

KACI DIANE

*Falling Apart &*

PULLING IT  
TOGETHER



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# STATUES

FEBRUARY 2011

**I**SIT HERE, IN THE 4TH FLOOR CONFERENCE ROOM, where you sat almost two months earlier, everything looks the same. There are still four tables; two of which are pushed together to make one large table, one medium table secluded in a corner, and one coffee table positioned as a centerpiece among cushioned chairs. Walking into the room the couch is still to the far right under the window and the blinds to the larger window straight back are open. The only major thing different is you, your lack of physical presence.

Our positions used to be reversed, you used to be the one occupying this room while I looked in from the outside. I would pause in the hallway and briefly wave at you through the large glass door as you studied on the couch. I used to expect to see you in there the nights I had duty, I'd pause by the door and wave, and you'd wave back before reburying yourself in a Chemistry book.

It's such a simple thing, a wave. It's only a hand gesture but it holds so much meaning. A small swoosh of the hand used to seem impersonal until I couldn't give them to you anymore. Now I realize how personal they are. A head nod, a fist bump, a high five - these are all ways of acknowledging other people's existences. Quiet ways of saying I'm glad you are alive. I like to think that you are looking in at me now, happy that I am still sitting here, resisting the urge to believe this room is haunted.

There's something about being alone in this room that makes me uneasy. I can sense you in a way that is making me uncomfortable like I'm trespassing on someone else's memories. When you studied here I never studied with you. You were always either alone or with your friends. From what I gather you were the diligent one, the one that said 'Okay guys it's time to start studying now. No more goofing around.' I've heard about your energy supplements how you rationed them out to keep friends awake. I remember you showed me a picture of your various vitamins, protein shakes, and energy pills when we were checking in residents sized portraits of ugly babies.

We didn't have much in common. At that table, at the beginning of the year, I tried hard to find familiar ground because you were cute and you lived in my building. The more we talked the more I realized how completely opposite we were. Compared to me you were perfect. I am easily overwhelmed and often wear my emotions as a jumpsuit, my entire body taken over with feelings too massive to wear on only my sleeves. While you choose your emotions, a task that you assured

me is not impossible.

I remember the one time we had an in-depth conversation, it was in the lunchroom. Walking into the cafeteria you were sitting with your back to the window on the first row to the far right at one of those round tables. It was one of those rare occasions you were out of your uniform of gym shorts and cut-off T-shirts, you looked very handsome in your collared shirt, pressed slacks, and loafers.

I'm hesitant to admit this, but for a second I had a crush on you. It was your confidence that drew me to you. Others have described you as playful but with me you always seemed regal or maybe even majestic. I almost sat at another table because I didn't want to bother you. The nickname you gave me was my okay to come closer, your gentle nudge letting me know I could sit down with you. "K dot C dot."

Sitting across the table from you we talked about God and church. You told me stories from the bible that I could not identify despite having the same book in my grasp for my entire life. You were so sure of your stories, and your no strings attached acceptance of my spiritual location allowed me to start accepting it myself.

In my memory you are a statue, permanently sitting across from me in the lunchroom exuding an attainable level of confidence. I have several statues of you. One statue that puts a smile on my face happened during one of our weekly RA meetings. We met in the old yearbook room, us seven resident assistants and Josh were sitting on the couches and you were sitting across from us in your chair, alone on your side of the room, wearing your uniform. You had your right ankle resting comfortably on your left knee with that blender cup GNC sent you for being a loyal customer sitting beside the chair. You were uniquely joyful because you and Nicole were officially dating. I had never seen you happier than you were that day. Later that same day the two of us were standing outside of Dempsey and you were punching in the code to open the door. "I just think it is... I don't want to say weird..." I said, "but it is kind of weird. Because she's so..." "Loosey Goosey," you said. "Yeah. And you're so..."

"Not," you added.

"Exactly!"

I envy Nicole because I know she has a million more statues of you than I have. She got to have endless conversations with you, deep and meaningful ones as well as light-hearted and playful ones. For the same reason, I want to weep for her. She has so many statues of you. The memories of places gone to, things talked about, plans made, she must see you everywhere.

I wish I had known you were going to die. Had known I would have watched you more closely, I can't sincerely say I would have tried to befriend you. If a new relationship didn't look like it had the stamina to last then it didn't seem worth the effort

to pursue. Somehow I found myself missing you anyway. When they confirmed your death, I cried like you were mine. I stood in my kitchen and sobbed into my mother's arms. The sun shining into our window made me cry even harder because I knew other people were having a good day. It didn't seem fair. How could one life end and another life sit in a park enjoying the sunshine?

Around your real friends, the ones that weren't afraid to know you, I felt guilty for shedding so many tears. I tried to stop them but they just kept on coming. After I apologized for what seemed like the millionth time for continuing to cry a mutual friend said, "It doesn't matter if he simply smiled at you or opened the door for you, he was a part of your life. It's okay if you're crying as much as his best friend." That comment was a huge blessing to me because it gave me the permission - that I was withholding from myself - to grieve you without shame.

