

Anesthesia

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I curled into the third seat of my mom's suburban. Tan leather clung to my pink skin, still damp with sunscreen and sweat. My son, my mother, and my sister and her two kids and I had spent our day posing for pictures with Santa, the seven dwarfs, the Cowardly Lion and the heartless Tin Man. We'd ridden a magic carousel, walked through the enchanted forest and down the yellow brick road. Now the kids had wilted into sleep in their car seats, my mom and sister chatted in the front seat, and I slouched in the back, breathing slowly, nearing sleep.

Until I thought of Blake.

It wasn't a gentle memory of his dimpled smile, not a longing that would coax me into a dream of a farmhouse with a front porch and a windmill, and chickens and children. This was a sudden remembering that jolted me awake.

It was the first time I had thought of him that day.

The sun was already dipping below the horizon of green, un-harvested corn fields before I finally thought about my husband, about how long it had been since I talked to him, about how long it might be before he'd be home from Iraq.

I sank lower in the seat, closed my eyes again, and tried to find him, tried to transplant myself to another place where I could feel his presence. I imagined the dusty haze that lifted from the upholstery of his dad's truck and found myself thirsty for the penetrating smell of smoke. I tried to drink it in, curling my fingers near my lips, imagining the smoldering taste of Blake's skin, yellowed with the heat of cigarettes. I closed my eyes to inhale the smell of his uniform after a weekend of smoke breaks at drill, but my lungs filled with the disappointing chill of air-conditioning. I wanted to be somewhere with him—in the dugout after a baseball game, holding an Old Mil Light and huddling against him for warmth—I tried to summon him, but I couldn't.

And so I found my niece's travel desk, unrolled white paper from the pink plastic scroll, and began to write a letter I would never send. After a year's worth of words chosen carefully to convey how much I missed him, how much I hated living without him, how much better life would be when he returned, I bounced over the broken pavement of highway 25 and wrote:

Dear Blake,

I almost forgot to miss you today.

My stomach lifted up into my throat as I realized that Blake had become something far off. Something unpredictable. He had dissipated, slithered into the air in winding wafts of smoke. He had dissolved into memory and the dream of what a

husband might be.

In a month, he would begin his journey home from Iraq, but at that moment, he was still drifting. I wanted to let go of the possibility of losing him, to start imagining what life would be like once he was home, but I couldn't trust it. Another soldier from his unit had died. Greg. Blake called him by his first name, so I knew this one had hit closer to home. That the loss was part of Blake's reality. Closer to him than George and I, maybe. Because that entire summer, I had woken each morning to the sound of George's coos. I'd spent weekdays at my sister's house, coloring with my niece, watching George crawl after his cousins. I'd scheduled tummy time and meal time and bath time. I'd nursed him to sleep each evening, then snuggled into the warmth of his sleeping body and the rhythm of his steady breathing while I watched the *Late Show with David Letterman* and finally fallen asleep myself. On Sundays, I had taken George to the family dinners with Blake's grandparents, cousins, aunts and uncles, then followed Blake's brothers to baseball games, where George toddled around in the grass near the dugouts, waiting to wave at his uncles as they ran from the field into the dugout. My life was predictable. But Blake's wasn't.

Blake couldn't tell me where he'd been or where he'd be the next day, what he'd be doing or when. And after Greg died, Blake had begun calling even less. What had been weekly phone calls had stretched to every ten days. I told myself he called less because it was getting easier, because he was so close to coming home. But some part of me knew that he didn't call because it kept getting harder, because when Greg died it took the wind out of him. Blake's return was so close, but I knew he wasn't safe. It was the Army – it was war – and, in his words, you never knew what was going to happen until it actually happened. I was still terrified of the possibilities, but I was also tired of being afraid. I hung somewhere between anxiety and relief, suspended between consciousness and sleep, storybook land and reality, numbness and feeling.

I had experienced this numbness, this lack of feeling before—on October 17th, when our son was born. After the epidural, after my sister had assumed her position behind the blue curtain that cut me off just below the chest, someone dressed in blue peered around the curtain and said, "Let's see where we're at here. A little pinch to your heel—just let me know if you feel it."

I felt a pinch and said, "Felt that."

After a few minutes, the blue-masked man repeated the routine a second time, and I said, "Yeah, felt that a little bit, too."

Still, he peered over the curtain at me and said, “All right, we’re ready to go here,”

I smiled, maybe even nodded slightly, while his words sunk in. *Ready to go?* But I had felt it. The pinch. I knew I had. And now they were preparing to begin? Preparing to cut through layers of skin and muscle, to peel back the layers of me, even though I felt that pinch. The medical staff was blocked from my view, but my sister sat beside me, her head tilted toward mine. She held my hand. And yet, she smiled. Unconcerned. She squeezed my hand.

