

ADDICTION

Karen Heise

I push the cardboard puzzle pieces around on the table. The waiting room is half-full and choked with the quiet of grief. Families—or remnants of them—slump behind magazines, gaze blankly out the windows, and silently come and go. Others before and after me will work this same puzzle—a row of brightly-colored parrots sitting on a tree limb—until the picture is complete. I'm diligently trying to finish the body of a green bird not too unlike my own recently escaped one. Suddenly, my eyes fill with tears.

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I had named my now-escaped parrot after my dad because he seemed to embody so much of the garrulousness of my father. I bought the bird from a woman who was afraid to handle him, and within two days of getting him home I had him sitting on my hand, scared but remaining. Our bird-human bond strengthened over the next two years, and my dad grew to like him; I think he knew what I'd had in mind when I chose that bird's name. They growled and screeched at each other every time they got the chance.

One day, a cat came calling and knocked the cage over onto the deck outside. As it fell apart, my fine-feathered friend made a leap and flapped madly for his life, landing safely in a nearby tree. The cat vanished as stealthily as he'd appeared. I berated myself for not paying more attention, for my stupidity in thinking my bird was safe on my doorstep—I knew there were cats in the neighborhood! I tried unsuccessfully for the next few days to get him back, but he eventually drifted further down the block, and in a few days was gone all together. I was heartbroken, but thankful the weather was sunny and warm that time of year. He'd probably do just fine I reasoned as I looked with an aching heart at the empty cage sitting in my now silent house. My husband, twenty years my senior, could say nothing to comfort me. Besides, I had other much more pressing things to worry about. My dad was dying from lung cancer.

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After a few minutes, my dad emerges from his near-daily dose of radiation, a five-minute procedure preceded by an hour's drive and sometimes as much as a half an hour's wait in this cramped room. We try hard not to look so burdened by our grief, for dad's sake and for the other strangers there, but all of us fail miserably. We get up to leave as others arrive and make an orderly, silent shuffle toward the parking garage; we leave one unfinished puzzle behind and take another with us.

In the dim gray and harsh orange of the garage, as we reach the car, my dad suddenly hangs back a few paces. When I turn to see why, he is retching—a huge, booming, gagging sound in the cement vault—and the tears I have mostly managed to hold back flow freely now, though I don't make a sound. I'm afraid it will, like his moment of weakness, be amplified into grotesque size, a monster of a wail. When we finally emerge into the day, the traffic is light. I roll down my window and look out so I won't have to see my father's withering form just on the other side of the car from me. I want to reach out and take his hand in comfort.

Three days later, which is a Saturday, my good friend Alice comes to the house to visit me. She knows how to do reflexology, and my dad, in his desperation for anything that might stop the onslaught of the disease, agrees to let her massage his feet. She is a nearly a stranger to him, but not to me: we have been lovers for nearly two years by this time. As I watch her work tenderly and earnestly with my dad, my sense of shame, guilt, and longing nearly makes me leave the room. I am ashamed because our affair has been going on steadily for so long that I cannot now imagine life without her; in my spare moments it's all I think about—sometimes as a way to relieve my horror at the inevitable losing of my father. I am guilty, of course, because my husband has done nothing to wrong me, really; he is a good man, but I do not and have never loved him like marriage requires, and I love Alice in a way that marriage cannot eradicate. My longing on this day isn't for her, though; it's to be in her place, to be the one massaging my dad's feet. I, after all, am his daughter. But I'm unable—the full force of that word has never been clearer than just now—to be that daughter to him. A stranger, my lover, pours her love into him right before my eyes and there's nothing I can do about it.

After she is done, we quietly leave, driving to the first dirt road we can find. She offers me a beer. I take it and drink it quickly in silence. I

realize I'm not jealous in a vengeful way of her ability to reach my dad in his misery—I am covetous of her ability to do it. I want to be like her. That desire flames out of me briefly as she holds me there in the front seat. I want to merge with her—to *become* her—so fiercely I can hardly hold myself back. A car approaches. I tear myself away, lean down, and put my head in my hands. Outside, the cicadas are mad with desire, too, a glittering green-yellow roar.

