Date of Death

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47. My mother knew she would die young, so she sprinted between life's milestones, relentlessly pursued by an unwanted fate. She was married at twenty, gave birth to me at twenty-two. She broke the news to me when I was eight years old, and even though her death was still seventeen years away, it became an ever-present force in my life, a shadow, at best only temporarily forgotten. In response, I became a model child, ambitious and eager to please. I earned straight A's, tested into the honors program, won spelling bees, and, later, scholarships. As a teenager, I never rebelled. As a young adult, I never tried to find myself. I didn't have time for any of that. I wanted to make my mother proud of me while I could, to show her that I was worth it.

12. In sixth grade, a girl in my class stopped coming to school. Our teacher explained that she would not be back. She had only one week left, so her parents were spending it with her, letting her do the things she loved. I thought about what I would do with so little time. Go swimming. Watch fireworks. Eat pumpkin pie every day, even if it was summer and Thanksgiving was months away. And then I was disappointed in myself because I thought I should dream bigger.

17 or 81. I wasn't attracted to the boy I lost my virginity to. He was scrawny with acned skin, and he smelled of insecticide. We were counselors at the same summer camp. Friends, I suppose. As he walked me back to my cabin after bed check, he confided that he would die next year, at seventeen. *A virgin*, he lamented. We did it in a clearing beside the lake, the mosquitoes feasting on our skin. He thanked me profusely before and after, and I thought, even though I wasn't thrilled with how or when or with whom it had happened, that I had done a good deed. I ran into him at the airport when we were both in our mid-twenties. *Still alive, I see*. He blushed, shrugged. *I was just a dumb kid trying to get laid*.

60. The captain of the high school hockey team shot himself in the head, and instead of dying at sixty, he died at sixteen. He wasn't the first. Suicide was certainty's only loophole.

22. My college roommate lived as though she was not going to die at twenty-one. She saved money and studied hard. She talked about going to law school and getting married and living abroad. She had no intention of dying when she was supposed to; she had a plan. The night before her date of death, we took a cab to the hospital. A half dozen people loitered in the waiting room, but only a few had something visibly wrong with them. The others—a balding middle-aged man, a spandex-clad woman in her sixties, an anorexic eating her way through a bag of caramel corn—had, like my roommate, come to the hospital preemptively, in a desperate bid to elude death. The next morning, the balding man clutched his heart and died, right there in the lobby as we looked on. The athletic woman had a brain aneurysm around noon. The anorexic collapsed in the early evening. I asked the receptionist if the doctors had ever been able to save anyone from their fate. *Never*, she said. *But that doesn't stop them from trying.* At one minute to midnight, my roommate passed out, and, panicked, I yelled for help. I hadn't thought this moment through, that I would be alone, in a dingy lobby that smelled of antiseptic and old age, watching my best friend die. Except she didn't. She had only fainted. A few minutes later, she opened her eyes. *Look*, I said, pointing at a clock on the wall. *It's past midnight*. Ecstatic, my roommate proclaimed that she was the first person to defeat death. One year to the day later, she died in a car accident. It was her dad's mistake. When he'd calculated how old she'd be when she died, his math had been off by a year.

67. My college graduation fell on the same day as my grandmother's date of death, on the opposite side of the country. A terrible coincidence. My parents made themselves miserable, debating what to do. They knew there was no good option; they'd feel guilty either way. In the end, my mother came to my graduation; my father went to his mother's bedside. I missed him, but I understood. My own mother would be dying in four years, and there was nothing I wouldn't sacrifice to be with her then.

25. After college, one of my classmates couldn't get a job. Most applications asked for date of death, and no one would hire him because he only had three years left.

107. I went on a date with an older man who had a strong chin and a British accent. He made me laugh so hard I spit my sixteen-dollar martini out, drenching the bar with gin and saliva. We saw each other the next day and the day after that. When he asked my date of death, I thought nothing of it because I was not slated to die until eighty-six. But when I told him, his face crumpled like used Kleenex. *That means even with the age difference, I'd have to live thirteen years without you*. I shrugged. We'd still have nearly sixty-five years together. But he had thought about this; he didn't want to be alone in old age. We never saw each other again.

