

Solstice

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The sweater is grey; a zip up Quiksilver hoodie. It has a mohawk of black fuzz on the hood. Black sherpa fleece lines the inside. It's small enough to fit a toddler. I was cleaning out Wesley's closet when I came across it. Andrea bought it for her son. Wesley, my second born, was the fourth kid to wear it. It's too small now. I press it to my face; I can smell Tide detergent and my family. I sit with it for a moment before folding it up and putting it back on the shelf.

June 2011 rainy. I worked outside from the end of April to October. Many afternoons consisted of sitting on an inverted plastic bucket, in the mud, pulling weeds, while rain seeped through the seams of my rainsuit and the pants underneath. I got into a habit of wearing a ball cap that summer, not to prevent sunburns, but to keep the rain from dripping down my forehead, and sneaking behind my safety glasses. I was twenty-four years old that summer and Andrea, my sister, was pregnant with baby number two.

We celebrated Father's Day on Friday that year. We were at Andrea and Steve's house in Lambertson Place. By the way she walked, I could tell that Andrea was getting uncomfortable.

Her beachballed midsection strained her hips. She barely lifted her feet as she walked.

I was getting text messages from my newly ex-boyfriend. I was in love with him and he had commitment issues. He unintentionally tortured me with daily reminders of what I wanted, but couldn't have. I isolated myself, while replying to a text, in Andrea's front entrance. I sat on a refurbished wooden church pew, aggressively thumb typing a response when Andrea came around the corner.

"Scott?" she said.

"Good guess," I answered.

"He just can't quite let go, hey?"

"Which is weird, since he's the one who did the dumping."

Andrea arched her back and blew out.

"How are your hips? Pretty sore?" I asked.

"It's mostly just heavy and tight. Right here," she pointed to both sides on the lower part of her stomach.

"Here," I said. I put my elbows on my knees, pressed my forearms together and held my hands in a cradle-like 'u'. Andrea stood in front of me and set her belly down in my hands.

"Much better," she laughed and the baby bump bounced.

"Hello little boy," I said right to her belly button, "see you soon."

I woke up early on Monday. Too early. I felt hungry and a bit nauseous. I didn't know why I woke up but I sat on the floor of the galley kitchen in my six-hundred-and-fifty square foot apartment eating Frosted Flakes. It was around 5:00 am. I went back to sleep and when my alarm sounded, I turned it off instead of hitting snooze. When I looked at the clock, forty minutes had disappeared. I had to rush to make it to work on time. I pulled into the lot by the quonset and my phone started ringing. It was 7:59 and work started at 8:00. It was my mum. Something was wrong. She wouldn't call at this time.

"Are you at work?"

"Yes, I'm just in my car. Why?"

"Andrea's baby has died."

"What? Where is she? How do they know?"

"She's at the hospital; we're coming to get you."

I hung up and called back immediately.

"Not Anne, the baby boy?"

"Yes, Anne is with Marion."

"Andrea is at the hospital with the baby?"

"She still has to deliver him."

"She hasn't delivered him yet?" Heat plummeted from my chest to my belly button and my legs started trembling. *How is she expected to be able to deliver when she knows he's not living?*

The morning meeting was midway through when I stumbled into the shop. I could hear words but they didn't make sense. Their order seemed nonsensical and disorienting. Suddenly I was standing in front of Rene, my boss. Her eyes wide with concern, flicking back and forth between mine.

"Andrea's baby died. My parents are coming to get me."

Rene, barely reaching five feet tall in her steel toed boots, pulled me into a hug with alarming strength. "Oh god," she said.

My parents picked me up and took me to their house. Together we waited. I sat in my old room and looked through the bookshelf. Out the window my dad was sitting in a deck chair, holding his head in his hands. My mum was laying on the deck. After a month of rain, the sun decided to shine.

I went for a walk. I couldn't wait in the house, it was too quiet, too stifling. I walked down to St Mary's church. I'm not religious but the church's garden has an attractive bench. I sat on the cold stone, a woman, a stroller and a dog passed, visible through the rose gables. *What a nice day they must be having*, I thought bitterly. My phone rang. She had her baby.

