

How We Grow into Loss

written by Guest Contributor | August 29, 2018



Happiness is the privilege of presence. I have this unrelenting habit (or maybe personality) where I either need good things to be over, or that in the middle of good things, I am stuck thinking about the next thing, already. I skip to endings before beginnings begin. I am never in the right tense. I see everything with the pretense, or perhaps premonition, of loss. I make everything the sigh of past-tense, as in *already lost*. Sometimes I want to skip whole experiences, get to the end part, where it's over and I can look back with nostalgia or void or reverence. I know loss, I am good at it. I know sadness, I am good at it. I don't know what to do with happiness, so I kill it prematurely.

And yet, there are the days when I feel joy in such a way that I want to become the air, looking out over some panorama of earth and weeping out of pure awe and wonder, or the ones where simple things—writing in a coffee shop, dancing in my living room with my best friend as we become electric circuits for the music, cooking haphazardly and out-spread, where adoration and love and their expressions of it are urgent—make me feel the lifespan of a moment. And I think, maybe, I can just be here. Maybe, this is what it is like.

And then there is the question of genesis. Where did this habit come from? Why do I do this? Feel this?

I started taking anti-depressants when I was eleven years old. I remember many hours spent on the faded cottage furniture of the waiting room during my mother's (so-far) 3 decades of therapy sessions. My grandmother tried to kill herself three times and each time decided against it, rattled, regretful hands dialing 9-1-1, empty pill bottles between thighs on the carpet. What great swallow of pain got her there and what on Earth or in the cosmic beyond sparked her to not become a loss, herself? Is this the history and future into which I was born, or is my personal affliction from something else, entirely?

I am not wholly convinced it can be tracked, tacked down as the parent's separation, the illness, the abandonment(s), the addiction(s), the break up, the assault, the funeral. Each time I braced for impact or insult. Each time I thought I wasn't gonna make it to the next year. Each time I was completely

alone. All these topical transgressions, some silos, some patterns. I believe it to be something deeper, inside me so thoroughly one might mistake it for an accent, or a shadow. This knowing. Of something coming.

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"I'm going to get milk, be back in 10 minutes," my mom announced.

Some time later, I stood shaking in my brother's room staring at the clock, counting the minutes, the space between when she said she'd be home and the hot, heightened now. I was overwhelmed by the unquestionability of facts. The store was right around the corner, two driveways' walk. 45 minutes had passed. I was convinced she was dead. I saw dropped quarters chiming against the sidewalk, splashed open milk cartons, a struggle.

I told this to a friend once and laughed, said it must have been due to all the *Law & Order* my parents used to watch, and, by extension, that I'd absorbed. That "DUNDUN" sound haunted the shit out of me. But the truth came in the caught breath after the chuckle.

There were many nights like this. I'd had violent images burned into my mind. Once, my mom told me the story of Matthew Sheppard, young gay man, stalked and murdered, sprawling across a farm post in Wyoming, set on fire. Once, with tears in her eyes, she told me of women raped and killed simply for the enticement of their bodies, whole villages burned down. My mother is gay. My mother is a woman. Sometimes my small town felt like it was on fire. And so death was not a question, rather simply that of when. Death bewildered me, I saw so much of myself in it. I had a habit of imagining my death and those of the people I loved in the dark hush of my bed before sleep found me (No wonder it always took so long).

I was 8 years old. Later, I found out she was getting high, crouched among the veil of tall grass near the creek in the far back of our landlord's yard.

During that time, my life always felt in lack, about what we didn't have. Enough milk, cable, money for new clothes, safety (or the perception of it), rent this month, a vacation planned, some semblance of family, traditions. When you are ruled by lack everything becomes about insecurity, uncertainty, comparison. I think my moms were always searching, too.

My mom in drugs, lovers, get-rich-quick schemes, and hurt. My mama in partners, different states, parenthood at a distance, and silence.

Growing up gay means nothing is given or a given. Not family, a house on some cul-de-sac, a great love, children, a job, next year, any time at all. Only this knowledge.

