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Taking Care

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taking care by Kelly A. Dorgan

It's July 26, 2010, late. I've sunk onto the edge of the bed in my childhood home. The bedroom reminds me of one of those cozy, pretty Valentine's Day shoeboxes I made back in elementary school: small, pink, white, flowery. My cell's pinned between my ear and shoulder. Words tumble from the other end, a soft murmuring bringing my first love story to a cacophonous conclusion.

In 1993, I'd returned to the southern Appalachian mountains during springtime, a period of rebirth when purple crocuses are often ice-encased. After six months of living in and traveling through India, I was looking forward to my own rebirth.

The weekend after my homecoming, I wound up at a local restaurant, a dim hangout choked with youthful bodies. My friends and I tucked ourselves into a back room, isolated, forgotten by the wait staff. In the haze of smoke and hormones, my excitement throbbed, almost painfully.

Sitting across from me was the guy I was crazy about (I'll call him Seth). Seth was funny, sexy, geeky, and I'd met him right before leaving for India. Along with my backpack, I'd hauled fantasies of him across the subcontinent, towing my attraction for him west to east and north to south, then back home again.

That night in the restaurant, I seriously doubted I had a shot with him. I was squat, five feet short. He was a glorious bear of a man, a six-footer with longish soot-black hair. Later, in the men's restroom, I discovered that I did indeed have a shot after all.

When he emerged from the dented and scraped metal stall, I was waiting by the sink, porcelain with swirls of rust. Then and there, I ambushed him with my audacious attempt at seduction under sallow floescence. Without pausing, he cupped the back of my neck, his hand unwashed.

We kissed, inches from the foul toilet. We only pried apart when a man pushed into the restroom and snickered at our absurdly enacted passion play.

*

Looking back, I see why I fell hard for him. Seth was a boot-wearing mountaineer who hand-penned melodically haunting poems about his youth, one marked by red clay, poverty, and fear. Clad in faded jeans and plaid shirts, he hiked rugged trails, sprinting over rocks and roots like he'd been born in the wilds. And when he smiled, his crooked teeth were smoothed by lips the color of spiced crab apple butter. To me, he always smelled of a mixture of just-lit cigarettes and leaf-covered trails. And his mind left me stunned. Though I'd earned a master's degree and had taught university classes, I was no match for his intellect. Later, as I would learn when he enrolled at the local university, he both mesmerized and infuriated me—like those times, having forgotten an astrophysics exam, he'd ace it after a late-night cram session. Then there were the poems, lines he jotted down almost casually but somehow managing to capture humanity's torment and beauty. Afterward, he would regard resulting praise from professors and classmates the same oblivious way that a grand woodland creature receives oohs and aahs from awestruck onlookers.

Like many young couples, we had little money. I taught college classes, part time. Meanwhile, Seth transferred from community college to the same four-year institution where I taught. He pulled in money as an on-campus student worker and an off-campus dishwasher/cook at a local seafood restaurant. Quickly, his earthy scent was replaced with bleach and grease—and cigarettes, always cigarettes. Our dating life reflected our pathetic incomes. There were movies (occasionally) and dinners out (rarely). Mostly, we took to the woodlands surrounding our mountain town. We discovered one another on fragrant wilderness trails, slipping into lush areas and icy swimming holes, and pursued our intimacies pulled off to the side of night-time backroads.

The natural world oversaw our courtship. So it was fitting that our wedding took place outdoors. Under an autumn sun, ringed by delicate asters and stately goldenrods, we exchanged lyrical vows, as lacey and lovely as wild carrot blossoms. Seth wore a crimson bowtie, uncomfortably tight around his neck, and a vest that hugged his wide chest. He slipped a yellow-gold ring on my finger, its leaf pattern complementing the one etched into his own

white-gold band.

*

Deciding to pursue different graduate programs at the same school, we moved further south. Along the way, there were all kinds of signs. In fact, there had been signs everywhere, but I had dismissed them: the sullen silences, brimming anger, and furious outbursts. There were lies and secrets, jobs gotten and lost, restless nights and eggshell mornings. I talked myself out of seeing the signs, wiping away tears as I would raindrops, and brushing off doubts as if layers of pollen. I'd reasoned myself out of my disenchantment: There was never physical violence or cheating and rarely name-calling. Eventually, I had learned to remain vigilant for sudden shifts, eyes peeled for bruising darkness and ears opened for unsettling stirrings.

