



**What I long for, you know would kill me;  
What I think will kill me, you know will heal me.  
Loving you, I enter a darkness where I can't see anything.  
"You do not need to; I am guiding you by the hand."**

*Rumi (translated by Andrew Harvey)*

## **CHAPTER 5: CINNAMON TOAST**

My body shuts down the moment Jim dies.

Someone hands me a glass of water and I don't think I can swallow it. My mouth is dry, tongue swollen, throat closed. My whole body filled with grief and fear, no room for anything else. Later that night, I am alone in our crowded living room, surrounded by his family and our friends who live nearby while we wait for other loved ones to arrive who have been traveling all day to be with us. I feel alone, disoriented in a parallel world where time has stopped.

The motions of shared grief keep repeating as people arrive. Red, swollen eyes. Disbelief. Hug, cry. Wails. Hug, cry. I tell over and over how he fell back on the bed, "Debbie, I feel so dizzy." Each time I do, my body relives the moment his soul flew out the window. *Push, breathe, push, breathe.* Sit down. Wait for the next person to arrive, the next phone call, the next telling. The phone doesn't stop ringing as the news spreads. The ringing of phone, ringing of doorbell, constant ringing announcing death has arrived in my home.

Because Jim's father had died when Jim was twenty-six, his two younger sisters, only nine and seven at the time, viewed Jim as a father figure. One of them sits next to me, and even though she is steeped in her own grief she is worried I am not eating or drinking anything. I share with her my inability to swallow. She lovingly mashes a banana in a bowl, and like a concerned mother she tries feeding it to me—spoonfuls of nourishment and hope my body isn't ready to accept. I am shut down.

For her, I open and try, but the taste of banana makes me want to vomit. My stomach revolts, my throat clenches tightly, and I spit it into the palm of my hand.

Days pass and I eat what little I can manage—spoonfuls of soggy cereal, soft vanilla ice cream, chicken broth, marshmallows, and other things I can let dissolve into my mouth until there is almost nothing left to swallow. When I am able, when my throat opens just a little, it's never out of hunger. I eat because people are concerned, because I am rapidly losing weight as a part of me has disappeared with Jim. Food has no taste, and the lump stays in my throat for a very long time.

At work, co-workers are kind. We order lunch in and someone always orders me turkey on whole wheat because I no longer care and they know it's what I used to like. Before. Every day, the same sandwich: turkey on whole wheat. I unwrap and stare, then take a small piece of meat from between the bread and roll it around in my fingers. I put it in my mouth and show them all I am trying. It feels like cardboard on my tongue.

Everyone wants to nourish me out of love, caring, and kindness, and out of a love for Jim who they know would want me to be taken care of. And yet, I need time to be alone with my grief, with my struggle to make sense of what has happened, of my new place in the After world. I need room to not have to be anything or do anything other than what I am feeling in each moment, which drags on into whole days. Whole days with little food. I can drink water again. I am thirsty. My body needs to replenish all the water leaving through my near constant tears.

I have become a ghost of my former self, a griever in the depths of an abyss I am just beginning to navigate. I am a thirty-six year-old, shattered woman, now a widow. I ache for him so much my bones hurt.

I rarely accept dinner invitations with friends, and I want people to stop coming over to check on me. I am grateful for their love and concern but I want to be alone. Sometimes I say yes to keep family and friends from worrying, but I only want to be home. It's hard enough to go through the motions of life each day. Some days I don't get out of bed. But most days, I get up, get dressed, take the train to work, do my job, try to smile when my co-workers are so kind. All I really want is to crawl into bed and take an Ambien and sink into the missing of Jim.

One night, knowing I need to eat something, but with an appetite for nothing, I make cinnamon toast. For some reason, cinnamon toast is just right. I toast the bread dark, coat it with lots of butter that melts into the hot bread, and add mounds of cinnamon sugar. It isn't too much food for a stomach already stuffed with grief.

I eat this simple meal of cinnamon toast every night for the next month. Like a ritual, I sit and look at the two slices of buttered toast for a few moments because I'm never hungry. The smell of cinnamon and butter and sugar encourages my desire to pick up a piece and take a small bite. I chew and chew because I need to break it down so I can swallow.

I can smell the cinnamon and this is why it appeals to me. I am disconnected from everything and my senses are dulled, but the smell of cinnamon begins to lure me back because it smells like comfort. This is how I begin to eat again.

It is still hard to swallow.

### ***OUR GRIEVING BODY***

*Do you know about the innate fight, flight, or freeze response? It's a physiological reaction inherited from our ancestors thousands of years ago. When we experience a shock or traumatic event, our instinctive survival responses take over. This is why, in the midst of a crisis, we are unable to eat, or swallow, or we throw up. When our brains perceive danger it instructs the body to rid itself of anything not needed to survive, preparing us to fight or run or freeze.*

*All energy is directed solely to survival—digestion slows down or stops and we even stop producing saliva. It's why I couldn't swallow and had no appetite.*

*For many of us, the acute grief and intense fear we experience keeps our bodies in continuous survival mode. This feeling may last a long time. It may be days, weeks, or months. There is no timetable. Every person's experience is unique to them. It's completely normal. We are wired to have this response.*

## FOR YOU

*Although loved ones may worry about you, be kind to yourself. You may lose weight, or you may gain weight because all you want is ice cream. It's okay. There is no right or wrong way. Ice cream may be all you can manage to swallow for a while. It may be the only thing that comforts you. For me, it was cinnamon toast. And marshmallow fluff spooned out of the jar—it was soft and easy to swallow.*

*Be as good to yourself as you possibly can... even the smallest thing can make a difference... whatever that may be and whatever feels right to you.*

*What's your "cinnamon toast"? What brings you comfort? Even if it's hard to do in this moment, try to think of one or two things. It may not be food. Maybe it's a warm bath or a favorite soft blanket wrapped around you. Maybe it's his or her favorite tee shirt that you like to wear. I slept in one of Jim's tee shirts every night for a very long time.*