

Happiness (an excerpt)

“Man is fond of counting his troubles, but he does not count his joys...”
– Fyodor Dostoevsky

My husband and I talk about death. A lot. We aren’t old—he is fifty-six; I have just turned fifty-two. And for the most part we are in good health. We run a couple of miles a couple of times a week. We go to the gym. We eat a healthy diet—low carb, low fat, low sugar.

And yet.

Lying in bed holding hands, the room dark but for the glow of our reading lamps, we talk about how devastating it will be for whoever is left behind when one of us dies. I’m never sure how we stumble into this conversation, but we do, night after night, the conversation seemingly coming from nowhere. My husband walks from the bathroom, brushing his teeth. “I’ll be crushed if anything happens to you,” he says. “I don’t have any plans that don’t include you.”

Or: “I don’t want to live without you,” I might tell him as I empty the dishwasher the next morning. I set his favorite mug--orange inside, black outside, Harley Davidson logo on the front--next to the coffee maker, and in the midst of this routine ordinary action, it will occur to me that if anything happens to him, even this small task will be unbearable, although what frightens me even more than *my* being alone is the thought that I’ll die first and *he’ll* be alone. Who will take care of him? Who will know him and love him as completely as I do?

He calls me “Best.” It started as “MariBest” instead of “Maribeth” but got shortened. “Hey, Best,” he says on the phone. “What time are you coming home?” Or to his kids: “Let’s see what Best is planning for dinner.”

“*Best?*” my sister teased when she first heard him call me this. “I’m not so sure I like that *she’s* ‘Best.’”

“Well, I can’t call her ‘Better,’” my husband laughed. “Besides, for me, she is the best.”

I think I rolled my eyes. He also calls me “Creature” and “Kid” and “Love” and “Sweet Pea” and sometimes, “Dude,” or “Man.”

But “Best” is my favorite.

I tell him that if I die first I want him to get a dog and name it Best. Neither of us likes dogs much—we don’t have a dog, don’t plan to get one, but my death, he says, is the one scenario where he can see getting a dog. “I’ll need a companion,” he says. I think of the Jesse Stone made-for-TV movies starring Tom Selleck that we both love. Selleck plays Jesse, a down-and-out alcoholic cop who still grieves for his ex-wife. The movies contain

numerous scenes of Selleck, late at night, sitting alone in his darkened house, nursing a glass of scotch, finishing it, pouring another, as his dog stares at him with soulful and reproaching eyes. That's the kind of dog Best will be, I think. That's the kind of man my husband will become without me.

Sometimes we make calculations: just twenty more years, we agree. He'll be 76—*only* 76! I'll be 72. Twenty years. It's not that much to ask, is it? Sometimes we are filled with regret. Why couldn't we have met sooner? I was already 45 the snowy morning he walked into a Starbucks, where I was writing, and asked if he could buy me a coffee. He was about to turn 50. But if we'd met when we were younger, he wouldn't have had his children, which is unfathomable to him. He had them late. He was 37 when Gillian was born, 40 when Teddy was born. He'd always wanted to be a dad. He talks on the phone to Gillian, who is twenty now, every night and some of his happiest moments are when sixteen-year-old Teddy is home with his posse of friends. "The wildebeasts are here," my husband whispers as the boys rampage through the kitchen in search of food, leaving the refrigerator a carcass of empty shelves by morning.

My husband's voice softens around his kids. I listen to him console Gillian on the phone when she's had a difficult day, and sometimes, I'll wake late at night and hear him in the kitchen, scrambling eggs for Teddy and his pals, the low timber of his voice as he asks about their college plans, what they want to become once they finish school. He wouldn't have had this had we met when we were younger, I think. We met as soon as we possibly could. He'd been divorced from his children's mother for two years. And I, after my own failed marriages, was single again. Still, no matter how much time we will have, it seems miniscule against what it could have been.