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Thanksgiving comes and goes, a quiet-somber affair. My dad doesn't eat much and falls asleep on the couch in the middle of the Bowl game, his slide into silence unheard of before. My husband and I move into our new house the next week. My dad comes out to see it and musters as much enthusiasm as he can. His gaunt face and slumping frame make our acquisition of a house seem ludicrous: he will soon leave his house of flesh—to where? I try several times to talk to him about God. He listens mutely, offers no action. My husband, a lay preacher, offers to step in and help, but I am adamant that he leave the task to me. The thought of losing yet another opportunity to impact my father is more than I can stand, and somehow I find this possibility unexplainably more heinous than losing my daughter-place to Alice. I decide I'll think about that one later.

One morning, just before he would be admitted to the hospital, I get up at 5:30 and write him a song. By 6:30, it's taped and ready for him to hear. I am elated. Maybe now I can get through to him how much I love him, and how much more God loves him. I play the song for him on a small cassette player (I do not trust myself to be able to do it in person without falling apart) and he listens, then thanks me with moist eyes. That's all.

Later that day, he's lying in a hospital bed and only speaks in a hoarse whisper if spoken to.

When it comes my turn to spend the night with him, I am terrified. His anguish at his condition has multiplied considerably; he is enerally combative, suffering, and seems especially upset as I arrive. My brother, clearly relieved at his chance to get home from his own gruesome shift, leaves hastily, telling me everything will be just fine. He has no clue of the yawning pit of hopelessness that has just opened up in

my soul. How could he?

Our night is as anguished as I'd feared it would be. Dad tears at his tubes, wrestles in bed, and hacks up the thickest, foulest-smelling brown and red sputum I've ever seen. The coughs shake him to his innermost being. He rails against everything and everyone. He refuses nearly all of the comforts I try to offer him, eventually cursing me. I leave the room briefly to cry, and when I re-enter, he is drowning in his own fluids. I ring for a nurse. They suction him against his wishes. When they leave, his blue eyes are smoldering.

I remember our rancorous exchanges about his smoking as I was growing up how he deliberately blew smoke in my face at the dinner table one evening as I was pleading with him to quit, how he told me all the hard evidences about the harmfulness of second-hand smoke were "bat shit," and how he cried as he exited the doctor's office into the crowded puzzle-filled waiting room and announced that the doctor told him he had the "Big C." Although I have never told him "I told you so," he looks at me now with a measure of contempt I've never seen. I cannot plumb its depths or find its ends.

As the hands spin around the clock, his condition grows worse. Soon he rattles like the nurses' station coffeepot at the end of its brewing cycle. He is desperate for breath. Suctioning does not help. I flee to the desk. They call the doctor, and when they hand the phone to me, I know we just woke this man out of a much-needed sleep. I feel guilty for that, too. He explains carefully to me what will happen, and that the timetable is now down to hours, not days. I ask if he can have my dad put into ICU—I can no longer stay at his bedside. He agrees. As they gather the paraphernalia around my dad and wheel him out of his private room, I am overcome with the conviction that I have somehow deserted him, let him down once again. My family, as I speak to them early by phone, assure me otherwise. I am healed momentarily by their words.

Two days later, my dad is dead.

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My husband urges me to get out of the house. I've been inside for nearly two weeks since the funeral. Our motorcycle chapter is sponsoring a "toy run"—an excuse to ride motorcycles all over the countryside while gathering toys for needy children. I flatly refuse to go. I haven't

the spirit for anything resembling Christmas. I tell him I just need to be alone. When the roar of his motorcycle fades down our long driveway, I pick up the phone.

In an hour and a half, Alice and I are pulling into a motel parking lot in the opposite direction my husband and his cohorts have gone. We enter the room, strip, and in the tacky 1970s decor, I make love to her like it is the last thing I'll ever do. If we get caught, it will be.

My misery wells up and up in me, a hot black spring fed from all of my life's sources. I wail loudly into the pillows. I lay silently in her arms while the tears stream from my eyes. He's gone now. I can never get the closeness I so much wanted. My lover, who sometimes must throw her entire weight squarely over me to keep me from going crazy in a fit of despair, becomes the closest-living link I now have to my father. I take her over and over. I frantically search for a way to join us, to break down the last remaining barrier. I plead with her to never leave me. She promises she won't.

After six or seven hours straight, she crawls from our bed, dresses, and cracks the door open to the darkened outside world. I watch her move through the dim light, silhouetted and beautiful. Smoke rises from her Marlboro. She softly swears she will quit her vile addiction someday. Addictions are addictions, I tell her, trying to ease her fresh guilt at my loss. I feel my longing for her begin to coalesce all over again. Though she is only sitting a few feet away, it is painfully far. We all have them, I say into the darkness . . . and in one way or another I realize addiction will part us, too.

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