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Becoming Lovely

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Becoming Lovely

When I fell in love with her father, I thought I'd remain detached enough to protect myself. When I moved in, Caroline and her younger brother were only with us half the time; day on, day off, and every other weekend. I cherished what time I had alone, or with my husband.

I saw how tenuous relationships with step-kids could be, how when couples split up, the stepparent often never gets to see the kids again. I saw it up close when the kids' mom and her second husband split up. That was it. Their mother excised him from the kids' lives without warning, overnight.

I thought these children would hate me, grow jealous of my time with their dad, wreak havoc as teenagers, slamming doors and screaming. It hasn't happened, yet; eight years in.

"I love you!" Caroline said, saying goodbye after one of our earliest kid-involved dates. *Love me? You hardly even know me.*

My family of origin, parents and sisters, reserves "I love you" for serious, dramatic occasions. 9/11 (the original). Pre-surgical. Essentially, we say "I love you" when we think we are about to die.

Not this generation. They throw out "I love you" to all their friends. They say it multiple times before hanging up the phone. They use it in place of my usual go-to, the more traditional "goodbye."

I didn't know what to make of it, but early on I knew to say it, too. *These are children.* At the time their dad and I got together, they were just six and eight years old. "I love you, too," I said, and eventually, painfully, I did.

I was standing in the pediatric ICU hallway, denied entry to the room. My name was not on the list, and I lacked the proper ID bracelet. Inside, I heard Caroline crying in her sleep. She was waking up after three days of sedation. In the hallway, a nurse approached.

“My name should be on the list,” I said, “I’m her stepmother.” The nurse nodded and jotted down my name, then she turned and headed back down the hall to find my husband. I texted him. “I’m here, but they won’t let me into the room.” *Where is he?*

The usual hospital sounds surrounded me; the beeps and whirs of machinery, a baby crying. There were quiet murmurs of adults talking. The medical staff behind the desk monitored me with wary eyes. Briefly, I thought of charging through the door, imagined getting cuffed and carried away. It was enough to keep me outside, listening to the nurses inside the room talking to Caroline with hushed voices.

Three days before, my fourteen-year-old stepdaughter was so out of her head from an intentional ibuprofen overdose that she fought and bit at the staff. Knowing her risk and ongoing threats of self-harm, we had locked all the medications in a safe. In desperation she’d walked a couple miles to the grocery store, bought an economy bottle of store-brand ibuprofen and a jug of juice, and downed the pills on the way home. In the ER, having no other choice, they sedated her, and we waited to find out if she would live, and if she’d done permanent damage to her organs.

Naturally, in all that confusion, no one thought to add my name to the list of approved visitors.

I heard Caroline’s voice then, suddenly awake. She cried and wailed over and over. “I just want to die! Why can’t I die?”

My toes strayed over the threshold as I yelled to her, using the name her father calls me.

“I’m here,” I called through the door, through the curtain that hides her. “It’s me, it’s Lovely. I’m here.”

It’s also the name she has adopted for me, a name that will never be on a list.

We waited for test results and learned that she would make a total physical recovery, but that she would be admitted to an inpatient psychiatric facility. It was a terrifying prospect; we didn’t know what that would look like, or how long it would last. But we knew we couldn’t take her home. We knew we could not keep her safe.

I have a scar on the back of my left hand. It is a tiny white crescent, likely noticeable only to me. It is the mark of a willful four-year-old, angry at

being awakened at a rest stop on a 12-hour road trip in a snowstorm. I can still see her look of fury as she dug her fingernail into my hand, looking straight into my eyes as I summoned my strength to withstand the pain with patience and love this small, angry girl.

The scar reminds me of the rage we can feel about things we don't completely understand. It is full of indignation and insult, intolerance and revenge.

I can run the pad of my right index finger over the scar to feel its tiny ridge in my skin. I can use it to remind myself that some people feel things so strongly, they lose control.