I know that part of our fear stems from the fact that Victor has juvenile diabetes. And even though the technology for managing the disease gets better and better—he now wears a pod on his arm that delivers the insulin by remote control, this neither cures the disease nor protects him from any of the all-too-common effects--kidney failure, blindness, heart attack. We both know the statistics: Men with Type 1 diabetes lose about eleven year's worth of life expectancy compared to men without the disease. I ponder this as we make our calculations. Do I ask that he live until he's 88, knowing I'll only get him until he's 77? I think about this. I do. As if my asking or hoping or wanting has any bearing.

Part of our fear of death also comes from the fact that Victor is a cop. Despite living in a small town with a winter population of only 1200, a quaint beach resort originally founded as a Methodist church camp, where there is very little violent crime; where in the summers when the town swells with tourists, a vast number of tickets are

written for such things as riding one's bicycle on the sidewalk, skateboarding, or having a dog on the beach, his job is still dangerous. We are two hours from Philadelphia, from Baltimore, from DC and it takes only one angry person with a gun to forever change our lives. Every time I hear of another police shooting—and it's become commonplace to hear of one every week, and often they *do* happen in little towns like ours--something goes quiet in me.

But neither of these are the main reasons we have become so afraid.

It's because we are happy, and this happiness feels fragile, an egg we are balancing on a teaspoon.

"I love our life," I tell him. "I love our home." We live in a modest ranch-style house next to a cornfield, and it is as we are pulling into the long gravel drive, returning from the gym, from the grocery store, something so achingly ordinary, that I hear myself say this. *I love our life*. It stuns me sometimes--that I *can* say this. I feel lucky and blessed—a word I've never used before, a word that feels foreign on my tongue. Who am I to feel *blessed*, to be *blessed*? Why should I be given such happiness? Given. As if it had been bestowed upon me. I know better. I know my meeting Victor that day in the Starbucks was a random occurrence. How easily I might not have been there that morning. How easily he might not have been. "The odds against us are endless/ our chances of being alive together/statistically nonexistent," the poet Lisel Mueller writes in "Alive Together." It is all so random, the word itself--*happiness*--sharing the same root as the words for *happenstance*, *haphazard*, *perhaps*. And just as there is no reason or rationale for my finding happiness so there will be no reason or rationale for its loss. One of us will most likely die before the other. A random cell multiplying silently even as we lie in bed, holding hands and laughing quietly as the wildebeests tear through our kitchen. Or a random bullet. A slick patch of icy road, a drunk driver, an accident.

It's not true that you never know what you have until you lose it.

I know.

But how do I write about this? About happiness? And who wants to read it? There is no drama, no plot, no story, moments like snowflakes melting the minute I try to hold them. My husband getting off a twelve-hour night shift, face shadowed with stubble as he flashes me a peace sign when he sees me waiting in the car to pick him up; the two of us in the kitchen in our PJs mid-day, making black bean soup, snow spiraling past the windows; trying to teach ourselves to box-step in our living room, staring at our feet and counting our steps. Sometimes as I am reading next to him in bed, he'll just stare at me for no reason except, as he tells me, because he loves looking at my face.

It's distracting and annoying and I hold up my book to block his view.

But I am happy.

Still, it feels like a kind of flaunting, a showing off. I think of how years ago, as Victor and I waited to board a plane, a woman in line behind us commented, “I hope to God I don’t end up sitting with you two. You’re so in love it makes me sick.” She was joking, of course, and we’d laughed with her, but it was a curious statement. It’s not as if we’d been engaged in public displays of affection. In fact, I’d been helping him study for his sergeant’s exam, asking questions from the text he’d brought with him, sometimes touching his arm to stop him, laughing as we devised silly word associations to help him remember the various court cases. *Garner v. Tennessee*; *Graham v. Connor*. “Crackers,” I’d say to get him to remember Graham. “S’mores!”

I think of this now and wonder if perhaps it is in poor taste to talk of one’s happiness in the same way that I was always taught it was gauche to discuss money. Or maybe, as the novelist Graham Swift once said in an interview, “Happiness is fine. But it’s rather boring.”

Everyone knows that happy families are alike, after all; it’s the unhappy ones that are interesting.

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