

## The Interruptions of Life with Death

My husband's brother had been sick for a while. In earlier years he claimed he had cancer many times, my husband always said it was just to get attention. But this time it was for real. It took several months, but we finally got the call, he had passed. We packed, notified work, made arrangements for a place to stay, and for someone to take care of the pets. At the end of March, the long trip to North Dakota from Idaho would take 15 hours, but we'd done it so many times before.

I walked to the garage with the last of my things and looked at my daughter's cat, sitting there in the hall. Her fluff filling the walkway. I didn't stop to pet her before we left and I didn't even say "bye kitty," like I always do, I just looked at her and she looked at me, with her yellow eyes, that didn't understand we would be gone for a while. I didn't understand it would be the last time I saw her and I walked out the door.

We stopped at the usual spots along the way to get gas and to get a quick bite to eat, Idaho Falls, Fort Hall, Montana and Billings. At Glendive, Montana we head north into what is now oil country and east to my husband's hometown. A small town, that used to thrive until the boundary of the Indian Reservation was moved to include it. With the North Dakota oil boom it still wasn't thriving, everything was just more expensive.

We pulled into my mother-in-law's driveway, late during the night. Frigid wind and puffy white snowflakes swirling around us as we tried to unload everything from the car and rush into the house before we froze to death. Everyone was still up; this is what my husband's family does when they gather. There were hugs all around and questions, "How was your drive,"

“long,” we always say. We stood around my mother-in-law’s kitchen, groggy from riding in the car and not wanting to sit down, because we had already sat for so long.

We would stay at the next door neighbor’s house; she was a longtime family friend, living next to my mother-in-law for too many years to count. Stomping down to the basement where a mattress on the floor for me and my husband and one for the kids waited for us. Every house in North Dakota has a creepy basement. It’s usually unfinished with a concrete floor and the framing for the ground floor is visible, never covered with sheet rock. These basements are usually used for storage, boxes are stacked along the walls, old toys and Christmas decorations are tucked away in the corners. The stairs to the basement are neck breaking steep, narrow, and made of wood. My little family cautiously maneuvered ourselves and our luggage down into the pitch black, cold room. The lightbulb was in the middle of the ceiling so we waited in the dark for my husband to pull the string and click on the light. We surveyed our home for the next few days and dropped our bags on the dusty floor.

The next evening my daughter called her boyfriend who we had watching the house and the pets at home. I heard her on the phone with him, she was sitting on the makeshift bed on the floor, her head bowed, her long brownish red hair hanging around her face. She spoke in a quiet tone, not wanting me to hear what she was saying. But I could tell she was upset.

“What’s going on,” I said when she had finally said goodbye.

She had tears in her eyes and said, “he can’t find Mercedes.”

“What do you mean?” My voice shaking, but not wanting to sound too alarmed.

“He said she meowed and meowed to go out, so he let her out the back door.” She repeated, “Then when he went to check on her to let her back in, she was gone. He said he looked all over and thinks she jumped over the fence and ran away.”

I sat down on the mattress, put my arms around her and held her close, “Did he look under the patio in the back yard?” I asked.

“Yes,” she said. “And he put her food outside to see if she would come back.”

“I’m sure he’ll find her tomorrow; she’s probably just scared and hiding somewhere close. You know she never goes outside. I’m sure she’s just scared.” I tried to reassure her although I wasn’t sure what to think, this was really unusual. Her fluffy, overweight kitty had never been outside.

I went to bed, laying on the mattress a few feet away from my daughter. The light was still on and I stared at the ceiling of that creepy basement, not really seeing anything while thoughts ran through my head. I thought of that poor little kitty, scared and alone outside somewhere. I thought about the last time I’d seen her and she didn’t know we would be coming back. But she’d never wanted to go outside before. I didn’t understand why she would cry to go outside now. I didn’t know what to think. My eyes finally focused up in the wooden rafters of the ceiling. There were boxes up in the rafters, then I noticed the cobwebs. I could see just a few at first until I realized what they were, then I realized there were hundreds of them. Right above our heads. I didn’t want to think about how many spiders might be in the webs, hopefully they were all dead. They must be all dead, it was still cold out. I didn’t say anything to my daughter, she is mortally terrified of spiders. I turned the light out and tried everything I could to not think about the spider webs above me and to not think about the missing cat.

