Mid pandemic, I craved distraction from rounds in the neonatal ICU. Months of holding parental grief and infant suffering while working in a safety net hospital at the epicenter of pandemic upheaval left me shattered. I snuggled my children, and we watched an escapist film about a world without The Beatles. Yesterday. A global event transformed the main character into half the man he used to be. I viewed it with intrigue as he discovered his whole self. I felt soothed, lulled.

Tucking my boys into their beds, I described their grandmother singing Paul McCartney’s ballad to little girl me. Yellow blankie in hand, I melted into every off-key note that she crooned. My 8-year-old son’s eyes warmed. He requested my off-key rendition. We hummed ourselves to sleep.

During my next overnight hospital shift, a premature infant was born. Fused eyes, gelatinous skin, cartilaginous ribs. I spent hours compensating for his immature lungs, wielding life support, incubator, blood tests. I knew machines could never breathe for him; he would never inhale, exhale, babble, coo. While he lay dying, his nurse whispered to his mother with soulful purpose as she sang to him. While his heart stopped, his mother’s hands encircled his tiny body. I told her how her bravery shone from the shadows. Why he had to go, I don’t know, he wouldn’t say.

A few times each year, I had cared for babies too immature to survive. I placated myself when these babies died by empowering bereaved parents. In the before times, families and friends and aunties and preachers and grandmas and more would come to the hospital. Because, without ambiguity, dead babies embodied hardship. As a physician, the virtue of communal mourning gave me solace, absorbed my grief.

There was no virtue in this death. The pandemic thwarted collective mourning in the fluorescent glow of hospital conference rooms. And I was left holding this loss in the space behind my sternum. I ruminated. I thought of calling her, but worried about projecting my own grief onto her, about reintroducing trauma. I did not call. But I could not let her go.

All those weeks, my son sang “Yesterday.” He sang it in the shower. He hummed while we walked after dinner. He took my phone to the basement and played it. Again and again. His tiny voice rang out with amusing inaccuracy as he longed for yesterday.

For months after I lost that baby, I drove back and forth from work as a silhouette against the dark hues of evening, morning, evening. I drove past children playing in yards of closed schools. Skip, hop, jump. I drove on days with no traffic and in the hours after shootings. I drove through protests, my car shaking in the vortex of helicopter blade slap. I drove past churches whose plywood-covered windows were spray-painted with pleas for salvation. I drove under hand-drawn banners flapping from highway overpasses: We can’t breathe; Plz help; Vote him out.

One morning, I saw a woman on the sidewalk a few blocks from the hospital. From behind, she looked like the mother whose baby died. Her fingers cupped the palm of a masked child that I imagined to be her surviving son. I slowed down, hoping to glimpse her in an undaunted moment of parenting. Love was such an easy game to play. It was not her.

My knuckles flexed atop my steering wheel, and my grief poured out as heaving sobs. Tears came suddenly. I cried. I drove, navigating the injustice of needless loss. Tears slid into my ear canals and along my clavicles.

I understood then: more was coming. More loss, more bravery, more reckoning. I was relearning to release it while mourning in the twilight of tomorrow.

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