Sometimes I call your cell phone even though I know you won't answer, not because you don't want to but because you can't. I call you more now than I called when you could answer. Shortly after you died I wrote down all the memories I had of you, there were more than I expected. The biggest lesson I have learned from you is this: People are going to affect your life whether you ask them to or not. You can either embrace all they have to offer while they are here or you can notice all the things you've missed when they are gone. 🌻

# GRAVES DISEASE

APRIL 1, 2011

I'M BROKEN. FOR MONTHS I HAVE BEEN TELLING MYSELF I'M FINE, and keeping my illness a secret, but I'm not. I'm sick. I see my doctor on a regular basis, twice every month since August. When I do talk to my friends about it, it's a joke.

"Why weren't you in class today?"

"Oh I just had a simple radiation treatment, and I'm not allowed to be around the public for 4 days, can't hug people for 9, and can't be around pregnant women or children under the age of 5 for 11. But think of it this way. I'm a mini radiation plant. Who else can say 'I am literally detrimental to your health? Hello Mr. Brightside.'"

It's not so funny anymore. Not after today, after I ran out of class crying that 'I am just a little overwhelmed.' Balling my eyes out in the bathroom because I couldn't hold it in anymore. Sliding down the wall I leaned on into a squat holding my knees close to me. My knees, the only things I can hug for the next 5 days.

My friend tried to hug me on the stairwell yesterday and she almost fell down the stairs, I backed away so quickly. When I told her why I couldn't hug her she laughed and said "Oh, well stay away from me," as she backed her way up the stairs to let me by. She was joking. I know she loves me. But the guy that works in the cafeteria, who took a giant step back when I told him why I need to use Styrofoam plates this week, he doesn't love me. And he wasn't laughing when he took that giant step back. Instead of telling him that I'm only harmful to him if we are in a confined space for a long period of time I took a giant step back too.

The week before the treatment I had three appointments with the radiology lab to get two types of Nuclear Medicine exams. The 1st and 3rd exam were the same, I needed to get scans from the 'Thyroid Prob'. That's where I sit perfectly still for about 3 minutes and they hold what looks like a telescope to my throat. Then they lower the scope to my knee and I sit still for another 3 minutes. The Prob is a cakewalk. The 2nd exam, the 'Gamma Camera' was the one I was worried about. Memories of our first encounter plagued me. I didn't think I was claustrophobic until I met Mr. Gamma.

I had flashbacks of me lying on his giant tongue with the nurses doing their best to make me comfortable by placing a

pillow under my head and a giant piece of foam under my knees. They covered me with a blanket and Velcroed me down leaving me powerless to move my arms or legs. Secured firmly to his tongue they slid me into his mouth, his mental tonsils hanging above my throat. "Remember to stay still," the nurse said, "I'll be back in 10 minutes." I was fine for a while, eyes shut almost dreaming until he started making noises. Those noises were unlike anything I've heard before and rose from the depths of his throat. "Hello?" I called "Is anybody back there?" My calls went unanswered but the noises continued. "Nurse?" I called. "Nurse?!" Tears slid into my ears as I laid helplessly strapped to this monster's tongue. "Nurse? Where are you?" I called. When the nurse came back 10 minutes later as soon as she unstrapped me I ran as fast as I could to my car. I crouched by the door and sobbed.

In that moment, I felt so weak and stupid and afraid. Earlier that day I told my mom she didn't need to come because I was 20 I didn't need her to come to my doctor's appointments. I was supposed to be an adult. I told her what the doctor told me when he first diagnosed me with Graves' Disease, that I was lucky because I had a very treatable disorder. I wasn't feeling very lucky though. My emotions were unpredictable, I was having allergic reactions to the medicine, and all the tests and procedures were unfamiliar and scary.

Back to today, as I sit in the bathroom with my knees pulled tight against my chest a friend follows me in and asks if I need a hug. I tell her I can't hug anybody until Wednesday. When she asks me why I tell her, "I am broken. My thyroid is overproducing hormones and my immune system knows that's not healthy so it's attacking my thyroid. And while those two are fighting it forces my heart to work harder than necessary."

When she looks at me sympathetically, but still obviously confused I continue. "I had a radiation treatment so I am emitting small amounts of radiation."

"Oh..." She says and steps back.

The step back. The reason I refrain from telling people what's wrong with me. That automatic part of human nature that makes people pull away from the broken. She beat me to it.

That's why I don't like telling people I'm broken. I prefer to keep my distance and not give them the opportunity to get close enough to back away.

"Ok then," she says as she steps forward. "I'll just sit over here so at least you're not alone." The step forward. The compassion that lies in the soul, what overrides human nature and provides mere humans the capacity to heal. 🌻

# I AM STUNNING

OCTOBER 2012

I AM STUNNING. I AM STRONG. I AM COURAGEOUS. I don't need a man to hold my hand, or walk me to my car, or order my food for me. However, after this past year, my hand could use something solid to hold onto, I wouldn't mind being escorted through the darkness, and I would appreciate someone else taking the initiative to lead. Being stunning, and strong, and courageous all the time is exhausting.