28. A colleague quit his job and moved to an unstable country to help fight the corrupt government there. He only had six months left, and he wanted to do something useful before he died. But he wouldn't have traveled to that country if he hadn't known he was going to die soon. Would he have died so soon if he hadn't traveled to that country? I became obsessed with counterfactuals after that. I spent hours trying to figure out whether death inexorably affected our lives or whether life was just a series of decisions leading inexorably to our deaths.

79. I met a man who reminded me of maple syrup. Sweet and comforting, he made me feel better than anyone had in a long time. By the time we exchanged dates of death, I had already decided to marry him. My mom only had a year and a half left. She had made me promise not to rush into anything, but I wanted her at my wedding. Still, when I learned he would die eleven years before me, it gave me pause. I thought of my father, loving my mother so much that he wed her despite knowing he'd lose her young. But I also thought of the man I'd dated a few years before, the one who had dumped me because he couldn't bear to live out his last years alone. I phoned my

father, asked him if he'd ever thought about not marrying my mom, knowing she'd die at forty-seven. He didn't hesitate. *Not for a second. Better to have nearly three decades with your mother than a lifetime with anyone else*. I accepted my boyfriend's proposal after he'd promised we'd have children, so I wouldn't have to die alone.

47. My dad and I were with my mom when she died. Knowing it was coming didn't make it any easier.

19. Online, a group of youths became obsessed with thwarting death by killing people before their time. One misguided young man attempted to detonate a bomb near the entrance to a children's hospital, but it malfunctioned, killing only him and a homeless man who happened to be passing by, both slated to die that day.

51. When my daughter was born, we learned that she would die at fifty-one. It didn't seem so young until I realized that I'd still be alive. It didn't seem fair that I'd have to bury my parents, my husband, and my child. I cried for days and had trouble bonding with her. We never became close. I never told her why.

69+. A nursing home caught fire in the middle of the night. Thirty-seven people were killed. Twenty-eight of them had said goodbye to their families the day before. Still, one of those families sued, arguing that the nursing home had known that many of its residents were scheduled to die on the same day, yet it hadn't taken any precautions. No extra personnel. No additional safety equipment. No preemptive phone calls to emergency services. The judge tossed the case out, ruling that the residents would have died anyway, by some other means, so the nursing home couldn't be held responsible. But it seemed to me that he'd missed the point. Punishing negligence reduced negligence. Holding the nursing home liable would not have changed the fates of those who perished, but it might have prevented future nursing home residents from dying in a similar way.

97. When my son was born, all I wanted to know was when he would die. I shed tears of relief when I learned I would die before him, that I wouldn't die alone.

14 and 91. A coworker bore identical twins with radically different death dates, but it was impossible to determine which would die when. The twins were inseparable; they

took all the same classes and played all the same sports. They shared the same likes and dislikes and, of course, the same genes. But when they came down with the flu as teenagers and were rushed to the hospital, one twin was assigned the better doctor and lived. Or maybe one doctor was assigned the more fortunate twin, and thus was able to save her patient.

97. We tried the usual remedies when my son said his tummy hurt: clear fluids, bland food, plenty of rest. When the pain persisted, worsened, we took him to the hospital. *Appendicitis*, the doctor said. *Emergency surgery*. There was never any doubt he would live. Still, I paced the waiting room, cursed my sluggish response, gnawed the inside of my cheek like chewing gum. I imagined my little boy, cut open on the operating table, the surgeon extracting his insides as casually as a butcher removes giblets from a chicken. In the end, relief came not from knowing that my son's death was nearly nine decades away, but from running my thumb across the scar that stretched down the side of his abdomen—proof that it was all over, that he had survived.

51. When my daughter asked, my husband and I answered her honestly. She was so young at the time that fifty-one seemed a lifetime away, and she went out to play without further ado. A decade later, when she was in college, she called us at three in the morning, sobbing.

2 months. My cousin gave birth to a healthy baby boy—eight pounds, two ounces. When she learned her son's date of death, she asked the doctors if she had to take him home. She didn't want to become attached.

