, seems entirely foolhardy. After all, it's scary enough that I have so little control. Why would I willingly invite havoc or heartbreak?

Living with two mystical creatures such as I do, I often find "potions" around my house in recycled jars and paint containers. A black, murky liquid might be marked *Deadly Nightshade* or *Witches' Brew*. I recently came across one labeled *Risk*. It was a tiny, fairy-sized bottle filled with golden glitter. It struck me that rather than it being a dark and foreboding concoction, *Risk* was instead luminous and magical, golden and glittery. I realized that, to my children, risk is a thrilling exploration of what is possible.

I wondered: if I can admit to myself that I control nothing, is it possible to find a place of freedom, rather than fear, in the not knowing? Can I once again begin to see *risk* as something *beautiful*?

Perspective

I snapped a photo during an early morning walk this week. I love how it plays with perspective—one can see the Newport Bridge on the horizon, which from a distance looks quite small, while the dock in the foreground looks enormous in comparison. A silhouette of a seagull against the sun also plays with size and distance.

This image made me think about how we relate to things in our daily lives. Small things, or small problems, often seem enormous when they are directly in front of us. Sometimes they are all we can see, obscuring our view of anything else—especially when we choose to focus on them.

But when we are able to step back and consider the big picture, we are able to put things into perspective. By taking this wider view, we can see that the problem is relatively small. This, of course, helps to calm us, and allows us to handle the issue in a healthier way.

It is much more difficult to shift our perspective when it comes to big life traumas. For one thing—they actually are big, and we know it. They are hard to minimize, and that is okay. We are entitled to feel their enormity.

It seems to me that sometimes the only way to change our relationship to these big traumas is to allow for the distance that can be gained only through time. We will always know, within, that the size of it has not changed, just as the size of the bridge does not actually change as we move away from it. But hopefully, in time, we will find ourselves far enough away that our traumas will cease to obscure—or even throw shadows across—our world view.

We're All Mad Here, Alice

Well, hello, Anxiety! I should've known you'd show up. It's because of what I wrote about risk, isn't it? Because I suggested we shouldn't worry, because nothing is really within our control anyway? I thought so.

Anxiety has arrived to call bullshit on my new, fun-loving, bohemian view on risk—on seeing the unknown as beautiful. And it has landed powerfully.

Oh, and I see you've brought your friend, Fear. How lovely! Please, make yourselves at home.

This morning I was entirely (and *completely* irrationally) convinced that some terrible fate had befallen my friend, Michael—a friend with whom I happen to be entirely (and, it seems, hopelessly) in love. Two romantic stops and starts between us have left me somewhat inexplicably enraptured.

Part of me knew I was being irrational with my fear of his untimely demise. (Fortunately, that was the part of me that willed myself to wait ten minutes for his text response before going off in search of his lifeless body). The other, very visceral part of me had already lodged my racing heart *well* up into my throat.

The thing is, you can talk about risk and lack of predictability, and about releasing the illusion of control, but if you are a parent, a child, a sister or brother, a husband or wife, a lover, or a devoted friend ...

Let me simplify. *Do you love? Are you loved?* Then I don't believe you can ever be truly free from the fear of loss—especially when you have lost before.

I also know that we can't allow Anxiety and Fear to own us, or put us into a panic when someone we love goes out of view or isn't where they are meant to be (small children aside). I know I will have to learn to relax my grip on the steering wheel of life. I already know I'm not driving.

When I heard from Michael (who was entirely *not* dead), and I told him how insane I felt, he replied, with a smile in his voice, "We're all mad here, Alice."

Indeed, as C.S. Lewis wrote: "*You must be mad, or you wouldn't have come.*"

Misplaced Purse

Sometimes I have these moments of panic that I am going to lose my memories of my dad. I frantically search my mind the way a nervous woman might plunge her hand into her misplaced purse. As her fingers grasp each familiar item—her wallet, her phone, her keys (his laugh, his smile, his humor)—she slowly begins to relax.

