

Studebaker

At four years old, long before seat belt laws, I crouch down on the floor of my father's dying Studebaker, pressing my left eye to the rusted floor where a convenient hole the size of my kneecap beckons. From time to time I look up from the floor, spying Jim—I never call him father—who wears a thrift-store cap over a bald head, dark brown fringe curls spilling out. It's the way our weekend visits go, an endless supply of quirky adventures with Jim at the helm. He nods at the hole, encouraging me with his smile to watch the street. I notice the wrinkles around his eyes.

I hover again over the hole while gray cement speeds past, blocks and miles whirring beneath my rapt gaze. I glimpse something of eternity—the ongoing universe passing me by, slowing to stop when Jim applies pressure to the brake. Later, when I share this memory, well-meaning adults spoil it by launching into a diatribe about how I could've lost an eye, wondering why in the world Jim didn't have any sense.

Eye to the Studebaker's rusting floor, I don't know God. Something in my preschool chest longs for a God who controls the rush of the street below, who holds the world's speed steady or brings it to an abrupt halt by applying pressure to a brake.

One ordinary fifth grade day, I am doing something rudimentary like fractions or spelling or reading when the secretary's voice blares over the intercom, "Will Mary please come to the office right away?" The undercurrent of alarm in her voice startles me. I pick up my things and leave the classroom. I meander, somehow knowing that at the

end of the outdoor walkway a terribly dark secret will be revealed and my life will never be the same.

I walk alone down the hall, noticing the brick patterns, counting my steps. Nearly to the office, the thought occurs to me: My father has died. I'm not sure how or why I know this. Perhaps the brick-lined hallway is a thin place where the Almighty whispers me a tender warning. As soon as I see my mother's face, I know.

In our idling green Datsun, parked with its nose facing the office, my mother puts words to my intuitions. "Your father is dead."

Because my mom has married twice more since being married to Jim, I feel the need to clarify. Which father? Jim who I visit every other weekend, whose tall, lanky frame I inherited? My first stepdad who took apart engines in our living room? Or my current stepfather who recently married my mom? I know in my gut who it is. Still I ask, "Which one?"

"Jim," she says.

My mom doesn't know what to do about grief, doesn't know how to console a ten-year-old in shock. She does not touch me. Instead she drives directly to Jafco, an electronics store of the 1970s. Pocket calculators are the newest thing.

"Pick one," she says, her eyes wet, her arms crossing her chest like armor. So I touch the small metal buttons of a calculator and hand it to her. The clerk puts it in a sack, hands it to me. I know I'll be the first kid in my class to own one—the first kid with a pocket calculator and no father.

Jim's second wife is a widow now, with a bulging belly. Their daughter is born after he leaves earth, both of us fatherless.

After my father's death, I have a recurring dream that Jim lives in Africa and, although he misses me, he is happy there, tending gardens and constructing huts half a world away. I try to grab for his hand in the dreams, but he smiles until the wrinkles around his eyes fade to black nothingness.

Why do I dream Jim lives in Africa? Because no one gives me a satisfactory reason why or how he died. "An accident in the home," they say. Grown-ups whisper when I enter rooms, shoot me looks of pity. So I invent a story—a story I still use today when I feel someone's being particularly nosey. "My father fell down a flight of stairs in his home, hit his head on the cement, and bled to death." It seems logical. The steps of his craftsman bungalow are steep, leading to the dank basement. I see the cement landing, put two and two together, and devise this viable story. It helps me endure the years until I discover the truth.

I dream this way because of Jim's closed casket. I sit near the front of the church where his coffin looms, large and cold. I remember very little about the day other than hymn singing and everyone wearing black. Faceless people hug me tight while tears run races down their cheeks. My father's widow has a hollow look, her pregnant belly nearly ready to give birth. For that day, people love me. Lavish attention on me. Hold me close. Whisper nearby. But it isn't long until I face school again where the meanest teacher of my elementary career awaits me. She scolds me once for what she thinks is cheating, sending me into the hall. "I used to feel sorry for you because your dad died, but you should be over it by now," she hisses. I come home to an empty house, do my homework, eat dinner, watch TV, and then cry myself to sleep right before I dream of Jim happy in Africa, all because I never see proof that he really died.

When I walk to school alone, I look behind me, worrying a stranger will reach out from nowhere and strangle me. I run from invisible chasers. I lock the back door behind me when I huff in from school. I am convinced I am next. If God's capricious finger has circled the fast-moving world and landed on my father's bald head, surely He'll summon me.

So I pray.

It's a strange thing to equate my longing for God with the death of Jim. Jim's casket makes me pray. Some primordial hunger inside me needs another Jim—someone to clutch me to his chest and tell me everything is going to be all right. That Jim, I hope, will be God. Late at night, with covers over my head because I still fear the boogeyman even at ten, I send little messages heavenward.

God, if You're there, speak to me.

God, do You love me?

God, help me to be happy.

God, I need a hug.

Some nights I can nearly hear His whispers, if I crane my neck just so, as I stay cocooned in the thin place beneath my covers.

Today I struggle knowing God "loves me and has a wonderful plan for my life." I seek Him everywhere—in my insatiable need for approval from others, in my "Do you love me?" pleas to my husband, in the dark places of my mind where I convince myself I'm a worthless mess and, therefore, unworthy of meriting the affection of the Almighty. Sometimes I'm still that little girl fighting against the grief of the world, longing for a

snatch of light in the midst of dark days. I no longer pull the covers over my head—an indication that meeting Jesus twenty-four years ago spurred something cataclysmic in my heart that is still unfolding. He stoops to the level beside my bed, pulls away the covers, and sets me free.

