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1 THE FALL

I was nervous about that particular trip. In his time off from work, Chris traveled many places to rock climb. It was his passion. I was used to his going off into the wilderness for as long as a month. And while I understood the dangers of rock climbing, I knew he was a skilled, cautious climber. But that trip felt different.

Throughout that fall and winter I had noticed the glow in Chris. He was joyful, full of life, funny. He'd tell stories about his life as a bellman at a hotel in the Colorado ski town of Breckenridge. At moments he'd have me in stitches. At other moments, he seemed increasingly wise beyond his years, knowing at twenty-five what I'd worked a lifetime to understand.

In February I called to set a time for our next dinner together in Breckenridge. "Is it okay if I invite a friend?" he asked. "You'll like her." My interest perked up. A girlfriend? That was something new. Chris sounded smitten.

It was a night to remember, freezing cold and snowing. Chris sat between us at the Japanese restaurant with a gigantic smile smeared across his face. He was brimming with affection and positively radiant. As we left the restaurant, he grabbed the sides of my furry hood and said, "You look so cute!" It was an expression of unrestrained happiness. I was thrilled. Chris was in love.

That spring we saw each other a couple of times, but the fates seemed to keep us apart. Snowstorms hit hard. Chris came down with the flu.

In April my daughter, Kate, called. She was having a hard time in school, unable to concentrate, exhausted. "Something feels very wrong," she said. I flew out to San Francisco to be with her. One day as we walked down the street, these words ran through my mind: *It's just going to be you and me, Kate.* The thought came through and was gone.

When I returned home I called Chris, hoping to see him before he left on a spring climbing trip. I was too late. He was leaving the next morning.

Kate needed me again and I flew out, thankful to be with her in a time of difficulty. School ended, and Kate came home the first week of May. All that month my mind was on Kate. She was having trouble thinking and sleeping; she wasn't herself. Day after day we confronted the problems upsetting her life.

In the third week of May, a friend flew down from Idaho for a visit, our first reunion in five years. We chatted incessantly, bought flats of petunias and planted them in the garden.

On Sunday morning, May 23, before taking my friend to the airport, I suddenly remembered my son. *Oh, Chris—I must call him right now.* There was a sense of urgency.

I got his answering machine. "Chris, where are you? I miss you. Call me."

On Tuesday he called back. "Hi, Mom."

"Where are you, Chris?" I asked, feeling apprehensive, then brightening with hope that he might already be home.

"I'm in Yosemite, getting fruit at the grocery store," he answered. "I'm sorry I didn't call sooner. I can only use my cell phone so much."

"Chris, are you having fun? Are you with other people?"

"Oh, yes, I'm having a blast. There's a whole community of people here. I'm staying in Camp 4." His voice was full of vigor.

"When do you plan to come home, sweetie?"

"Plan? What would I do with a plan? I'll come home when I'm ready."

I laughed. It was so typical Chris. "When you get home we'll have a barbecue. I love you, Chris."

"I love you too, Mom."

On a beautiful Thursday afternoon the last week of May, I opened the screen door and stepped into the backyard. The yard looked lovely with its fresh green grass and newly planted flowers. I eyed the new charcoal grill, anticipating family gatherings in the sweet summer months ahead. As I stepped back towards the door, I turned to admire the scenery once again. For an instant life stood still. A haze hovered in the air. I had the distinct impression that something was about to happen.

Between 9:30 and 10:00 on Friday night I was relaxing in bed, when a sparkling golden light swept into my room, surrounding me in a Heavenly glow. I felt wrapped in an aura of protection, as if I'd been transported to a magical place, very

safe and wonderful. The light felt like incredibly deep love, like God was right there with me—and I couldn't imagine why.

Saturday morning I took a walk. The golden light had mellowed, but I could still sense it. *God has given me an incredible gift*, I thought, and wondered what it meant. Kate and I spent the afternoon at a frame shop, framing some of her artwork. She complained of lack of energy and motivation. She didn't know what was happening and seemed to be holding on by the barest thread.

Saturday evening an old high school friend called. Though we spoke occasionally when I visited my mom, he had never called me at home in the thirty-five years since I had moved to Colorado. When he asked about my kids, I told him Chris was climbing in Yosemite. He said, "Doesn't that make you nervous?" "Yes," I replied. "But Chris is a good climber, and he is careful and meticulous by nature. I take comfort in that."

I went to bed with my mind on Kate. *There is something in the human spirit that can rise above adversity. There is something of the miraculous that can work with whatever comes up. I believe in Kate. I will help her find her way.*

At four o'clock Sunday morning the phone rang. Instead of answering, I rolled over and drifted back towards slumber. Minutes later the doorbell rang twice, followed by loud knocks.