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Sometimes we'd had what seemed to be the entire lesbian community of Connecticut in our living room for some Super Bowl party or summer potluck. I don't have enough fingers to count the number of times I'd been dragged to somebody's friend's partner's get-together-something of a small town stranger, lugging a red pleather cooler, my mom with her fold out chairs, my brother and I, ornaments in the background of some search for connection, belonging.

Butch, femme, leather jackets, denim that smelled of smoke, clutching beers and hands to chests. Their relationships all seemed like a game of musical chairs. One gathering, these two together, the next some kind of swap had occurred, every time the same jumbled group. One always named Jan, Janice, or Janet, always a Brenda, Debbie. Viewing this at 15 I'd found it pathetic, laughable, almost. Didn't these women know how to be alone and why couldn't they be? I won't be like that (Will I?).

These strange gatherings behind closed garage doors or carefully laid off back porches were both exciting and terrifying. Part of me felt a quiet pride, part of me was absolutely unnerved that this might be what my own future would look like. Where else did we exist if not in this room? Were there more of us? Or is this all who's left? How do we know how to grow old when this is the first generation who's even had the prospect?

My vision of gay people living in the world, living at all, started and ended with the women in those spaces, my parents and their peers. I couldn't see any age after that (Many of those women have since died, caught in a middle age).

The dissonance between weekends once every several months like this and the hellish isolation of high school was astounding. I used to love school, but not anymore. Well, I still loved school, rather it was the people I'd grown to hate. And they hated me. The gay girl with gay moms, of course they did. I was nothing they knew how to understand, let alone like.

"There's nothing we can do about it," smirked the Vice Principal of my high school.

My mother snapped at him. I was too busy trying to keep a welling cry taut in my throat.

"Sometimes the police can get involved in these matters, but usually that is after a suicide or greater crime has occurred," he justified.

He didn't look me in the eyes. Maybe he would see too much of his children in my awkward, frenzied body. Or worse, on the sending end of the pages and pages of printed out anonymous messages I'd received, telling me, in various ways all the reasons I needed to kill myself, how disgusting I am, the faggot family.

My favorite book at the time was *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (Shocking). I spent a lot of time watching, waiting, taking everything in. I knew what I was in for. I'd seen it. In my parents, those women circled in somebody's house, brought together by desperation. I, too, was desperate. To be seen and to be invisible, to get the fuck out of there, to overcome, to forget. I knew what I was in for. It was always looming. I lived and operated from that central knowing. This haunting. This something of a monster, out there, coming for me. How do you grow into loss?

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After work, my coworkers and I go out to dinner, find ourselves laughing on the outdoor patio of a restaurant I can't remember the name of. We eat, drink, lit up by string lights, our bodies pressed into unyielding frames of aluminum chairs.

We make lists and reminisce. Display what we are supposed to, the typical topics of conversation. We think we are doing things right, if only for the craft cocktails and overtly placed succulents. The waiter presents a rainbow-ed list of June happy hour drinks. They think this progressive, celebratory.

Someone takes a picture, that will later be hashtagged with something mediocre and annoyingly trite.

It all feels a little false. Premeditated. Performative. This is all a performance. Dinner and Pride. But there is love here, too.

I walk home alone and nearly lose my breath when a firefly lights itself on fire. Something in me tells me to run, hurl my body forward into the purple air. This blistering twilight, this hot, not yet night.

I enter the hollow of my studio, set down my bag, take off my bra. Stand fixed to the window through which I slip into the envelope of blackening night.

I skipped Pride this year, but still call my friends to wish them a happy one.

"Did you go?"

"I did . . . and I wish I hadn't. You know, it's just hard."

"I know. Sometimes, I feel like I hate it."

“Vibes. Maybe this is stupid, but I feel like I need to post a picture of myself there to show everyone I’m happy and like I’ve made it or something, especially since things haven’t been going so well for me. I feel like I have nothing to show for my life and I’m gonna be 25 like what the fuck.”

