**Sewing Lessons**

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It wasn’t the night he died, but shortly after that the last of the seams holding me together were worn thin enough that I completely fell apart. Revealed beneath my skin in this new gaping hole were the galaxies of emotion I had kept hidden for so long, and looking in the mirror at my new, unfamiliar face was captivating in the way that staring into a black hole might be, knowing that utter destruction was inevitable. I didn’t know how to be happy anymore, and I wasn’t ready to learn again, instead allowing this stellar vacuum to take everything.

It has been five years since my dad died. I find myself thinking that I am no longer entitled to the grief and sympathy that seemed to hover over me like a constant shadow after his death. I worry that if I show how much it all still hurts, I’ll look weak. I was a kid when my dad was first diagnosed with cancer, and it broke me, broke the way I saw the world. By the time I was prepared to gather those shattered fragments and glue them back into place, I found that I had already outgrown them. My ten-year-old body went on evolving without those missing pieces. And so, as a child, carrying shards that would never again fit, I came up with better ways to fix myself.

The emptiness lingered for a while. With fumbling, pricked, and bleeding fingertips, I taught myself to sew. Slowly, I worked on piecing myself back together. A big part was still noticeably missing, though. It has taken time and patience, but I have stuffed these universes back into my skin and sewed the seams together again. Truth be told, though, I’m no master seamstress. I think the hole is closed now, at least for the most part; nothing really feels missing anymore. Sometimes I feel really guilty for that, like I don’t deserve to feel normal, not yet, not ever, but even so.

As I said, I’m no master seamstress. And yet, I still choose to see myself as malleable, alterable, no longer broken glass. Still, there are gaps, and there always will be. Sometimes they stretch wide enough that I feel as though the grief could suck me in between the stitches, but most of the time, they’re threaded tightly enough that I can only feel the stiffness of my makeshift repairs when I stretch.

A couple of years ago, I sat up in bed one night because I couldn’t instantly recall his voice. Then I thought of his infectious laugh, and I could hear it so clearly it was like he was right beside me, but the fear lingered. That night, I was struck by the realization that there would be no new memories of my father. All I had in my brain was all that I ever would, and it felt like I was losing bits every day. I probably am. Memories are tricky that way. I cope with this by collecting photos and memories from others, piecing together a scrapbook in my mind that is just as patchy as the stitches in my skin. But I make do.

There are no rules for how to do this, how to grieve, but somehow, I still feel like I’m doing it wrong. I’m afraid that anyone who passes me on the street can see the shoddy patchwork that is holding me together. That they can see the thoughts I can’t stop from flooding my brain the second my mom’s phone goes to voicemail, the way my mind is plagued with the knowledge that anyone I love could be taken from me in an instant. I am happy now, maybe happier than I have ever been, but tragedy has left me scarred and fearful of every storm that passes, afraid that one strong gust will tear away this mismatched skin I’ve spent years rebuilding.

I am still learning how to navigate the world after coming face to face with the horrible complexities that linger just beneath my surface, with the knowledge that I could self-destruct in an instant. Sometimes, when I close my eyes, it’s like I can still see the darkness seeping through the cracks. On those days, when it all feels too much, I pull the threads just a little tighter and pretend I can’t feel them at all.