97. My son was wild with the knowledge that he'd live to ninety-seven. Skydiving, BASE jumping, he did it all. He took a job as a war reporter and traveled to destitute, violent countries, where he sent back heartbreaking videos of malnourished orphans and boys barely out of diapers, toting guns. My husband and I watched him from afar, proud of him, in awe of his bravery.

51. My daughter spent her twenties following false prophets and con men, fortune-tellers and witch doctors, practitioners of alternative medicine—anyone who promised salvation from death. We thought she was grieving, that anger would follow denial, but she was utterly unable to accept her fate.

63. My father was diagnosed with terminal cancer. The doctors told him treatment might extend his life by two or three years. He declined. *I'll die in seven months regardless*, he said and asked for hospice care to ease the pain. But date of death had long been circular to me. Had my dad refused treatment knowing he would die in seven months, or would my dad die in seven months because he refused treatment? In a confused bid for clarity, I asked him to reconsider. *What does it matter*? he said. *We know when I'm going to die*. But they couldn't both be true, could they? He couldn't die on the same date regardless of whether he got treatment, could he? I wished life was a science fiction novel, that I could split his timeline in two.

97. When we received the pre-dawn phone call, we knew it was our son. We hurried to the hospital in pajama pants and T-shirts. My son would live, but he would never walk again. We brought him home and settled him into his childhood bedroom. With him in it, the house became pungent, as though it had been doused in vinegar. I tried to spend time with him, but he was quick to anger. Not at me, though I bore the brunt of his abuses, but at his fate. He moved out as soon as he could.

72. I became friends with a therapist who specialized in counseling people who were afraid of death. *But who will counsel you*? I asked. *I like to think that I've drunk enough of my own Kool-Aid that I don't need counseling*, she replied. But on the appointed day, she didn't wait for death to come for her. She woke up early, swallowed a bottle of pills, and perished alone on her living room floor. She left a note: *The anxiety was killing me.*

51. My daughter turned to drugs to numb the pain of certain death. She had no interest in rehab. We were not surprised when she overdosed. But if she hadn't known her date of death, would she still have died at the same time in the same way? Maybe she would have lived a fuller, more productive life. Maybe she would have had a family. Instead, it had all seemed pointless to her. Pointless and painful.

16. I wrote an op-ed to a major newspaper suggesting that we'd be better off not knowing when we'd die, that ignorance would allow us to make better, less hampered decisions. One reader responded, writing that her four-year-old daughter would die at sixteen, that she had decided against telling the girl this. *She is so full of life*, the woman shared. *Learning the truth would be the equivalent of strapping a bomb with*

a timer to her chest and instructing her to ignore it. Impossible. I won't do it.

97. After the accident, my son confined himself to a ground-floor studio apartment that smelled of unwashed laundry. For years, my husband and I went into the city once a week to see him and buy him anything he needed. Then he had asked us not to visit so often, and it became once a month. Then a phone call instead of a visit, regularly at first and then sporadically. Eventually, the only way I could get through to him was to call so often that it was easier to answer than to keep ignoring my calls, and even then, we would speak for ten minutes, max. But he never blocked my number.

70. I was surprised when a childhood friend wrote and asked if I would be with her when she died. We hadn't been close in decades. I had been ordinary, while she had been something more—successful businesswoman, well-regarded philanthropist, civic leader. A wing of the local hospital was named after her. I expected a constant stream of admirers making a pilgrimage to her countryside home to pay homage to her, to shake her hand and kiss her cheek and thank her for all she'd done. But there was only her private nurse and me, and I realized that this was the death I feared.

92. When a friend's son, a veteran still haunted by the war, hanged himself in his parents' garage, I found myself thinking about my son lurking in his apartment with the lights off like a troll beneath a bridge. I wondered if he'd considered committing suicide. Not that I wanted him to. But his life had become so tortured it seemed like the obvious choice.

28 and 33. The couple who lived next door shared a date of death, a fact that comforted them greatly. When that date arrived, they went into the city to see their favorite artist perform one last time. Halfway through the second song, a domestic terrorist opened fire on the concert-goers. Forty-three people were killed. None of the deaths were a surprise. But I wondered, if the neighbors had spent the day apart instead of together, would death still have found a way to come for both of them?