His energies ebbed and flowed, sometimes rapidly. He sheltered under layers of shame-filled omissions and embarrassing secrets (to him!). Together and apart we uttered reassurances, little delusions that helped us continue on in spite of the distant rumbling and nearby crackling.

It would get better, we told ourselves; things would clear and settle. Once he quit smoking. Once I got my PhD. Once we had more money. Once he had a job. Once I had a job. Once we had a house. Once we moved. Once he...Once I...Once we...It would get better.

*

By the early 2000s, we had returned to the Appalachian mountains. Back here, I took special care of him. Though I worked fulltime in a tenure-track teaching position at a state university, I identified all sorts of ways I could alleviate his burdens. Like a seasoned thru hiker, I sought to carry more weight for him, reasoning that he could better steady himself. I took care of the bills, the savings, the housework, the groceries, the cooking. I took care of how I walked through the house, especially when he'd finally collapsed in the wee hours at the end of a sleepless night. I took care how I woke him, repeatedly rousing him for work (a process that usually took one-two hours). I took care how I spoke to him, especially about my own needs, my fears, my desires. I took care when I tried discussing our largely sexless marriage.

Taking care is what I did. Taking care is who I became. Over the years, there were numerous doctors and counselors. There were theories and diagnoses.

There were treatments and hospitalizations. There were capsules and tablets. There were waiting rooms and examination rooms. Still, we persisted, pushing against the stigma—external and internalized—and sometimes bitter realities of having our lives disordered by brain disorders.

I don't know how to write this part; I don't want to disparage a good man who struggled mightily in his own journey. But here is my truth: Years of taking care transformed me. Over time, I started reflecting the rugged terrain of my life. My face hardened underneath the weight of my unexpressed needs. My body widened, overly nourished by the food I used to comfort, sublimate, and satiate. Eventually, I came to resemble the rounded, granite boulders I hiked by on so many secluded mountain trails. Emotionally, I was as cold and stony as well.

*

In January 2009, Seth vanished, leaving without a

good-bye to me or an explanation to our young child. One morning, he'd simply kissed me on the forehead and left for work. When night came, but he did not, I'd started calling: his cell, his family, his boss, the police. Finally I got a text, a message as cryptic and indecipherable as my husband. At least I had proof of life, though.

He'd returned home days later while I was out, leaving a hand-written note on the kitchen counter; he'd crawled into bed, going sound to sleep. The moment I got back, my eyes instantly snagged the note. Before reading it, my heart promised that the lines on that single page would answer all, allowing me to go on taking care of him in spite of everything. My heart's promise was not kept.

These are the words I remember the most from that note: "It's not my fault." As I saw it, his only letter to me was an abdication of responsibility for going missing. Perhaps he was right. Perhaps nothing was his fault. Regardless, those words released me, more so than any apology could have.

We were divorced by November.

*

Toward the end of July, 2010, Seth removed his wedding band; he'd continued wearing it even after our divorce. He placed it on the counter of a dingy apartment (For some reason, I imagine the white-gold metal discarded on laminate, cheap and flimsy, the yellow of dying tulip poplar leaves). He slid off his wire rimmed glasses, frames round and tarnished. He dug out his worn wallet from his back pocket.

He deposited these meager possessions right beside the wedding band. Then, he went through the door and descended into the basement of his apartment complex. Once there, he slipped a noose around his neck. At times, my brain punishes me by silently asking why a man—who'd hated the confining bowtie he'd worn on our wedding day nearly fifteen years prior—had secured something so tight around his throat.

*

It's July 26, 2010, the night before our child's birthday. I haven't been able to get hold of Seth, and I'm mad

because he stood up his son, yet again. Lights are off. The whole house is asleep, including our kid and my aging parents.

When the call comes, it's after eleven in the evening. I learned as a child and relearned as an adult: the late-night ring of a phone is seldom the harbinger for good happenings. I feel the bad news before it's spoken to me in a series of low, halting murmurs. At some point, I sink onto my bed and listen-not-listen.

Tucked in my small childhood bedroom, it no longer feels cozy. Suffocating, I tug open the door and drift into the den. My brain's frozen, not unlike those ice-encased crocuses from that spring long ago when I had first fallen for a boot-wearing poet and mountaineer. Eventually, my mind thaws enough to let this seep in:

Twelve hours from now, I have to find a way to celebrate my child's eleventh birthday. And sometime after that, I have to figure out how to tell a young boy that his father is dead. All I know for certain is this: I will have to take care of what I do and what I say, but I have no idea how.