“You don’t have to. You shouldn’t.”

“What were you saying before, though, something about time.”

“Oh. Yeah, I don’t know. I’ve been reflecting on why feeling like I’ve wasted time these past few years since graduation has had me so anxious, and I think it’s because I’ve always seen my time as something that was extremely limited. Honestly, I’ve always had a hard time picturing myself living out a whole life.”

“What do you mean?”

“I guess, it’s not that I didn’t see myself having a future in terms of being successful or whatever, more that I honestly just didn’t see myself *IN* the future. I couldn’t picture myself truly experiencing joy and love and reason or settling into a particular lifestyle or a life in general. I’ve never been able to really see myself past my mid-twenties. Partially because I always had this strange feeling since I was a child that I was going to die young, but I think also because I couldn’t see myself in anyone older than me, not even my parents. Visibility is so deeply important and for some reason I just never really felt like I could see my full self in the people around me or out in the world—gay, survivor, someone who overcame a childhood disease, someone who fought depression, a witness to and victim in abusive familial relationships, etc. I saw bits and pieces of myself but never my whole self and I got to thinking that I’d had too much baggage, too much darkness, too many complications to really live out a life.”

“Wow. Yeah. I really feel you. Say more about that.”

“Well, even today I can’t really yet see myself growing old. I can’t even see myself into middle age let alone waddling my saggy ass around a porch (idk why but I see an inherent relationship between older people and porches). I can’t see that far down the line, but what I do know, now, is that I want to get there. I want my ass to sag someday! I want to live. I want to live, and

that, in itself, is a great victory, because I know what it's like to not really want that. You know what I mean? I hope I'm not alone in all these weird feelings about the future. I'm not sure I've ever really shared this so honestly with anyone."

"Haha, same! Really, though. And I'm glad you want to, boo. I think I'm finally at the place where I do, too."

"Yes! It's crazy, but lately, I've been having these moments where I feel like my heart is literally expanding, and it makes me lose my breath. Like when I'm looking out the window on the bus, late in bed by myself, walking out of my apartment. Nothing even special about the moments. I don't know how to describe it, but it feels like my future stretching out in front of me. Like my time here, alive, is growing. And I can see the faint beginnings of something. Thanksgivings and poetry nights and work achievements and friends' birthdays and all of it, all of it mixing together, coming together. It's coming together, right here in front of me. It takes the breath right out of me. I don't know. Maybe the best way to explain hope is being able to see yourself in the future, for time being both finite and boundless, and you, come undone and eager for more. What's coming for me and what I'm coming for."

The next day, I am lethargic with the routine of circumstance and the vastness of prospect. I pull out my phone, open Instagram, see a bright, smiling picture, floats behind, glitter on her face. Posted one hour ago. I comment: one purple heart emoji.

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My very existence had to be fought for, paid in cash, injected. My life was calculated. I do not identify with rainbows or pride or coming out of the closet. I was born into the swinging of that open door, everything irrevocably changed and changing. I'm embittered by the singularity of those narratives, resent their weight and responsibility, their positing of shame, and am alienated, how they assume the finality of suffering, as if pain begins and ends in one or the other.

I identify with something else. The heart race of anticipation. Struggle as a verb. Imminence. What is impending. The knowing.

Yes, love is love. But it's not always that simple, that equatable. I look at my moms. I look at my friends. I look at myself.

Our love is in the marrow, our love is a glow, a beam, a light source of some sort, our love is the termite that won't die but prettier (or maybe not), our love has knuckles and wingspan and blood in the mouth, has us cradled in its claw, in its ribbed cavern, our breath, a pulse.

We live in the duality of everything, the looming and the grace, doom and dawn, fist and caress, the desperation of it all and, too, being found.

Our history is in broken bottles, our future, also glass, capable of crushing, opaque in someone else's hands, and yet able to hold so much, refract the light.

We have always been alive.

I am, still.



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