I fingered this scar as I sat, bedside, awake over a long night, in the emergency room with my stepdaughter. Her suicide attempt was two weeks before; her sexual assault the previous month. We were in the ER again, the fourth time for her suicidal ideation. I was keeping watch.

Closing in on 23 hours of wakefulness I did stretches and jumping jacks, drank coffee, ate snacks, and took trips to the restroom just for the novelty of it. I read, texted and emailed friends, and struggled to keep my focus on the morning that would eventually arrive.

Caroline slept, long legs hanging off the end of the hospital bed, sheet and blanket askew across her lanky teenaged body. I sat in a straight-backed armchair with vinyl-covered padding. I nodded off and caught myself before I tumbled to the linoleum floor.

Like my own biological daughter, the one who gave me the scar on my hand, this one feels a little too deeply. My daughter, however, before she reached the age Caroline was then, grew into an ability to manage her emotions. She learned coping skills and ways to avoid internalizing the pain of others. Caroline, though, got stuck, replaying the worst of what she's been told, what she's felt, what she believed about herself.

The doctors and the social worker reminded me through the night that I am not a legal guardian, that I cannot sign the paperwork to admit her to an inpatient hospital. *I'm aware. There's time. Let her father sleep for once.*

I was in my late forties. I had witnessed a close friend dying of cancer, experienced the untimely death of my younger brother-in-law. I have seen genuine grief around me. I've felt it, too, mourning losses of all kinds, struggling to let go of some grief that hung on past its expiration date. Before Caroline was in my life, I had never witnessed a person who truly,

deeply wanted to die. It was breathtakingly awful, particularly in someone so young.

For nine months, Caroline had been cutting herself. Scars run from her wrist to the inside of her elbow, and they are a cap-sleeve at her shoulder. Some, I can tell, are deep enough to last. We were told not to worry, that many teenagers cut these days, that it's a release.

No one told us what I learned later; people who cut are nine times more likely to die at their own hands.

Sometimes it's nothing to worry about, sometimes parents ought not to make a big deal about the cutting. Other times it's a warm up to a suicide attempt.

I swung between anger and sorrow, helplessness and action. I tricked myself into heroism: "I can save her!" and acceptance, knowing that Caroline will do what Caroline wants.

Nearly thirty years ago, when I brought my son, my first-born child home from the hospital, I was just nineteen years old. I thought it was crazy that the doctor and nurses were allowing me to take that infant home with me, and that I could not possibly keep him alive. But with each passing day, then week, then month, it amazed me. I celebrated each time we reached another milestone, incredulous that I was keeping this child alive and from harm.

The cycle of ER visits and short stints in acute care inpatient facilities is a blur, nearly two years later. It was that day in the ICU, after she nearly succeeded at ending her life that I knew I'd do anything to help keep this kid alive. She went to acute care for a few days and when the insurance ran out, they sent her home to us again, telling us "Just take her back to the ER" if she was suicidal again, which she was, within hours of her discharge. That was the night I took on, the one I spent by her bedside, giving her exhausted dad a night to sleep, to recover. The cycle was finally broken by a six-month stint in a residential program.

In the kitchen, I make dinner while Caroline works out a tune on the piano in the next room. Something by Taylor Swift. She plays by ear—not like I do, chicken-pecking out note by note—but full on with chords and melody. She has taught herself to play more than a hundred songs.

When I was a child, my older sister was practicing for her final high school piano recital. I was seven when she was seventeen. Each night, I went to sleep listening to Beethoven and Tchaikovsky. I was happy when my sister was there, in the years before she left for college, before she left for married life. After she left was when our parents' marriage crumbled and exploded. At night, when they thought I was asleep, I'd listen to them fight. Piano music, no matter how raucous, means serenity to me.

When I hear Caroline play, I know she's okay. She's been home with her dad and me now for eleven months, following a half-year stay at an adolescent psychiatric facility, the only solution when her attempts to end her life would not stop. Her anxiety is decreasing, her depression, that beast, is in its cage, under her control. In her schoolwork, she is thriving. She has two best friends. She has regained my trust by telling me how she is, every day the moment she gets home from school. I leave the medicine cabinet unlocked.