Kate called from her bedroom. "Mom? What's going on?"

"I don't know, honey." I grabbed my robe, hurried downstairs, and looked through the peephole. Under the bright porch light stood two policemen and a woman in street clothes. I opened the door.



5 THE FIRE OF LIFE

Sadness is a necessary part of loss. Grieving must have its day. Do not stop the tears. Allow them to freely flow. Do not turn from pain when it comes. Be with it and honor it. It will pass.

Know that this lament is not suffering, any more than winter suffers the loss of barefoot days through soft green grass. Sun-kissed crystals dangle from trees, and the white earth glistens. Honor winter, and know that spring will come. Flowers will bloom and the heart will heal. We will live and even flourish.

Nurturance is the bedrock that allows the soul to thrive. To nurture myself now is to be light with myself, joke with myself, laugh gently at my gravity. To nurture myself is to take care of my needs in the best way possible—to rest, take walks in the mountains, soothe this rawness, and become creative again.

To nurture myself I only need to receive whatever comes my way, accepting that life just goes on. Witness this life. See

that it is but a single stop in the journey of the soul. Be in relationship with others.

There is no need to block experience. Don't hide from the things that cause pain, for they are tools for healing—sunlight, children playing, the patter of rain, the smell of pine. Receive fully my life this moment, and I will be carried forth. Lay bare my wound and allow it to bleed. Go forward with the sense that things are as they should be, and my loss will be transformed.



In September that first year, I returned to work with a dinner-performance of “The Hobbit” at the Vanilla Factory Coffee House in Denver. Before Chris died, I had been staging events there on a regular basis. The shows combined my two loves, cooking and storytelling. I would cook and serve a four-course meal for about twenty-five people, then I would perform a story; the meal and the performance would be around a theme.

“The Hobbit” was the last story Chris had seen me perform, in the spring. He had arrived at my house feeling sick and wasn't sure he could make it to the show. While he lay on the couch, I rolled out a counter's length of dough for the chicken pot pie I would be serving. From the kitchen I could hear him on the phone talking to friends in Breckenridge. He talked fast and ardently. I could feel his urgency and his love. *My goodness, I thought. Chris doesn't lose a second of living. Even when he is sick, he carries on in the most heartfelt way.* I was aware in that moment of the rich bond he had with others. It made me tingle with happiness for him.




7 TRUE FREEDOM

When your child dies, you learn to roam the depths, grasping for ground, rising and falling in an unfamiliar world. But how do I endure? Chris said, *I will be with you always. You can reach me at any time.*

Often I slip into longing, crushed by loss. Chris is nowhere. I am alone in my misery. The sacrifice is too great to bear.

To endure, I must believe. When I embrace the spirit that is Chris, I find him everywhere. When I cling to the person he no longer is, I cannot find him. Every day I bring myself back to this awareness. If I am consumed by doubt, there will be doubt. If I am consumed by loss, there will be loss.

Believing takes commitment and focus. It is daily practice.



I needed to have a plan for that first birthday. Christmas had come with its miracle, but his birthday loomed ahead. This seemed harder and more personal. How would I get through

it? I couldn't just languish at home; it would be better to go somewhere.

I decided to go to Chris's world with Greg to celebrate him in nature—to Joshua Tree.

That trip was invaluable. I learned that miracles don't come when you expect them to, nor in the way you expect. I learned that God and Chris weren't going to save me from the pain of going through the first birthday. I was willing to go out into Chris's world and risk what that would mean—that I wouldn't find him there. It was something I had to learn.

January 17, 2004

Today is Chris's birthday. I am sitting on a boulder in Joshua Tree National Park of southern California watching Greg climb with his girlfriend, Sarah. With so many things going wrong—stalled traffic driving west, no vacant camping sites close to the climbing walls, Greg's car going dead—I'm getting the message that Chris does not want me to climb. He knows I'd be terrified! He doesn't feel that climbing is something for his mom to be doing. I'm relieved that I don't have to. I don't really want to. I'll be camp cook instead.

The scene here is stark: granite monoliths rising out of a sandy plain studded with the twisted, spiked Joshua trees, resembling shrunken palms.

