

## on death and dying

you loved me like no one had. there was an unconditionality to it— and though it may seem to be a small example, i saw it most in the way that you forgave me. even for the little things. in the seventh grade, i told you i didn't want to be friends anymore. i didn't mean it but you thought i did. i had liked you for a while by then, but at thirteen i thought that meant we couldn't be friends. but you were fourteen and all you wanted was for me to be happy. we didn't talk for a few days, but it wasn't long before my mother noticed.

“is everything alright?” she asked.

“yeah, we're okay.” i lied. “he's just been busy.” i didn't know it then, but she had already spoken to your mother. i also didn't know that despite that, you hadn't given me up.

the next day, my heart sank when i watched you walk past me on the bus again. when i got off i walked a little slower than usual, hoping maybe you'd catch up and say something to me. soon enough i felt your hand on my shoulder. when i turned around, you looked like you had something to apologize for.

“um,” you paused for a moment, almost like you were expecting me to stop you. “if you need any help with the reading for history, you can tell me.”

your voice was always so kind. at the time i knew the offer was sweet, but it wasn't until years later that i realized the full weight of it. i was dyslexic and didn't know it. but you were intuitive, smart. you knew i didn't want to be your friend, that for some undisclosed reason i no longer wanted to belly laugh with you on the bus— but you also knew that i often cried when i tried to read alone. all i did was hug you, tight. we became friends again that day.

you never asked for an explanation, or even an apology.



our favorite movie growing up was *the goonies*. we watched it almost every weekend for weeks, each time enjoying it just the same.

there is a kissing scene in *the goonies*.

it's not steamy or long or even especially romantic— but it's there. you and i didn't talk about the kissing scene. we spent the movie laughing, joking; even competing over who could say the lines before the characters did. but without fail, each time the scene began, so did the silence between us. we didn't look at each other. sometimes i swear we didn't even move.

there was something about it, the un-acknowledged feeling that sat like a third person between us— born from the things we never talked about.

at fifteen and sixteen, we were watching it again. the characters were all in the cave together and we both knew it was coming. i wondered if you felt the same pull in your chest that i did then, like a hand was reaching into me and tugging on the strings of my heart that had long since been attached to you.

andie was making her way toward mikey. silence. they moved closer to one another, the music swelling around them. just as their lips were about to meet, i felt your hand on my knee. when i turned to look at you, you kissed me.



suddenly we were seventeen on a night in july, two years later. i was drunk. you were on an opposite couch with your friends but i knew you were keeping your eyes on me. at some point our gazes met and you smiled, your arm dangling with a beer in hand. you didn't drink much, but

when we went out with your friends you always ended up with a bottle. you told me once you feared your predisposition; scared of even the slightest chance that you could be driven to hurt the people you love if you ever developed a relationship with alcohol. i admired that about you, though i knew you could never be anything like your father.

we were all laughing about something when a friend of ours spoke up.

“truth or dare?” he asked.

i scoffed quietly at the sound of it.

“what’s that for?”

“nothing, it’s just...kind of a kid’s game.”

he rolled his eyes. “alright then. truth or dare?”

“oh, come on, leave her alone.” you said. you only wanted him to quit because you knew i was too drunk to let him make me feel stupid.

“dare.”

there was a look in your eyes that told me you wanted to say something, but you had a habit of letting me get the kerosene out before stepping in to prevent the fire.

“i dare *you* to force *him* to tell us how you are in b—” he didn’t get any further.

you were on your feet quicker than i had ever seen. before i knew it, the collar of his shirt was in your fingers. i’m sure i would have laughed at how scared he looked if i wasn’t worried about what you might do to him.

that wasn't you. it never had been. that was a part of you, i know, an extension of passion; like a limb that only grows for the final punch.

but you weren't a fighter, although i suppose that could have been because you never had a reason to be. i had found myself imagining scenarios like that in the past— those dramatic, heated situations when the man in the film protects the woman he loves. but i always figured we weren't right for those roles; that the lines would sound forced when they went to cut the scenes.

i hadn't known i was a reason to fight.

i doubted any of our friends had ever seen you like that, and it showed in the glances being passed around the room. the boy apologized and i knew he meant it.

“keep that shit to yourself.” you said, releasing him.

everyone was silent for a moment, all of us surely hoping that someone would say something first. i don't remember what it was and i wish i could, but you ended up making a joke that got a laugh from all of us.

we carried on after that as we had many times before, passing time with our friends until we were inevitably pulled away into the night by an invitation addressed to us— from a long, summer evening with the curious ability to make one night feel like a lifetime.

at some point, your hand was on my knee and a song we loved was spilling from the speakers of your car. we had given into our heavy lids and headed home, neither of us wondering if our lives were going to change any time soon. i fell asleep in your passenger seat not knowing how lucky i was. not knowing that at any moment, the feeling of your hand on my knee could slip away into nothing— as if your touch had never been there at all.



by the fall of my senior term, we had been in a relationship for two years and i had known you for a decade. we met at the bottom of the front steps every day after school, where we'd walk to your car and head to my house. you stayed over after dropping me off one day, offering to help my father with some work in the garage. i studied while the two of you worked, laughing when you came back covered in oil.

you gave me a look i knew all too well. i took off running but you caught me halfway down the stairs, tickling me until i couldn't laugh any harder. you stained my top with the oil but i didn't notice until later, when you had already gone home and i was doing laundry alone—clutching the shirt in my hand just a moment longer before tossing it into the washer, as if i could feel your touch that had somehow seeped into the fabric.



on a thursday morning in october, we were late for school. i jumped into an outfit in a way that proved i had been late many times before, pulling my hair into a ponytail so i wouldn't have to bother with it. you were clearing snow from the hood when i got in your car, and i stared at the dashboard as if the time would change.

we ended up being only a few minutes late. i spent my lunch period in an office in connection to my calc teacher's attempt at a punishment, but it knew you had probably gotten it worse. we met at the bottom of the front steps.