We walked into the hospital. My mum was holding both my dad's hand and mine. "This is the worst day of our lives," she said. The narration sounded oddly dramatic, but honest.

Hospitals; joy, sorrow, safety, relief, pain, yearning all shut up in rooms, leaking through windows and doors. We walked into the fog of tragedy through the door with the black angel sticker on it. Unit 25 nurses use the sticker to let staff know what to expect inside.

Andrea looked exhilarated, as if she just completed a marathon. Her long brown hair was tied back, cheeks red and round hazel eyes alert.

“Hi,” she said. “I’m buzzing right now. You get a big rush of endorphins right after birth, so I kind of feel like I’m floating. He’s over there.”

In the corner of the room a wheeled bassinet sat with a small loaf of blankets in it. I didn’t go over right away. I waited for my mum and dad to hug her and then I sat on Andrea’s bed.

“You look weirdly okay, are you okay?” I asked.

“Umm, I don’t know yet. Maybe for now, but I don’t know. You can hold him if you want. He is perfect,” she said, her voice cracking slightly on the word *perfect*.

Nervously, I approached the bassinet. I’d never seen anyone dead before but there he was, perfect but still. I pulled the swaddle down slightly grazing his cheek. Cold but soft. I picked him up and cradled him. Exactly seven pounds. I looked over at Andrea, her expression bemused as if undecided about how to feel. Shock.

My arm twitched slightly, tricking my brain into thinking that he moved. *Be rational, you know what happened*, I reminded myself. This wasn't how it was supposed to go.

Andrea's husband, Steve, came in. He had been making phone calls. My mum asked what the baby's name was.

"His name is Steve. It was going to be Steve. So, it's Steve." he said.

A photographer came to the room. The hospital has one they use for these situations. They know parents will want photos later. My parents and I left, promising to return soon.

My dad drove me to my car after dropping my mum off at home. I had only ever seen him cry once before, when our dog died. He kept clearing his throat and sniffing.

"Poor Andrea," he said from the driver's seat. "I don't think she has any idea how hard this will be." My dad, a bank manager, was rarely emotional. He was kind, but level, he didn't get excited easily so I was startled by his commentary. It was too raw. I was devastated.

When I went back to the hospital Andrea's endorphin rush had clearly ebbed. She had deflated. She sat in her hospital bed cradling Baby Steve, her face blotchy and red.

"I told him I was sorry," she said.

We stayed at the hospital long past visiting hours. Andrea didn't want to leave.

The following days were filled with funeral planning appointments. My mum and I folded up baby blankets, freshly laundered newborn clothes, spit clothes and hid them in closets. Steve took the car seat out of the Subaru after an appointment at Parkland Funeral Home. The next-door neighbour jumped off her step and hurried over.

“Did the baby come?” she asked excitedly. Andrea and I kept walking, quickly, into the house, leaving Steve to explain in the driveway.

The owner of the salon I worked at part time reached out to me later on that day.

“Do you want to come in for some extra shifts over the long weekend to make up some of this time off? I was just thinking your clients might be missing you.”

I was an apprentice hairstylist at the time, with hardly any clientele. Those that I saw regularly were friends of my family and knew what was going on. *Absolutely not*, I thought. *This is a real death. Would you expect me to come back this soon if he had died outside of the womb? As a toddler? A five-year old? How old would he need to be for you to understand that his death has destroyed the people I love most, and me? He was real.* “I don’t think so, sorry,” I said.

I quit two months later.

At the funeral both my dad and I spoke. I wrote a letter to Baby Steve and read it. When it was my dad's turn, I went to sit down but he grabbed onto my arm.

"I'm going to need you to stay up here with me," he said to me and the crowd.

A few months later the headstone arrived, and Andrea set up a little box next to it. She left letters for Baby Steve in the box. One day there was a letter sitting in it that she hadn't written. It said:

Mum

I met a tall man with blue eyes,

He is wise and seems to know you.

He has a happy yellow dog with him.

*The dog has a green ball that he will bring back
every time I throw it*

They both like to swim.