Breathe. It's all still in here.



Holding Their Gaze

My brother, Bill, is a funny guy. He is often sarcastic, with a quick wit and a gift for one-liners. While there is no doubt he loves his family and friends, I never would describe Bill as particularly affectionate, nor emotive. But Bill was hit hard by our father's death. He saw Dad every day; he shared an office with him, just as Dad had shared an office with his father before him.

Over these last few months, I have come to the surprising realization that Bill may be the most sensitive of us all. There is something about experiencing a great loss that cracks a person open, revealing parts of them that had been previously hidden. I see now that, hidden beneath Bill's intensity and sarcasm, is truly the most tender heart.

When you look into a person's eyes and see your own pain reflected back at you, you have two choices. You can decide it's too painful to look there. You can stop meeting their gaze, and your relationship will begin to wither. Or, you can hold their gaze, and truly see each other in all of your brokenness.

My brothers and I have chosen to hold each other's gaze. I believe we see each other now in a way we never have before. There was always love, but now I feel devotion between us that is deeper and more authentic than I could have imagined. Had we not been so mutually wrecked by this loss, perhaps we would never have known how truly, and how deeply, we love one another.

Pictures of Me

My mother has always been a beautiful woman. A petite blond with large, hazel eyes, she looks a decade younger than her age suggests she should. Mom is an avid and talented photographer. She has a gift for capturing the warmth and emotion of a moment in time, allowing us all to hold these moments in our hands and close to our hearts, timelessly.

Over the years, my mom took many beautiful photos of my dad, especially of him enjoying his family. Looking through all of these photos after Dad died, it became alarming to me how few photos there are of her. She is always behind the camera. This suddenly seemed a glaring omission.

I told her, “We need to take more photos of you from now on.”

She looked at me and said, quite matter-of-factly, “When I die, the photos that you will have—*of me*—will be the photos I have taken all of my life of everything and everyone that I love.”

Death's Dichotomy

Yesterday was Easter, and our first holiday without my dad. While none of us are particularly religious, it was a day we would have all been together.

In the early morning I donned Dad's baseball hat and ventured out into our "church." It was a glorious morning in the woods. I found myself feeling him with me so palpably—and, at the same time, missing him so much that I ached.

I got to thinking about this brutal and beautiful paradox: he is both nowhere and everywhere, all at once.

He is with my mom as she pours her coffee and watches the birds from her kitchen window. He is with his grandchildren as they tear into their chocolate rabbits. He is here with me in the woods, and he will be with us as we toast him at dinner.

We are left to painfully miss someone who never actually leaves us. He is everywhere.

Peeling the Onion

(Part Two)

In many ways, I liked the idea of Charlie being gay. It was convenient. It made our divorce clean, in a “throw your hands in the air and declare there’s nothing more to be done” kind of way. In fact, when I told a friend what was happening, she joked, “I’m seventy-five percent sure I wish *my* husband were gay.”

I secretly loved the idea that Charlie would, from that point forward, never have another relationship with a woman. There would be no other woman of whom to feel jealous. There would be no other woman trying to mother my daughters.

And then, ten months after I moved out, a woman moved into Charlie’s house. She was (or would soon become) Charlie’s girlfriend. The jig was up.

While I never felt foolish for people believing I had married a gay man, it was quite humbling having people deduce that my husband lied about being gay in order to get rid of me. Or that I had lied about him being gay in order to get rid of him.

As it often does, the truth lay somewhere in the middle. I never questioned whether Charlie was gay, because it was easier for me not to. And I suspect that Charlie was just trying to ease us all toward her truth in the gentlest way she knew how.

You see, Charlie is not, as it turns out, a gay man. She is actually a gay woman.

Charlie is transgender.

And so, the irony came to light that the “other woman” who would be mothering my children would, in fact, be Charlie.