“how'd it go?” i asked.

you laughed a little, starting the walk toward your car at the edge of the lot. “let's just say my dad's gonna kill me.”

i knew that meant you had racked up enough tardy points for the school to call your parents. i also knew that your father always managed to catch wind of anything he could deem even remotely worthy of yelling about.

“it’s gonna be okay,” i told you, getting into the passenger seat as you held the door for me. i wish i had thought more often about the generosity in that.

“tell him life’s too short to be worrying about tardy points.”

you closed the door and went around, getting into the drivers’ seat. “oh, how i wish it were that easy, my love.” you turned your keys in the ignition and leaned over the center console, giving me a kiss on the cheek. then you pulled out of the parking spot and drove toward the road that always took us to my house.



less than an hour later, i was sitting in a hospital bed with an unmistakable ache in my chest. they said we hit a patch of ice on lock street.

*lock street.*

*lock street.*

i kept repeating it in my head like its meaning would change— as if it would suddenly disappear from my memory and become a name i had never heard; as if it was not a street sign down the road from my childhood home; as if it was not a set of words i had seen my whole life. the car slid off the road, hitting a tree so large that you never stood a chance. the paramedics said

you died on impact. i knew it was their way of telling me you didn't suffer, but i wish they hadn't said such a thing.

my parents held me tight, though it was almost as if i couldn't feel them touching me— as if for some reason, i was receiving no warmth or comfort from their arms. i remember my father kissing my forehead, whispering something about how he knew this was going to be hard. it took me a moment to realize that a nurse was casting my arm.

all at once, i could hear your mother sobbing in the hallway. it was the kind of cry you could never forget. it came from a place i wasn't sure i could pull sound from, but i knew that i could feel the crater in myself.



i didn't eat for nearly three days. i became accustomed to the darkness of my room a week in, succumbing to the dreary feeling that consumed me each time the sun came back up behind the blinds and my eyes still hadn't closed. my parents couldn't work out what to say to me. they knew we were soulmates even when we were kids. though we didn't get together until we were teenagers, i've always struggled to pin down a time in my life when i did not love you.

we were about to graduate high school, about to do all those things we had talked about our whole lives. an apartment, a dog, a garden that i could write in. it was as if in just one single moment— everything we planned to build had been torn down; the blueprints torn by fate. i couldn't wrap my head around it. i had experienced death with pets, with relatives; lives i always knew would fall off the earth someday. in some way i must have believed you were immortal, as if this was all just a horrible mistake and you would be revving your engine in my driveway the next morning because i wasn't up for class yet.

i suppose i never understood grief. it seemed so distant, like grey clouds huddled in the sky, warning some far away town of rain. i watched my mom grieve her own mother when i was young. she would spend hours painting alone in the guest room upstairs. i watched her go through the process of acceptance, sealing the guest room up one morning with all the art inside. although i was young, i felt guilty for not knowing then that she had been destroyed.

i had no idea how she did it, moved through life with so much kindness and joy— still undoubtedly mourning the death of the person who raised her from birth. my first day back at school felt like walking through a place i had never been to. the people passed me like trees on a long, endless freeway through the middle of nowhere. i saw you standing at the end of every hallway, waiting for me to finish each class so that you could walk me to the next. i could see your backpack hanging off of your shoulder.

i never realized how much i hated people staring at me until you weren't at my side when it happened.



the seventh of october was your birthday. it was so close to the date of your funeral that your mom chose to hold them on the same day. i stood at your grave with the arms of my parents around my stiff, unmoving body— the arms of two people who still had a child to hold.

your favorite part of that day was on the table in the living room: a chocolate ice cream cake. there was nothing written on it. in the end it wasn't even cut, and i threw up in the bathroom thinking about how upset you would have been. your bedroom door was closed and i remember imagining it completely empty, void of any furniture or blinds; no stray socks or pairs



of pants on the carpeted floor. your mother held me for a while in the kitchen by the stove, the two of us crying so hard that i could feel her bones shake.

you would have been eighteen that day.



oftentimes my mind makes a point of punching me in the gut.

i become sick from the thought that i will never see your smile again— never hear the laugh that echoed through the halls of our houses in the days when we were most innocent. some nights i find myself barefoot on a ledge, and whether that means physically or metaphorically i am afraid to say. you would be torn by the ways i have demolished myself.

grief found me when i had never met her, disguised as the loss of a boy whose name was carved into the face of my heart. i hated her, i resented her. i found her *stages* to be more like guesses about things she couldn't possibly predict. she ground me into dust. and when i was on my knees at the door i hoped you were behind, i realized that i had been wrong.

she is anything but one-dimensional. grief is changing, continuing, sleeping, waking—reaching for you in the dark when you have finally gotten to sleep. some nights she won't leave, and others i wonder how well we even knew each other at all.

tonight, however, she is in my bedroom. she curls up at my side where her figure has made a space, struggling to describe the feeling of your hand as it rested on my knee.