79. As his death approached, my husband became increasingly withdrawn. I feared he was depressed, the way the terminally ill sometimes were. But one day, he emerged from his office carrying a stack of paper. *My opus*, he told me. *Will you read it?*

Although it was nearly 400 pages long, I finished it in a single sitting. His memoirs, beautiful and deep. I was stunned because I'd never known he was a writer. He'd been a tax lawyer until five years ago, and his hobbies had been more pedestrian. I wished I'd known this side of him sooner.

75. A charlatan was arrested for hawking a potion she claimed would extend life for ten years beyond date of death. They said she had made millions scamming the desperate. I thought of my daughter and all the time and money she had wasted chasing empty promises, and I found myself hoping they would throw the book at this woman. She only had four months left to live, and her lawyers requested a suspended sentence, but the judge gave her two years, saying that if her potion worked as well as she said it did, she'd enjoy another eight years of freedom after serving her time. When she died in prison four months later, it felt like justice for my daughter.

79. When my husband died, I wasn't sure if my son would come to the funeral, but he showed up five minutes before the service started and stayed through the reception, scowling miserably beside me, grunting his thanks to well-wishers, sneaking drinks from his hip flask. Before he left, he hugged me and told me to hang in there. But at that point, he stopped responding to my calls entirely.

82. A childless friend threw a party the day before he died, an over-the-top 600-person bash at a pricey waterside venue he had rented out for the occasion. An open bar with top-shelf liquor, lobster tails for hors d'oeuvres. A legendary band playing on a makeshift stage. I found my friend and complimented him on the most impressive party I had ever attended. He thanked me and said he'd realized about a year ago that he had more money than he would ever be able to spend, so he'd started planning a fabulous soirée. *I know it sounds silly*, he said, *but this brought so much joy to the last year of my life. All of the dread and anxiety was replaced by something fun, something to look forward to, so much so that I almost forgot about death.*

84. So many of my friends were dying I could have wallpapered the house with their obituaries. I remembered as children we'd compared dates of death, most of them so far in the future that it seemed inconsequential, no different than comparing height or shoe size. We had all hovered around eighty. And now we were all dying. I went to visit a former classmate, days away from death. She had been bedridden for years,

writhing in pain beneath the twisted sheets that chafed her dry skin, leaving rashes on the backs of her thighs and bed sores on her elbows and hips. She was relieved at the prospect of death; she wondered why her Lord had taken so long to call her home.

86. The retirement home was like a prison in that it would serve you anything you wanted for your last meal. I wanted to re-create a dinner I'd eaten on my honeymoon: fresh-baked baguette, boeuf bourguignon, tarte Tatin with crème fraîche. A Kir Royale and a glass of red wine. *Fancy*, the chef said, pleased by the challenge. I wished I had someone to eat it with, besides the other residents of the home, who toasted my life and took turns sharing kind words about me, but whom I didn't love and who didn't love me. Afterward, I took a bath and went to bed, less anxious than I thought I would be, but sadder, lonelier. This wasn't how I had wanted my life to end. When I woke up the next morning, my last, my son was sitting beside my bed. *You're here*, I said and reached for his hand. He took it reluctantly. My heart sunk. *You resent being here*. I was a balloon at a child's birthday party, inflated only to be popped. *No*, he said. *I don't resent being here. I resent being alive*. He had never made peace with his paralysis, never even tried. *Why are you?* I asked. *Alive?* He looked away. *For you. You didn't want to die alone*, he said, voice thick with emotion. Resentment, obviously, but also a hint of pride that he had made this sacrifice for me. I blinked back tears. I understood how much being here had cost him. He squeezed my hand with something like affection and then changed the subject. Our conversation was stilted, our bodies tense. We were less like mother and son than two strangers trying to make the best of an uncomfortable situation. But he was here. I wondered, if he hadn't known my date of death, would he have come to see me sooner, or more often, because I could die at any time? Or would I not have seen him at all? Would it have been too late by the time he realized he wanted to say goodbye, another regret he carried to his grave, along with that ill-fated trip that resulted in the loss of his legs? What did it matter? Counterfactuals were pointless. He had lost his legs. His sister had died too young. He had known I'd die today, and he had come.