Sometimes it seems verses in the Bible were written only for me. It's like the Holy Spirit, dictating words to scribes and prophets and shepherds, one day stops, smiles, thinks of me, and says, "Hey, write this down. Two thousand years from now, Mary will need to read this. This one's for her."

So Paul listens and writes these words. Just for me. (And maybe for you too.):

For consider your calling, brethren [sisteren!], that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble; but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, and the base things of the world and the despised God has chosen, the things that are not, so that He may nullify the things that are, so that no man may boast before God.

1 Corinthians 1:26–29 NASB

I am not wise. But God chooses me anyway.

I am not mighty. But God chooses me anyway.

I am not of noble birth. But God chooses me anyway.

I am foolish. But God chooses me anyway.

I am weak. But God chooses me anyway.

I am base. But God chooses me anyway.

I am despised. But God chooses me anyway.

I am nothing. But God chooses me anyway.

I picture Him watching from heaven as I press my eye socket to the floor of Jim's Studebaker, watching God's chaotic world spin beneath me. "That one," He shouts to the heavenlies. "That raggedy one. I choose her because she knows her lack, because she knows her insatiable need for a father. Someday she'll cling to me." As I trace my fifth-grade hand over the brick wall leading to the office, He knows I am about to embark on a journey of fatherlessness, enduring the gaping hole that comes from a longing unfulfilled.

At nearly sixteen years old, I finish the journey I started under the Studebaker's floor mat. I hear about Jesus from Young Life leaders who love me—how Jesus chats with ordinary folks, goes fishing, heals bleeding women (oh, how my heart bleeds), and guffaws the religious pious. I fall in love with Jesus when I realize He commands the wind and the seas yet stoops to love the likes of me—a girl who wants to take her life, to rid the world of herself. He is the One I've been muttering prayers to under the cover of my bedspread. It is like having the President of the United States—someone far away and terribly important—turn up at my doorstep, entourage in tow, and take me to McDonald's for lunch. And order me a Big Mac and fries.

Under a blanket of stars that twinkle one icy night, I weep a prayer.

Jesus, can it really be true? That You love me? And want to be with me? Come into my life, then. Take me over. I'm a mess. I hope You don't regret it.

I cry the entire weekend, wetting my face, my pillow, my clothes with bottled up tears. It feels like Jesus is scrubbing me clean. Not the kind of washing you get from an

overzealous grandmother bent on scouring the germs away, but the cleansing of a gentle stream, flowing over and through my patched soul.

Jesus washes me that night with my own tears. Or are they His?

But as the Psalmist so aptly writes, “Those who sow in tears shall reap with joyful shouting” (Psalm 126:5 NASB). My journey begins wide-eyed over a rusty hole. It continues when Jesus washes me in tears. And it marches forward still—after a quarter-of-a-century-long pilgrimage where joyful shouting comes and goes to the rhythm of this crazy, fickle life. I’ve come full circle, the wife of a man who is a doting father, who loves his kids well. And by some strange twist of God-irony, He gives me a daughter, my last, who looks just like me, and whose birthday, on some years, lands on Father’s Day:

Two come by, year by year
At least for the last nine
When sometimes they collide
Birth shaking hands with Death,
Death not returning the favor

Father’s Day is never easy
For the fatherless
Half-orphaned, starved to the bone
For Daddy love
No man can fill

Thirty years is a terrible lifetime
To weave through days
Without his hand

His words

His I love yous

Nine years ago, she yowled hello

To her Daddy

So alive, she bawled and bawled

He held her

I melted

Crumbled

I will not know

What my daughter

Wears like a birthright

Around her heart

Her daddy's love

But I can taste it

I can see it

I can marvel

From the sidelines of parenthood

God's father-heart knew

I needed resurrection

Julia's life on my day of sorrow

Joy mingled with my gaping heart

United in her

Strange how life

Can't be helped

Or hindered

Even when Death snatches

Fathers away

Resurrection is always

The answer to grief

New life, new yowls, new hopes

Mingled with

The life that was,

Old tears,

Old *cynicisms*

Thank You kindly

For the *juxtaposition*,

Jesus of the resurrection,

The One who weeps on Father's Day

Alongside me

Who pulled His beard

While the world ripped His flesh

And His father died to Him

In that terrible moment

History hinged upon

You understand resurrection

Invented it

Wove it into my life

On Father's Day

When my daughter

Cried her way into my arms

There's agony in that poem I do not allow myself to wallow in—that empty place in my heart an earthly father will never fill. Sitting across from some dear friends at dinner, the husband tells the story of how he took his daughter on a trip to visit a college campus. She didn't like the college immediately, which gave them time together to do other things. He does what a loving father does—helps his daughter find a college. Because he loves her. In the midst of his recounting, my daddy-ache comes back. My father never goes on college visits, never meets the man I marry, never walks me down the aisle, never frolics with his grandchildren. It's an injury that never seems to heal.

I am Jacob in times like this. Wrestling with God over my lack of a father, He injures me so I limp. The limp reminds me of God's God-ness and my frailty—the most humbling thin place. Yet it's this daddy-less thin place that reminds me that He is big enough to fill the need I've buried inside. Though I ache and will probably always carry a limp, I'm thankful the injury leads me back to Him.