Chapter 8
The Gift of Grief

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ABSTRACT

My journey began with a call that brought me to “the edge”: the farthest reaches of what any mind can handle. I found every notion I had of myself was a fallacy, an illusion created so completely I’d fooled even myself. The days ahead found me by my father’s side for the less than six weeks it took him to die from pancreatic cancer. The journey toward healing my mind, however, took far longer than I could’ve imagined. From the first days of wandering into the local Hospice building begging for help to a seemingly innocuous lunch with one of my third grade students that turned into a soul-soothing balm, I have sought more help than I once would’ve cared to admit. My story is an excursion to the deepest depths of grief and the extended passage back to a version of mental health I could’ve in no way imagined.

DIAGNOSIS

Everyone knows that the worst kind of calls come in the middle of the night. The penetrating noise of the telephone jolts a person immediately into wakefulness with all the subtlety of a cherry bomb tossed into an empty can. Such calls never come during the best of times or on the brightest of days, so I didn’t consider a midday call on an ordinary weekday afternoon even remotely ominous. Still…

When the call came I think I was gloating. Well, at least doing a too-proud kind of strut at the very least. I had, only a few minutes before walking in my apartment door, just let my very first class of third graders go for the summer. No one had come out any worse for the wear on my first turn out and their FCAT scores had been swagger-worthy. To say I was on top of the world would have been an understatement.

When my cell rang I noticed the caller ID flashed my stepmother’s number. Looking back I really should’ve known there was a problem. While we weren’t at odds, she never called me if there was a way to avoid it. Still…

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The sun was shining with an early June version of Florida intensity and I had a grin plastered to my face that could’ve disarmed even the biggest skeptic. I grabbed the phone, held it firmly in place at my ear, and in a sing-song voice slipped out, “Helllooooo!” That’s when the world as I knew it ceased to exist.

If asked before that particular day in June 2008 to describe myself to someone who’d never met me my first statements would include words like ‘strong,’ ‘responsible,’ and ‘dependable.’ I’d always been proud of the fact that, no matter the situation, I’d always been able to rely on myself. No need to ask for help from others. If there was a mountain to climb I’d run toward it, arms wide, ready to face the coming task without a single backward glance. Because of this very firmly imbedded view of my own self-efficacy I was completely unprepared to discuss terms such as ‘cancer’ and ‘father’ in the middle of that bright, shimmering day. Besides, everybody knew calls such as the one I’d just answered were supposed to come in the middle of the night. I distinctly remember only one thing: moving the phone away from my ear and bashing it on the couch a few times, like it was a too-tight lid on a jar in need of a few whacks on the counter to get it moving. I had no inkling, not the slightest bit of a clue, that the strength of mind and spirit I consider synonymous with myself was about to be blown away like so much dust on a soft gust of wind.

No one in my family ever calls me by my given name. In fact, when I hear it I know it’s the first sign of a coming storm and I’d better start thinking escape plans. My nickname, Marnie Googles, hails from a cartoon from the early part of last century. My father would sing the jingle to me when I was little, substituting the main character’s name. “Marnie Googles! With the goo, goo, googley eyes!” Silly, yes, but like all things Daddy, I cherished my moniker and it stuck. Eventually, as all my father’s nicknames came to do, it was shortened and I became Googs.

“Hey, Dad,” I said in our first conversation since I’d gotten myself somewhat under control.

“Googs!” He replied. Like this was any one of the many conversations we had each week. “You okay?”

“Not really, so I’m on my way.” For once, my Dad didn’t accuse me of overreacting. I caught what seemed like the next flight to Dallas. If he was going to fight this cancer, I was going to get in there with him. I was completely convinced my sheer strength of will would be enough.

Even now, some five years later, I can’t remember how I got from my house to his. In fact, there are details that come up every now and again that ring no familiar bells in my head. My only clear recollection is that I somehow ended up at the house and remained there, save for a brief time I spent a weekend elsewhere. It was Father’s Day, 2008. My father looked as he always did... he looked absolutely fine.

When walking into my father’s house and entering the foyer, a visitor is greeted by his office on the left and a formal living room on the right. Since it’s rare to find Dad anywhere else, he was (predictably) working on the computer when I walked in the door. He looked over his outdated monster of a monitor with his cheater-glasses perched on the tip of his nose.