Helping raise a kid with trauma-induced anxiety and depression is a whole new frontier for me. The experience I had raising my own kids didn't prepare me for this. My kids, adults now, had their own scary moments, for sure. There were bad breakups, encounters with bullies, and periods of depression, but that all felt like normal teenaged stuff. Raising Caroline has been downright terrifying, never knowing if her latest attempt would be the successful one. I learned, though, in family therapy designed to help her safely reintegrate into life after her residential stint. I learned by trusting my husband's deep love for his child, even when it was uncomfortable to do so. And I learned through the passage of time, with each day and night that went by without returning to the ER, without a call to the suicide hotline prompting police officers to show up at our door. I slowly got to a place where I could fully exhale.

I have learned to pay attention to behaviors that confuse or irritate me and to call them what they are; symptoms of anxiety. Why is she afraid to order at a restaurant? Why is it important for her to make sure there's always enough of the juice that she drinks and the food that she will eat? (A related "unspecified" eating disorder makes her appetite fleeting and very specific.) I strive to meet her needs before they send her into a panic. Time is important; plans and schedules need to be honored. Need to pick her up? Don't be even a minute late. When she has an appointment we

leave unnecessarily early, waiting in the car when we arrive. When someone violates these unwritten contracts with her, she starts to pinch the skin at her wrists, her eyes might well with tears, her breathing becomes restricted, and her heart begins to pound. Be on time. I can do that.

With any other kid, one who didn't have her background, I'd see this as indulgent, spoiling behavior. Tough luck, kid. You don't always get what you want. And that has to be true for her, sometimes. But it's the little things I can do, that I can manage, that help her feel safe. I no longer hear her gasp in fear several times during the evening. Instead I hear her play piano from the next room, while I prepare a dinner I know she will eat.

A week into the coronavirus quarantine, my husband, Caroline, and I sit down to dinner after an interminable grey day and a stress-filled week of adjusting to working from home full time and Caroline being home from school. The terrifying news about the spread of COVID-19 is the hum that fills the silence as we eat. It's been two years and three months since she nearly died. She would have, had a neighbor not seen her that day, had no one called the paramedics.

"I just want to let you guys know I'm struggling a bit. My chest is tight and I've been crying most of the night," she says.

Her father and I exchange looks. My fear comes flooding back. In the year of her most desperate depression, she was in the ER five times, and landed in the ICU with potentially deadly overdoses twice. We spent months locked in the cycle of emergency room visit, to inpatient care, to home, then back to the ER. The added risks of going to the ER now make the prospect even less welcome. Time in a residential facility could devastate, rather than heal. Submitting her to a facility but this time, not being able to visit, is an unbearable thought. If she's suicidal, how do we choose between keeping her at home, and facing the risk of exposure to others?

"Is there something Lovely and I can do to help you?" her dad asks.

"No," she says, "I've got this. I called Dr. J and I've been doing all my self-care stuff. I colored last night and crocheted until 3 a.m. And no self-harm, I promise."

I remind myself that neither her dad nor I can be her hero. During the cycle of self-harm, ER visits, acute intervention and back home, a social

worker said to me, “If a determined person really wants to kill themselves, no one can stop them.” I felt angry when she said it. It was impossible for me to hear then, but I understand it better, now.

I can be there for Caroline and help her get access to the support she needs. If I need to, I can drive her to the ER and stay awake all night. I can lock up the sharps and the medicine. I can be vigilant. I can be present, at home when she needs me there; outside her door when she needs to be alone. She knows this beast belongs to her, and she trusts me to be there if she needs me. And I am.

When my parents call and ask after Caroline, I say, “I love you,” before I say goodbye, before I hang up. At first, it’s by accident, a habit Caroline has helped me form. After a while, my parents say it back.