There was always something feminine about Charlie. To be honest, I always loved that about her. I don’t tend to go for partners who are dripping with testosterone. I like a man with a softness about him. Should I have been tipped off that there was more to it for Charlie than being comfortable with her feminine side? Perhaps. When she pirouetted from the stove to the refrigerator to grab the butter, should I have questioned her masculinity? Maybe. But even if I had deemed this behavior “unmanly,” rather than quirky and endearing, believe me when I tell you that I never could have imagined that the first transgender person I would meet would be my husband.

Still, as foreign a concept as this was for me at the time, it made sense. In fact, somehow, this revelation made *much* more sense to me than Charlie being gay.

Unfortunately, Charlie’s feminine energy never manifested itself in the desire or ability to share her deepest thoughts and feelings. Once, while we lay in bed together, each glued to our own screen, she sent me an email accusing me of (calling me out on? Because she wasn’t wrong!) carrying on an emotional affair, via messaging, with an old boyfriend. She composed it, sent it, and then lay there watching me as I read it—all in complete silence.

It is not hard to understand why Charlie never developed the skill of being vulnerable. When you have spent decades of your life with a deep-seated fear that the truth of who you are won’t be accepted, I imagine you learn to put up a lot of walls to protect yourself. Revealing bits of her authentic self must have been terrifying for Charlie—like voluntarily shooting cannons at the very walls that kept her safe.

And so, in typical Charlie fashion, rather than to speak with me in person about this small matter of her gender identity, she chose to inform me via text. At 10:30 p.m. on a Saturday night, two and

half years after we'd split, she sent me a photo of herself standing on the sidewalk in our old neighborhood wearing a dress, makeup, and a wig.

For a moment, I thought I was looking at a photo of her sister. And then I saw. I saw *her*.

Can you stand it? she wrote. *Oh my God! Don't show anyone.*

Stunned, I shifted my body to shield the screen from my date. I had just explained apologetically to the man sitting beside me on my couch that I had to read the text from my ex-husband when it came through. Charlie and I had an agreement that we would not text each other after 9:00 p.m. unless it was an emergency. (I had no idea “emergency” was about to be redefined for me).

“Okay,” I wrote, somewhat numbly, as confusion and panic seemed to drain the blood from my body. I tried to make sense of what I was seeing—was it a Halloween costume (in March)? Was it a joke? Or a fetish? In my gut I knew it was none of these things. My head swam with the implications of this one, singular image.

So, how does one respond—while on a date—when the father of one's children shares something of this magnitude, without warning or explanation, and then asks that we keep it to ourselves?

There was nothing to do but to quietly text back, *Okay. It will be okay. We will be okay. Can we please talk tomorrow, in person?*

Yes, she replied.

And then, with shaking hands, I turned off my phone.

On Prince and Career Goals

The morning I heard the news that the iconic entertainer, Prince, had died, I felt compelled to listen to some of his music with my girls. I explained that he had died unexpectedly and much too young. I said I wasn't sure how he died (of course they asked), but that this was being investigated (which led to a whole other conversation about *autopsies*).

As it turned out, the girls did not much enjoy the music of Prince. "His music wouldn't appeal to everyone," I said, "but what an amazing gift to have your music loved by millions of people—to know that what you've created will live on long after your death."

I thought this was a perfect opportunity to discuss gender fluidity and the importance of not only being confident in who you are, but also of being accepting of others who don't conform to the norm. I showed them some images of Prince with his hair from long and wavy, to short hair with side burns, to afros, and with his clothes from feminine silk blouses and tunics to leather jackets and suits. He rocked whatever look he wanted to and never let himself be defined by—well, he never let himself be defined. I really wanted them to get the message that it's okay to be different and that in doing so, a person can bloom into something amazing—*themselves*. *Boom*.

Just as I felt I was really scoring a home run with this teachable moment, Beau said, "That seems like a good job to have."

"A famous musician? Yeah, that would be a great job!" I said.

“No, I mean cutting people open to figure out how they died.”
She pauses to consider this further, “It’s like being a doctor, but if you make a mistake with the knife—at least you know you aren’t going to kill anybody.”