My brother-in-law’s funeral was strange, but I think all the funeral’s I’ve been to for my husband’s family are strange. His family grew up Catholic, but living on the Indian Reservation, some of the next generation of the family took on some of those traditions. The funeral was in

the small town Catholic Church, then out to the cemetery for burial which would be traditional Indian style.

My mother-in-law sat at the front of the church, we sat further back in the middle of the pews. Her youngest son sat next to her with his arm around her frail shoulders. This was the fourth son she had buried and you could see the wear on her body that went with the tears in her eyes. After the funeral we move to our cars for the long drive out to the cemetery where he would be buried. The family lined their cars up on the brown dirt road that matched the brown grass in the cemetery. We stepped out of our cars into air freezing from the March North Dakota wind and gathered around the hole in the ground where my brother-in-law would be laid to rest. Next to the hole was a high pile of dirt with several shovels sticking up from the reddish brown ground. A few prayers and the coffin was lowered into the ground, we all stood around then, not sure what to do. Then a few friends from the tribe began to slowly fill throw dirt from the pile into the hole, making the sickening noise of heavy dirt hitting the coffin. We stood in the cold, the wind whipping through blankets we held around us, then my husband got fed up and jumped on the dirt pile, getting to work. Picking up the pace, the remaining brothers shoveled until the job was done.

We had packed our bags for the trip home, leaving directly from the cemetery and not returning to the church for the meal after the service. So we began to say our goodbye, but in my husband's family it's never goodbye, it's always "see you next time". Making the rounds, I said "see you later" to brothers and sisters-in-law, nieces and nephews and others. I saw my mother-in-law sitting in a car with her heavy coat hunched up around her neck. I thought about going and saying goodbye, and telling her I was sorry she lost another child, that we weren't going to stay and spend time with her, but I froze. I didn't want the hassle; I didn't want to put on the

false face and go through all the goodbye motions. It's not that I didn't like my mother-in-law, or didn't care about her, it was just that I looked at her differently than her children and grandchildren did. They saw her as a saint, as the rock of the family, they still do and maybe she was. But I saw her as a mother-in-law, who wasn't always nice to me or nice to her children and even though she was in failing health at this point in her life, I just couldn't bring myself to speak to her. But I did watch my husband say goodbye to his mother, he talked about seeing her in August for her 85<sup>th</sup> birthday, part of the "see you next time" ritual, him saying we would all see her again for her birthday. She didn't answer him, she wouldn't commit to August.

We loaded in our car and pulled through the cemetery. I saw her one more time, still sitting in the car. She hadn't gotten out the whole time we were there, it was too cold for her. As we drove by I looked right at her, she turned her head and looked me straight in the eyes. Those grey cloudy eyes, full of sadness, but with the look of determination, of a woman who was done with the sadness and loneliness. I returned the steely look realizing she was sending me a message; she didn't ever want to do this again. She wasn't going to bury another child. I looked at her and understood, I would never see her again.

We started our long trip back to Idaho, more tired than we were on the first trip. We stopped at the usual places for food and gas, at Glendive we headed west to Billings, Fort Hall and south to Idaho Falls and finally Boise. Exhausted when we got home, we still looked for the cat, under the back patio, shining the flashlight and calling her name, but I knew there was no way we would find her in the dark, she was gone.

The next several days we tried to get back to normal, Easter was coming up and my family gets together for a huge Easter egg hunt every year. We put up signs for the cat and looked around the neighborhood. We checked the Humane Society to see if anyone had found

her and got ready for the Easter holiday. My husband called his mom every day, but her declining health got worst. Easter came and went, we didn't ever find the cat and within ten days of my brother-in-law dying, my mother-in-law passed away in a hospital in Fargo.