In my panic, I’d forgotten how she’d told me to expect this very thing—this fear that the anesthesia wasn’t working, this phantom feeling of my limbs—and she had explained the inside joke: “They don’t even pinch your heel the second time, because they know you’re numb.” If I had remembered, I might have trusted her. After all, she was a medical professional. An insider. She probably knew. But I didn’t remember. I just lay there, unable to do anything other than imagine Blake. I longed for him beside me, his thick eyebrows raised, full lips sucking in a deep breath, fingers extending anxiously, flat palm pounding his knee. I needed someone as unfamiliar with the procedures of childbirth and epidurals and c-sections as me. Someone to believe me—to believe with me—that the anesthesia had not yet taken effect.

I sucked in icy air, stared into the glaring white ceiling, and thought, *Yeah, you can get started. You can cut me open, but I really did feel that pinch.* I closed my eyes, clenched my teeth, and prepared to scream.

And then, nothing happened.

I felt nothing. No slicing pain, no swelling scream. I lay on the table, my arms stretched out, crucifixion style, secured with Velcro straps. I anticipated the most horrific pain I could imagine, and then didn’t feel anything. If I concentrated on the body I knew was still there, I could conjure up some sense of pressure, of skin pulling and stretching. But really there was nothing. A void of sensation. A sort of limbo, suspended between two realities.

In the backseat of my mom’s suburban on that summer day, I rolled out the waxy paper of my niece’s pink travel desk about six inches—well beyond the words, *I almost forgot to miss you today*, to a rectangle the size of stationary. I tore the paper slowly. Soundlessly, not to wake the kids. I stared out the window into pristine rows of corn, their vibrant green stripes angling toward the horizon, giving the illusion that they were growing closer and closer, that they might converge somewhere just beyond the

horizon. I rolled and unrolled the paper around my index finger. When I recognized the four-mile corner, I laid the paper flat, folded it in fours. Once at home, I tucked the single sentence, the singular sentiment, into the drawer of my nightstand.

When I discovered the paper three years later, I felt myself lifted into that dizzying emotion, that threat of pain and the guilty relief of falling into the void. I remembered the epidural and its strange nothingness and I felt an urge to explain, to finish the letter I never sent. To say:

That’s how I feel about forgetting to miss you, Blake. It’s a sort of suffering that I’ve come to expect to sweep over me several times a day—when the sound of George’s rasping snore flashes me an image of you, pitching baseballs to a toddler you never rocked to sleep as a baby; when I watch TV and try to snuggle into the arm of the couch, wishing that arm would wrap itself around me, extend a soft-skinned hand to trace circles on my shoulder until it burns on my freckled skin. When it doesn’t come, I feel numb. As if half of me has died. And I want to scream, but I can’t, because that is when I realize that if something does happen, if you don’t come home from war, life will go on. Just like you always say, “Everything will be okay.”

If you don’t come home, I imagine that for a while it would feel like part of me were missing. Not just as if I couldn’t feel my legs, but as if they were actually gone and I were nothing more than a bust—a resin form of head, neck, and shoulders, sitting still and lifeless on the shelf of a library or an office somewhere, where people pass by, pretending not to see me, my testimony to death and tragedy—but eventually I would start to feel a prickling numbness, a dead-heavy foot. And eventually that foot would twitch involuntarily, reminding me that I’m not completely broken, reminding me that it is still possible to feel, to move, to live. Then I would reach down and tug on that lead foot, drag it around for a while, until it gave in and started to wiggle and flex, then finally move freely.

And so I can’t scream because I know it is a good thing, the fact that I wouldn’t die without you, but I hate it at the same time. I know you would want me to move on, maybe run into that guy I always flirted with in college, the one I bumped into the summer before we were married, the one who asked my uncle if I was still single just weeks before our wedding. But I don’t want to have to. I’m afraid of the possibility of losing you, of having to live without you. But I’m sick with knowing that somehow, eventually, I could do it.

Can you understand the guilt of that?

And can you forgive me?

I hope so, because even now, as I realized that life could go on without you, I know that you are always part of me and that you always will be, even if it seems like I am forgetting: whenever George's face transforms into yours with the furrow of a brow, the peak of eyebrows; whenever I enter a hazy bar, met someone's smoke circles on the street, or catch a whiff of burning autumn leaves; whenever the tinny, cheap twinge of Old Mil Light trickles from a sweating blue and silver can to my lips, making me long to inhale the smoke of you.