*The man has a little wooden boat and I ride in the
small front seat and it seems like I am flying.*

He says he will look after me

She knew who it was from, but they never talked about it.

I started dating someone new in October that year, a definite rebound. I could tell he was afraid of Andrea. He would hesitate if I said we were going to meet her somewhere, feigning

enthusiasm. He was not a good actor. In some ways he was a convenient distraction. He was totally disconnected from June 21, 2011. I hadn't even known him then. Our relationship was superficial. We circled around trauma, never diving in.

"She's not normally this intense," I told him. "If you met her a year ago you wouldn't be so nervous around her. She's heartbroken and angry."

We broke up after ten months.

Meanwhile, Andrea had been advised by her doctor not to try for a baby again for at least six months, better yet, a year. Whenever we were in public together, I would steer us away from any pregnant women we saw.

"Come with me, I want to show you something." Andrea said one day as she led me down the hallway and into her bedroom. She opened the closet door and pulled out a paper shopping bag from *The Edge*, a store at Bower Mall.

"Ooh, what's that?"

She pulled out the grey hoodie.

"I bought it for my son," she said, "last week. I saw it and it killed me a little bit. I bought it and the lady at the register commented on how cute it was. I don't really know why. I know it's weird because he'll never wear it, and that made me mad, but I got it for him anyway. I don't know what I'll do with it."

"I don't think it's weird."

We both stood in silence for a few moments, holding parts of the sweater. Neither of us made any promises about the future though both were aware of the hope that someday soon another little person might wear it.

“It’s a really cute sweater. I would have bought it too,” I said, knowing it was true.

In January, I knew Andrea was pregnant again before she told us. She found out in the spring that she was having another boy. She had already picked the name “Claire” for a girl. A boy felt too familiar and scared her. She habitually listened to the baby’s heartbeat using a doppler Steve brought home for her. Midway through August her doctor set a date for induction. They wanted her to have the baby early to minimize risk of another placental abruption. A week before the induction we went for lunch and I drove us by the mall.

“I was in Toys R Us the other day,” she said sitting in the passenger seat, “and I saw a train table. If this baby lives, I want to buy it for him.”

“He will,” I said. “He’ll be here. In a week he will be crying and pooping, not sleeping, and driving everyone crazy, but he will be here. Let’s go get the table.”

“Thank you. I haven’t been able to think that. Thank you for saying that.”

“I’m glad you told her that too,” my mum said over the phone later that evening. “I also haven’t been able to think like that yet. It’s so good that you two have each other. I don’t think a lot of siblings have the same connection you two have. There have been times when she’s called me about something and you call right after in almost the same state.” I told my mum about feeling nauseous the morning Andrea had Baby Steve. The pair of us realized that I woke up around the same time she had. I felt sick and she had been bleeding.

Spencer was born on August 31, 2012. My mum called my new salon.

“Hey,” the receptionist called over to me from the front desk. I was halfway through a haircut, “it’s your mom. She wants to tell you, ‘He’s here’.”

“Thank you,” I said smiling.

Spencer is twelve years old now and continues to be obsessed with trains. Anne is fifteen and Billy and Logan are ten and nine. All three boys wore the Quiksilver hoodie before Andrea passed it along to me for my children.

My dad passed away this past summer and Andrea, my mum and I all spoke at his funeral. I told a funny story about him babysitting my cat. My mum shared their love story. I stayed on stage with Andrea when it was her turn. In her speech she read the letter from Baby Steve. She said she never thanked my dad

for giving her son a voice when she needed to hear it. Andrea had given me a copy of her speech to read before the service. Even though I knew what she was about to say I couldn't hold back my tears as she read it out loud. My throat felt sticky as I watched the faces in the crowd reflect the sorrow I felt.

A few weeks later Andrea got another letter from Baby Steve. It said:

Dear Mum,
I met another tall man with blueish-gray eyes
He was buried next to me
He hugged the first tall guy with the blue eyes and
said "It's nice to see you, Dad"
A long time later we watched my little brothers
play
He pointed down at you
I said, "That's my Mum!"
He said, "That's my Big Tootsie."
He said he will help take care of me

Spencer wrote it.