Twenty-six years ago Chris was born. *Chris, darling, you came through me at 1:38. At the moment of your birth, the universe came into a certain alignment.*

Ten after one. The energies are quickening. I feel immersed in sun, wind, and rock. More climbers are starting up. *Though the route remains the same,*

the ascent is always new—uncertain, shifting and unfolding

One twenty-eight. I am waiting for a sign. I yell up to Greg and Sarah, “In ten minutes Chris was born!” They say, “Oh.” It is a tense moment on the wall. Sarah, a newcomer to climbing, is frightened. She can’t find a hold. Greg is standing on the ledge above, encouraging her. They can’t hear each other because of the overhang. I yell their messages back and forth, thinking Chris will help her up. She will step onto the ledge at 1:38—that will be the sign!

The wind and cold are fierce. More yelling as Sarah lifts, descends, pulls, gropes, and hugs the immense, unyielding rock. I am mesmerized, waiting for the next words to shout. I’m part of the team. I glance at my watch. One forty-five. Sarah is not going up, not this time.

I meander a long sandy trail, then go back to the car and weep.

January 18, 2004

So much for expectation. A voice whispers, *Destiny is not a given, rather a possibility. We mint our lives moment to moment.*

It was hard, this first birthday. I felt his absence. Today I am not looking for Chris, and I feel him again. *Mom, I am with you always.* Seated comfortably in a nook of warm rock, in the ancient refuge of high desert, pen in hand, insights come.

The universe needs the energy of enlightened souls. Chris gave up his attachments for a higher Truth. He loved all earthly things and beings, and still he let go. That was the great achievement of his life.



8 YOSEMITE

I sense that Chris is becoming more involved in the cosmos. I wonder if he is moving further away. He has been close to us, but will it last?

The question is wrong. With the passage of time, though Chris may pursue the heights of Heaven, his light shines ever true. His voice becomes my voice, his breath mine.

I sometimes think that those who lose children are the lucky ones. We have been chosen by God to bear a cross. It can kill us or stir us. Out of the throes of heartbreak comes rebirth. I pull myself up, peek over the rim, and blink. Nothing is as I thought. I am humbled, and I am encouraged. Here I am, more willing to live on the edge, more willing to risk, to love and forgive. I follow wherever life takes me—to places I have never been before.



March 1, 2004

It feels daunting to go to Yosemite on the anniversary of Chris's death, to just take off in my car and go.

To look back on Chris taking off in his car last May and never coming home, and to repeat that action. It is an important step—but how can I prepare? Even to imagine that time last year is painful. How can I actually travel to the place where Chris lost his life? The memory puts me back in that time, imagining Chris in his Subaru.

I must keep in my heart the knowledge that Chris's soul knew he was going to die, that something spectacular happened, and it is cause for celebration. It is an anniversary celebration of a miracle. Going there will put me in touch with that miracle. It will be scary. I must go without expectation, stay with the truth of things as it unfolds, whatever it brings.

Last year there was a quickening in my awareness of Chris's impending death. That was then, and this is now. So it is not to relive that time but to see how things open up in this time.

Going to Yosemite isn't for the purpose of retracing Chris's path and invoking sadness. It is to stay with the beauty of the miracle, a deep respect, a tribute to Chris, and to stay with where he is today.

Once I knew I was going to Yosemite, it became the focal point of my life. I thought about it daily. I dreamed about it. It was the exciting unknown that lay ahead. Then, as winter began to lose its blustery grip, I learned that Teague Holmes was also going to Yosemite for the anniversary of Chris's death. We made our plans.

With the coming of spring, the shock of Chris's death had diminished, leaving me with a deeper realization of loss. I found myself wedged between two untenable worlds. Behind

me, Chris's life on Earth was receding into the distance, while ahead lay a worrisome veil of uncertainty. I pined for his softness and playfulness, his sweet endearing personality, and feared the day when his spirit would also disappear, and all would be lost.

Bleak days were followed by blessed days, such divine sweetness, when the light of heaven streamed through, and I would see with fresh eyes that Chris's death had been purposeful. It was always going to happen. He was always going home, so close to God he was, and I would just feel so happy for him, imagining his joy, while feeling his golden essence and the goodness and beauty of it all.

When all of life is glad again and bursting with exuberance, the tender buds of healing can peek through. Wondrously, in the midst of tumult, came a steadying sense of closeness with Chris in my heart. I could be with friends without being overwhelmed with sadness. Most significantly, for the first time, I was taking a few of Chris's framed pictures out of the drawer where I had placed them and setting them out. Amid the pangs and birthing of spring, I created a shrine, which included pictures, a St. Christopher statue, Chris's climbing photo album, and an urn of his ashes.



There is something beautiful asleep inside of me. I'm given a lifetime to wake it up. To awaken the kernel of beauty, I must receive the life I am given and surrender to the Way of things—as each moment comes to light and passes on. Otherwise, I will simply never get over Chris dying and never know the dawn.

