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Alive and Breathing and Happy

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By Sarah Kilch Gaffney

A few weeks ago, my daughter and I attended a birthday party held at a cute little downtown arts and crafts studio. The birthday girl was turning six, and ten little girls gathered around the craft-paper covered table to make glitter-and-jewel studded shadow boxes out of recycled tins. Giant magnets were adhered to the tins so that their creations could then be displayed on each girl's home refrigerator.

A few of the other mothers stayed and the rest departed. My daughter was shy at first, but eventually settled in. We mothers moved about the table, helping the girls with each task and reminding them to listen when the studio owner gave the next set of instructions. We joked about how happy we were that the vast quantities of multi-hued glitter were here and not in our homes. After the projects were complete, the girls moved on to snacks, cupcakes, and gifts

The studio was dog-themed, with dog paintings, photographs, sculptures, and trinkets abounding and we began chatting about pets. I noted that my daughter frequently insists we need another pet despite the fact that our home menagerie currently consists of two dogs, two cats, and four chickens (and a preschooler, I usually add).

One woman casually remarked, "But just one child, right? That's not too bad."

"Yes," I replied, and left it at that as my mind teetered within my skull.

There was so much more that I could have said. I didn't hold it against her, though, as there was no way for her to know. This type of thing happens to me all the time.

Part of me wanted to say, "Yes, I only have one child, but it's just me now. My husband is dead. I have all these things to keep alive and breathing and happy, and it's just me."

A smaller part of me wanted to say, "Yes, I only have one child, but my dead husband and I wanted another baby, very badly, and it didn't happen. We tried, we attempted a mini-IVF procedure, everything failed, and then he died."

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These are the facts that I face every day of my life, but I didn't say any of these things. I didn't even mention the simple fact that I was widowed. The only people I knew at the party were the birthday girl's mother and grandmother. They know my history intimately, but everyone else present was oblivious, and I know facts like these often make people intensely uncomfortable.

Sometimes I bring up the fact that I am widowed (it is an enormous part of my life, after all) and sometimes I don't. I am in my early thirties, so it is almost always a shock when it comes to light and every casual conversation is a potential minefield.

As I buckled my daughter into her booster seat that afternoon, she laid her head on my shoulder and sighed, a little overtired from the day's events, and said, "Mama, I miss Daddy."

"Me, too, babe," I replied, "me, too."

Early on in my widowhood, I almost always brought it up when I met someone new. At that point, it related so directly and intensely to every single aspect of my life, and my grief was such a raw and gaping wound, that I felt I had to tell people. The wound was enormous, but also invisible; if I didn't say anything, it didn't exist.

Acknowledging it directly was the only way for everyone I interacted with to understand, even just a little, where I was coming from and what I was wrestling with. Even when it brought me to tears and felt like rubbing salt in the cut, it also felt like affirmation: please see that even though my life is a horror, it is mine, and I am doing with it the best I can.

Eventually, my need to tell virtually every single person I encountered lessened. There are still times when I bring it up, but it is now often a choice rather than a desperate need.

A few days before the aforementioned birthday party, the local school called to schedule my daughter for her kindergarten registration day. We scheduled the appointment and the woman kindly detailed the items I needed to bring. Before we hung up she said, "Oh, and I don't have her father's information here, so I'll need that." I explained the situation, that my husband had died nearly two years prior and so there was no pertinent information to give. Awkwardness and social fumbling ensued, and before the conversation was over, I had apologized to her.

Later that night, a dear widow-friend and I had a good laugh about the transition that had occurred: when we started apologizing to other people for the deaths of our husbands. We had reached a point when the facts of our widowhood became far more uncomfortable and panic-inducing for others than they were for us. It's not that we're no longer sad or no longer grieving, it's just that the facts that often make others squirm have become our new normal.

I am a young widow with a young child, so strangers frequently ask if she is my only child, or how many siblings she has, or if I plan to have any more; they ask what my husband does for work; or they make some comment related to the nuclear family because they just assume that we are part of one. When they learn the truth, they find themselves flabbergasted and at a loss for what to say, and that's okay, because I know it is atypical for a preschooler to have lost a parent and someone my age to be widowed.

Sometimes I wish people would generally be more aware of what they say, but mostly I just try to let it all go. While I have had complete strangers and close friends say innumerable insensitive things over the years, to my knowledge no one has ever done so intentionally. When you fall outside the norms of society, this is just what happens.

Most of the time, if people notice at all, the transgression has already escaped their mouths. I could spend endless hours of every day offended and appalled at the things people say to me, but I have absolutely no desire to live my life that way.

I find that my situation has also made me particularly aware of my own assumptions about people I don't know, and even the ones I do. No matter what presumptions are playing around in my head, I tend to be quite conscious of not voicing them.

If someone wants to offer information that they feel comfortable sharing, that's wonderful, because I love to hear people's stories and discover connections. If they don't want to share, that's their prerogative. Regardless, I try to keep to myself whatever narrative I've woven in my brain because I know that impressions do not equate to truth.

The trajectory of my life will always be a bit of a conversation-stopper and jaw-dropper. People will never get used to hearing that my husband was diagnosed with a terminal brain tumor at 27 and that he died when he was 31. They will never be comfortable with the fact that I was widowed at 29 and that my daughter lost her father when she was barely three. The important thing is not how others feel, however, but that I am now comfortable and at peace with these aspects of my life.

And as much as it pains people to hear the story of my widowhood, they love to hear about how my husband and I fell in love in the woods and got married on a mountain; how selfless, unflinching, and humorous he was right up until the end; and what an amazing father he was in the time that he had.

These are the facts I try to put my focus on.

Though I had little choice in the way things played out, I am now choosing to be happy and fulfilled despite the tragedy and grief I have seen. I am choosing to move forward and to embrace the changes as they come, and I am trying to see a little more light than dark in the world. The often inflamed and sometimes barely perceptible emotional limp of grief and loss always comes along with me, but that is simply part of my story and part of my truth, part of me.

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