The Hawk

For nine days after Dad's heart attack, we held his hand, talked to him, and cried beside him as he lay, unresponsive, in his hospital bed. At his funeral, I said I felt this was a true gentleman's final act of graciousness—to allow us the time we needed in order to accept, if not to understand, why he had to leave us.

His prognosis was never good. He had been deprived of oxygen for too long. Looking back, I realize the doctors and nurses knew all along he was not going to wake up. The doctors were simply crossing their T's and dotting their I's—making sure they followed protocol. If I hadn't been in shock, I'd have recognized it sooner: the expression on all their faces revealing that they already *knew* the awful truth. They just weren't allowed to say it. Not yet.

My mother would admit only after Dad's death that she knew he had left us on December 27, the day he first collapsed. I suppose one can feel such a thing in their bones. After loving someone for fifty-five years, you just *know* when they are gone. She knew. And she stayed by his side, all day, every day. She never wanted to miss a moment with him. I also think that, whether she was aware of it or not, she wanted to afford my brothers and me the small comfort of coming to understand this reality on our own. She didn't want us to see her waving the white flag.

My older brother, Bill, is a realist. I wouldn't say he expected the worst, but he felt he needed to prepare for it. To him, losing Dad wasn't the worst-case scenario. Having Dad continue to live without the quality of life he'd have wanted—that seemed to be Bill's biggest

emotional burden. He worried that Dad would come back to us in an altered state. He often sat on the floor in the hospital corridor, reading articles online about people waking up from comas with completely different personalities—not only physically and mentally impaired, but angry and hostile, the antithesis of our dad. He worried about us having to make decisions about Dad’s future without being able to ask him. Bill didn’t want our desire to hold onto Dad to hinder our judgment.

Ryan, on the other hand, spent his time reading about people who simply woke up—as if nothing had happened to them but a long nap. He wanted to believe in miracles. To be clear, we *all* wanted a miracle, but Ryan ... he hoped for it with a raw desperation that was both beautiful and excruciating to watch.

I wanted to believe, too. I never wanted to leave Dad’s bedside. At first, this was because I wanted to be there when he woke up. But after the hawk came—I didn’t want to leave because I wanted to be there when he died.

One morning, before dawn, I was sitting on a metal folding chair beside Dad, holding his hand and resting my head on the edge of his bed. I’d say I was dreaming, but what happened was too visceral to be a dream. It was otherworldly. A hawk swept over my head, wings outspread. It flew so close to my face that I felt its feathers brush against my cheek. I believe the hawk was in fact a messenger from the spiritual realm (if not Dad’s actual spirit), letting me know he was ready to leave his broken body.

I understood then that he was not coming back.

After that, it became incredibly painful to watch Ryan pleading with Dad to come back to us. I often had to step out of the room—my heart was breaking. I understood it was what Ryan needed to do. He wouldn’t have been able to live with himself if he hadn’t tried to get Dad back, and he did. He tried with everything he had.

One night when Ryan and I were alone, I gently suggested that maybe Dad *couldn’t* come back. “What if he wants to, but he can’t?”

I asked. “Maybe what he really needs to hear us say is that we love him, and that we are going to take care of each other. That we are going to take care of Mom. Maybe he is waiting to hear that he doesn’t have to worry—that we will be okay.”

This was hard for me to say, and—I imagine—harder for him to hear. The next day, though, he told me he’d thought about what I had said, and he agreed. So, while we waited for those final tests from the neurologist, we talked to Dad. We told him we loved him. We told him if he couldn’t come back, we understood. We would take care of each other. We would take care of Mom.

We told him not to worry. We let him go.

My mother, brothers, and I all took different routes, and different amounts of time, to get to the place of acceptance—to the place of reconciling what we knew in our hearts to be true. At some point in our lives, we all must go through the processes of letting go, of grieving, and of beginning again in a new reality. The truth is, we really don’t know, until we’re there, how we will navigate a situation we never dared imagine. And there is no wrong way.