

**TW: Suicide attempt,
suicidal ideation,
grief and depression.**

Jane

I splashed cold water on my face and gazed at my reflection in the medicine cabinet mirror. I watched droplets travel down my cheek to my chin; my eyes fixated on a droplet clinging to the edge of my chin as if falling wasn't an option.

Focusing on the droplet was better than thinking about other things, including the stabbing pain in my shoulders that threatened my lower back whenever I leaned over. There was no hiding the dark circles under my eyes from nightmares that plagued me night after night.

At the corners of my eyes, crows' feet were getting deeper and deeper. More and more white and gray hairs were peppering my brown roots; the first streak of gray shooting across my scalp the day my best friend, Mary, passed away. The others arrived courtesy of the COVID-19 pandemic.

On good days, I chased after my boys and carried heavy groceries, the straps of the grocery bags digging into my palms as I hurried inside the house before the bags ripped.

On bad days, my eyelids were so heavy it was near impossible to focus, let alone finish a single task.

I stare at the droplet of water still clinging to my chin. It was stupid, really. But, for some reason watching the droplet willed me hold on: pretend I was normal.

“Damn,” I said, watching the droplet fall onto the floor with a gentle splat right between my bare feet.

I took a deep breath and held it until my lungs burned. Then, I reached for a towel and dried my face. Jack and Angus would wake up soon and race around until I *made* breakfast, a bowl of dry Honey Nut Cheerios. Jack, 8, had autism and a food aversion. It was dry Honey Nut Cheerios, or a tantrum that would throw my entire day off kilter.

No one, it seemed, had a clue about how much energy and willpower it took to take care of Jack and Angus, 6.

I was stepping back from the sink, when Jack and Angus whooshed past the bathroom and stomped down the stairs.

“Brush your teeth, please.” I sounded exhausted because I was.

They raced back upstairs.

“Hey, watch it!” Jack said.

“I can’t see myself in the mirror. Make Jack move.”

Jack groaned.

“Mom,” Angus wailed.

“Please, brush your teeth. Your grandmother will be here soon.”

“Fine.” The boys said in unison, and quickly brushed their teeth, and raced downstairs to be the first in front of the TV.

A minute later, I poured Honey Nut Cheerios in a big blue bowl and placed it between them.

“Thanks,” Angus said, his brown eyes never moving away from the TV screen.

“Sure thing,” I said.

Just then I heard my mother’s car pull up. She was taking the boys to her house for a sleepover. I braced myself before opening the door. My mother...as much as I loved her, was a lot to take sometimes.

“Hey, Mom.” I was wearing my best smile. The smile that fools everyone into thinking I am normal, not on the verge of a mental breakdown.

“Hey, sweetie. How are you?”

“Fine.”

I’d gotten good at lying. Good at getting my smile just right. Not too small, not too wide, otherwise they’d know I was faking. Never show all of my teeth. Make sure my smile reached my eyes. Made me look sincere. Not like a deer in headlights...a dead giveaway. Keep my voice soft...casual. Above all, breathe evenly, knowing I’d be asked a bunch of questions they already knew the answers to.

The truth: nobody wanted to know how I was doing. No one knew how to handle the sadness, depression and grief I was feeling. Add in, death, darkness, vulnerability. No one wanted to talk about that stuff. Despite all the questions, no one *really* wanted to hear why I never took the boys with me to family gatherings, or anywhere.

“You see,” I would begin, “I need to make sure there won’t be a lot of people because crowds make Jack uncomfortable and could trigger a tantrum. Then, I need to make sure there

won't be strong scents or weird textures, because even though Jack won't eat...he doesn't want to see, smell, or be near food.”

“Oh,” was the usual response.

Trust me, it was easier to stay home.

Anytime I tried to explain how lonely I felt, people nodded and made sounds like “Hmm” or “Tsk”. Or said, “That’s a shame” or “You should talk to someone about that.” It was easier to pretend that everything was *fine*.

My mother tapped my arm. “Are you sure you want the boys to stay over?”

“Yeah,” I said with a nod.

Her hazel eyes softened. My mother was so predictable. Like clockwork, she said, “The Lord detests lying lips, but he delights in those who tell the truth. Proverbs, twelve twenty-two.”

I tried not to roll my eyes.

“I need a breather, mom. Please don’t start with the bible quotes. You know how I feel.”

“Then don’t give me reason to worry. You never asked me to keep the boys overnight. I don’t think you should be alone. Why don’t you call one of your friends to keep you company?”

Suddenly, my mother looked much older than her sixty-eight years.

“I’ll be okay.” Another lie.

“It’s been over a year and you haven’t gone out on a single date. Don’t you want to see what’s out there?”

Here we go again, I thought. She thinks a man is going to magically fix all of my problems and make me happy. At this stage in my life, I really doubt there’s anyone with that power.

“Mom...I’m a forty-year-old widow with two boys. I’m overweight, weird and depressed. No one...absolutely NO ONE is going to want me. Men want a girlfriend that’s shiny, happy and new. I’m none of these categories.”

Mom shook her head. “Your sons are brilliant...they have their *quirks*. But, you are the most wonderful daughter in the world. Any man who doesn’t see your charms is a damned fool. You’ve got to stop being so negative. You’re fine...just a little sad. Nothing a nice man can’t fix.”

I smiled. I knew my mother was just being a mom. She would’ve been horrified if she knew I wasn’t interested in dating men at this point in life. I’ve known I was bisexual since I was seventeen years old. The only man I was ever interested in spending my life with was Calvin. After he passed away, I couldn’t imagine being with another man.

Besides, the single men in town were just *okay*. I didn’t want to settle. I wanted someone different...special.

But how was I supposed to tell my God-fearing mother I was attracted to men AND women? How was I supposed to tell my family?

Coming out as a forty-year-old widow? I’d rather get struck by lightning a hundred times.

But still.... I couldn’t help but wonder, what if? My thoughts drifted to a woman who went to my coffee shop. She made my stomach flip and my heart jump at the mere sight of her blue eyes, as clear as a cloudless day, and sandy blonde curls that grazed her shoulders. I wanted was wrap a curl around my finger to see if her hair was as soft as it looked.