

A New Mother's Meditation on Grief

This time, one year ago I was grieving. My grief was messy and big and it scared me. I had lost one of my closest friends, suddenly, painfully and the loss tore through my heart like it was made of tissue paper. I spent months alternately grieving and then suppressing that grief. I mostly grieved in private, lying prone and weeping on the couch while my husband was in his office, sneaking off to the bathroom at work to cry and soaking my pillow in the dark while I was supposed to be sleeping. This terrible, sharp feeling was big and when I started crying I worried that I wouldn't be able to stop.

The peaks of my grief were punctuated with valleys, very short at first, mere minutes or hours, then days, weeks. These were the valleys of numbness. When I finally did manage to stop crying, to stop feeling his loss as acutely as an injury, I did my best to carry on in the world, to hide from the heavy wave, lest I again be drowned in it. This meant that during the times I appeared "normal" or "functional"; at work, spending time with friends, visiting family, I could feel an invisible hand inside me pressing, pressing down on my feelings, willing them to mute themselves.

I could not reliably separate my grief from my joy or my curiosity or my love so this invisible hand suppressed all of them alike. The numb valleys of my grieving were a respite from sadness but they were also void of any other emotion. I knew this was probably not healthy, but I was glad of it. I was relieved not to feel frightened by the enormity of my feelings, even if it meant that the world now existed in shades of gray. I could not be alone with my thoughts. If I were alone, if I were reflective, I would then make visible that invisible hand and all of the troubles that it lay heavy upon, that it had been protecting me from. I distracted myself as best I could with television, books, conversation, alcohol, work, anything to avoid a moment of silence. This strategy was mostly effective and when my grief snuck up on me in moments when my vigilance had relaxed I grew adept at swallowing it hard, banishing it back behind the stone wall I'd built around my heart.

In the early months of the year following Jason's death, two very important things happened: I became pregnant and the world fell victim to a global pandemic. I lost my job and we were, all of us, forced into our homes. I was quarantined in a tiny apartment, growing a tiny human, and living a much tinier life. You'd think this would cause me to become more introspective but if there's anything that can occupy your mind to distraction it's preparing for a baby.

I spent the next ten months reading, shopping, cleaning, nesting, organizing, taking classes and preparing as best as I could for the new life that was waiting in the wings of my body. This was a perfect distraction because it needed doing and it took up almost all of my brain space. Still, when I thought about the baby, or felt him kick, or imagined our future together, I was still perceiving through that veil, the

protective film I'd wrapped myself in. Intellectually I was excited, but I couldn't fully *feel* it after purposefully making my feelings inaccessible to myself for so long. Even this impending blessing was just another long stretch in the valley of numbness. I didn't admit this to anyone but my husband who comforted me and told me not to worry. We decided that our son's middle name would be Jason.

My son, Oskar Jason, is now just over two months old, and something miraculous has happened. From the moment we came home from the hospital following his delivery, I felt that his entrance into the world had torn a hole through that stony gate I had so carefully constructed around my grief. At the same time as his little body had stretched my own to its limits to give him life, there was a mirrored event happening on the spiritual plane. Just as his crowning head had coaxed wide a small opening inside my body, so his arrival had forced open the aperture of my heart. Looking at his puffy little face I felt, for the first time in a year, joy so powerful I wept. The first time he smiled at me, the first time he cooed or giggled, gazing at him while he slept, I was suddenly a fountain of joy and I cried all the time to release it!

But riding in on the same wave of joy were other feelings that I'd worked very hard to avoid: grief, fear, a deep, keening sadness for the impermanence of every good thing. The strength of my love for Oskar was matched by a fear of all the ways in which this world could hurt him, like it had hurt Jason long after he had left his mother's care. My great joy at his every new milestone was met with a great sadness in the knowledge that he would never again be this small, or need me this much. From the moment of his birth he was already in the process of learning to leave me. This is both proper and right and also terribly sad.

I used to worry that once I started crying, I wouldn't be able to stop. Maybe that is partially true. I now find myself crying much more often; not only at events in my own life, but those in others, or those imagined or those yet to come. I cry at things that are too sweet for words, at things that are holy and mundane, every time I see an act of kindness or a new baby or someone in need. My empathy is dialed up to eleven and I cry as if the tears I refused to shed last year had been saved up for this.

My husband thinks it's sweet. He says it's because I clearly love our son so much. My mother and my sister (who went before me into motherhood) say that this happened to them as well and that the change is irreversible; I will forever be softer and more permeable, more susceptible to the primal fears and joys of being human. So this is, in fact, what is really meant when it is said that "mothers worry". I've begun to wonder if this isn't what being an adult truly is: the ability to detect the complex. Children are innocent because they can feel "pure" emotions, one at a time. As an adult, every emotional experience now contains an echo of its opposite.

Now sometimes, on nights when I nurse my sleepy boy and I think about Jason's mother and how, many years ago, she did the same for him; blissful and trusting and full of hope for his life...I cry. I cry because I feel love, fear, grief, gratitude, joy and sorrow in equal measure. I cry freely in those quiet moments because I am no longer afraid. The loss of Jason and the birth of Oskar have worked together to show me that grief and love are two streams from the same source. I can physically feel how they come from the same place, the same ache inside me. They are alternately painful or pleasurable but both equally sharp. Now, though I still have peaks of grief, I let it flow freely down that steep, terrible mountain because I know that it brings with it a twin river to flood my valley with all of the color and intensity of feeling that it is my human birthright to experience.