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I remember a day in the fall of 2001. I had just finished teaching my Honors 200 class at BYU and was walking north across campus. There was a crisp chill in the air; I noticed some leaves on the ground which hadn't yet been sucked up by the grounds crew. Normally I would have been enjoying my favorite season, but my heart was heavy. I had stayed after class to talk to Andy about his paper. There were plenty of things wrong with it—it had grammatical errors, it was too short—but the essay itself had stuck with me. Surprisingly, it wasn't the fact that Andy had obviously lived through a difficult childhood that I found so disconcerting. There was a surprise ending in his narrative that had penetrated me. Throughout the essay Andy referred to a friend who helped to distract him from his childhood troubles at home. I felt protective towards this innocent-looking freshman boy with tousled blonde hair and averted eyes, and I was so glad to know that he had had at least one buddy with whom he could escape into the woods to play. Having a friend didn't make the abuse he went through acceptable, but it somehow made the suffering bearable. At the end of the essay, Andy told that many years later he asked his mom what had ever become of his friend. As she slowly turned around and looked him in the eye, it became clear to him that the one friend he'd had existed only in his mind.

As I kicked through some red leaves on the sidewalk, I thought of my friend Sasha. It was hard for her to even get out of bed. She did well to get dressed and then lay on top of the covers so she could at least appear to be up. The pain from her fibromyalgia was crippling her, and the doctors had just changed the combination and dosage of her pills for sleeping, waking, depression, appetite, and pain management. She weighed just ninety-nine pounds.

Earlier that week, her ten-year-old son, Matthew, had told her his greatest wish: that the two of them make cookies together after school. Sasha cried to me as she tried to convey her devastation over not being able to do that small thing for the son she loved so well. She talked of the Oreo cookie recipe she had set on the counter in the morning with some of the ingredients, and how she had even managed to put on some makeup that day. But by the time three o'clock rolled around, pain and exhaustion had overtaken her.

My son, Sam, helped me make chocolate chip cookies for them, and his help felt right. Somehow making those cookies together felt like a prayer of gratitude for the privilege of being able to give good gifts to my son. I told Sam about Matthew, and it helped diffuse my pain to share it with him. As I scuffed the sidewalk that fall day in 2001, it hit me how pathetic our offering had been—and not just because chocolate chip cookies seem common next to exotic homemade Oreos. Cookies weren't the point at all. Matthew just wanted his mom.

That year, with all of the destruction of September 11th, it was strange that I didn't feel pain over the planes crashing or people fearing the collapse of their building. What got me was imagining God that early morning, perhaps the only witness as a husband kissed his wife goodbye, a mother peeked in on a sleeping baby, a daughter yelled at her mom for butting into her life. How could He bear the pain of it all? Not the physical pain of bodies exploding and burning, but the pain of imminent loss, of grief, of despair, of loneliness. In that quiet dawn He was the only one who had to see the final goodbyes.

Finally I realized why I had linked my thoughts of Andy, Sasha, and the World Trade Center. How could God stand it? I get only a glimpse of pain through squinty eyes, and I can barely stand it. In Mormonism they hold up godhood as the supreme goal. I decided to increase my swearing and caffeine intake because I wanted none of it. A god has to see it all.

The next fall, Sasha died. Was someone there with her as she lay on the cold bathroom tile clutching her toothbrush? Did she have a guardian angel or a deceased grandma or even Christ himself to wrap his arms around her as she realized she'd be leaving her husband, her son, her parents? Did everything happen so quickly that the moment she felt the pain of her nose breaking she lost awareness of the separation that was to come?

This is what I remember about Sasha: cozy flannel pajamas with steaming cups of coffee imprinted on them. She tried to convince me that the pictured cups held hot chocolate until I pointed out the word *café* scrawled artistically in the pattern. Her eyes relaxed when she laughed.

I remember her eyes. I remember bony wrists, red slippers, Maui Maui smoothies I delivered. I remember how clean she liked things. I remember the way she sat in a chair. The first time I had seen her dressed in real clothes, she was wearing a light purple cotton shirt with dark purple flowers on it, tight-fitting jeans, even a toe ring. I was struck by her beauty. She looked pretty even without makeup and brushed hair, but her eyes had always scared me a bit with that far-off look that clearly stated she had gaped into the jaws of hell. But there she was: dressed and normal . . . and almost a mirror of me.

Sasha had been Relief Society president when she had her nervous breakdown. She was a full-time employee and a regular baker of cookies. And then one day she couldn't get out of bed. I had befriended Sasha because I was her visiting teacher, but my service wasn't simply altruistic. Whenever I helped Sasha, I satisfied a distant foreboding of my own future. It was like drawing a glass of ice water and setting it on the counter so that when my future self was dying of thirst, she might take a sip.

There's not a chasm between normal, functioning human beings and the bums on the street with no job and no life. There's one hair's breadth. Disaster is one step off the sidewalk. It is one migraine away.

I've always believed that the real miracles in life aren't the last minute snatches from death: the one house that is preserved in a tornado, or the car that is unbelievably unscathed in a crash. A miracle isn't the averting of danger or pain, it is the brilliant shaft of light that penetrates through the darkness of pain. It's a miracle when Roberto Benini insanely breaks the rules to play music over the loudspeaker in *Life is Beautiful.* It's a miracle that Andy's imagination gave him the gift of companionship when there was none to be found. A miracle is the cell phone call to say "I love you" when there's nothing else that needs saying; it's sitting on a front porch with Sasha—knees held up to her chest in pain but a smile at the corner of her mouth—and watching the sunset; it's picking up a perfectly symmetrical maple leaf and realizing it never would have turned red if it wasn't about to die.

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