We packed our bags in the car and headed from Idaho to my husband's small hometown in North Dakota. This time in early April. We stopped at the usual places for gas and food, Idaho Falls, Fort Hall and Billings. At Glendive we headed north, then east back into that brown, dreary, still wintery oil country. We pulled into my mother-in-law's driveway, late at night and were greeted by all the same family we had seen not so long ago. We would stay at the next door neighbors house again, in the same creepy basement with the same steep rickety old stairs. I found myself laying on the mattress on the cold concrete floor, staring up at all the same horrible spider webs covering the ceiling. Squeezing my eyes shut, trying to ignore what might be creeping and crawling right above me, I couldn't believe I was back in this nightmare again.

I've always thought my birthdays were cursed. Especially the milestone birthdays. When I turned 20, my college roommate kicked me out of our apartment. My 30<sup>th</sup> birthday was spent on a harrowing road between Idaho Falls and Billings, Montana during a white out blizzard, driving my car with my two small children behind my husband in a box truck on our way to deliver furniture to Billings for my husband's job. Now I would turn 40 years old at my mother-in-law's funeral.

The morning of the funeral was miserable outside. Typical North Dakota weather, freezing wind blowing snow sideways. We frantically tried to get ready, sharing the neighbor's shower and small bathroom with several other relatives. I was trying to get myself ready along with two kids. My young son would be a pall bearer, but he needed a tie. We borrowed one from his cousin, which belonged to her father, the man we had buried two weeks earlier. My husband

didn't tell me happy birthday, but I guess I can let that go. After all he was burying his mother, the saint, the rock of the family.

This funeral was still strange, but a very typical Catholic funeral. With all the ritual of a funeral mass. We sat in the first several rows of the church this time with the rest of the family gathered closer. There were songs and tears, many Kleenex's were passed around. At a typical Catholic mass, there is a lot of standing and sitting and kneeling. I was not raised Catholic, but after a few weddings and funerals, I was able to follow along fairly well. I was still uncomfortable during the part when the priest says, "Peace be with you" and the congregation returns, "and also with you". Then you greet each person around you the same way with a handshake, even if they are a stranger. It was still awkward with these relatives I had known for so long, who were so sad and grieving.

I turned to one of my brothers-in-law standing behind me and said, "Peace be with you." I held out my hand. He took my hand and pulled me into a hug, "Happy Birthday," he said.

"Thank you," I choked out and he held me in the hug a little longer.

The weather was not better when we left the church to go to the cemetery. I think it was worst. We huddled next to the casket in the freezing snow and rain, this small clump of family, my husband's brothers and sisters and their families, sticking it out in the cold to bury their mother and grandmother. They played an old country song on an old boom box tape player and cried. No one lingered at the cemetery though, we had to get out of the cold.

We left the next day, back through Montana then Idaho. Stopping at the same places for gas and food, Glendive, Billings. At White Hall, we stopped for gas and ran into the convenience store to use the restroom and gather supplies for the rest of the trip. My husband and I both sitting back in the car at the same time, backs sore from sitting so long, I turned to look at him, "I

made the doughnuts,” I said and smiled. We both gave a weary laugh and carried on, driving to Idaho Falls and on to Boise. Back to our normal lives that are never really normal again after such a loss.

When we got back, we still looked for my daughter’s kitty, but by that time it had been several weeks, and we hadn’t had enough time at home to really put in a good search. We didn’t ever find her and we never knew what exactly happened. My daughter was devastated. My husband was grieving and trying best to get back to work. In the years to come I feared the date of my birthday would always haunt him as the anniversary of the day he buried his mother. This fear was true for the first few years after his mother died. I also feared my milestone birthdays would always be cursed. The next milestone actually turned out to be one of the best birthdays of my life so far, even though I turned 50 in the midst of a worldwide pandemic.

I look back at this time and all the travel and all the grief, my biggest fear was not realized as the loss of my mother-in-law, but the fear my husband would ever know I was not as impacted by this loss as much as he would expect me to be. I know he was devastated just as my daughter was for her loss. But I think I was more impacted by the loss of my daughter’s kitty than the loss of my mother-in-law, something I hope my husband never realizes.