Yesterday I was walking my dog up the street and she was peeing on everything. I like to think there is a method to what she chooses to mark as her territory, but I could not find any correlation between the red house's mailbox and the cluster of brown, burgundy, and golden leaves on the curb in front of the green house. Nor did I see a connection between the grey house's driveway and the browning grass of the home next door to the grey house. She's a dog, so maybe I was wasting my time attempting to understand her pee patterns.

My dog was peeing on a shrub in front of the blue-grey house when it started to rain. I closed my sweater tightly around me and began pulling her down the street towards our home. It must have been the rain that triggered the memory because before it started I was perfectly content analyzing dog pee patterns.

It's 2011 and I'm sitting at the desk in my dorm room earnestly writing something not for school. The bed is to the left of me, the couch is to the right, and outside my window the sidewalk is littered with brown, burgundy, and golden leaves. There are times when I like being an RA and having a room to myself - this is not one of those times. I'm convinced spirits prefer to visit the lonely. I can feel my uncle's presence so vividly by the couch I can see him. I don't cry right away. Slowly, I put down whatever I am writing and climb into the bed. I stare at my uncle as he stares at me. We didn't know each other very well before he passed away, two days ago, so I assume he is just as curious about me as I am about him. He doesn't speak and makes no attempts to come closer, he just stands there as tears gradually travel down my cheeks. He's only there a few minutes and eventually I fall asleep in the fetal position with the lights on.

I continued pulling my dog down the street even as I began to cry. I'm thankful he loved me enough to say goodbye to me. It's been a full year since my uncle died. I don't understand why I started crying yesterday, but it's today and I'm still

crying. It's not been debilitating sobs; it's been silent tears that come at random moments like when I'm washing the dishes, driving, and walking the dog.

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My uncle was not the only spirit to visit me last year. During one of the winter months, after my godmother's funeral, a woman dressed in all black invited herself into my dorm. She doesn't look anything like my god-mother. This woman has olive skin, dark hair, and eyes that see every twisted thought I try to suppress. This woman is bolder than my uncle, she waltzes into my room and sits on my bed right next to me. She is beautiful and she knows it. I immediately know this woman is death in the flesh - what I do not know is what she wants from me. This is her first of many visits. We soon develop this awkward rapport where she sits on my bed and smiles at me, while I wonder if she is plotting to kill me. She resembles my mortality exactly. I look at her and know for certain I will die. The question is, when?

I have not figured out which spectrum of the afterlife sent her. It's hard to imagine God using that kind of scare tactic. I assumed all his messengers would be dressed in all white with harps strapped to their backs like a bow lacking arrows. It's plausible she was from the devil because I had a crippling fear of sleeping in the dark for months. Every night I would twist open the blinds allowing the street lamp to act as a night light. The only reason I know she was from God is because, although she terrified me, I feel like she genuinely liked me. None of my living friends knew just how tormented I was living alone in my mind. This woman not only knew everything I did not know how to express in words, she didn't seem fazed by it.

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When Corey died in December of 2011 it felt like getting hit by a Mack truck. I was completely paralyzed with disbelief. I literally did not leave my house for about a week. In my head, 2012 was the light at the end of the tunnel. When my mom told me what happened a few days before New Year's, a giant boulder fell from the sky blocking my only source of light. For that week, I sat in various places in my house for extended periods of time too afraid to move.

I thought about Erik a lot during that week. I thought about the journal full of memories I wrote about him; the memories I didn't realize I had until he was gone. I thought about how much he changed my life without him even trying. I remember being mad at the sky for being beautiful when I felt like his death was worthy enough to make the entire atmosphere mourn.

Erik and Corey were plus and minus a year in age difference from me. Both of them died bizarre unexpected deaths. Both

of them left me speechless. How do I...? What do I...? Where do I begin to make sense of how long I have on this earth?

Towards the end of my immobile week, I began to be aware of how worried my mom was about me. I assume she was worried about me the whole time, but I was too distracted to notice sooner. She tried to get me to write happy poems. My first few poems were miserable attempts at joy. It's hard to write about something you no longer recognize. My mind was so crowded with the dead I couldn't even remember what I did for fun. Not only that, I had no recollection of who I was before December of 2010. 🌻

# HARD DAYS

## AUGUST 2013

**E**RIK WAS 22 WHEN HE DIED IN JANUARY. I turned 21 that August. Corey died at 20 in December. I will be 23 this August and I think I have finally stopped living like death is chasing me. Because I am young people have assured me I have plenty of time to do, to be, to become. I have seen firsthand that no man has the authority to make those kinds of promises. I am here until I am no longer here. So I do and I do and I cry and then I do some more. But now I have done everything I know how to do. I have cried seven oceans worth of tears. I have written and written and written and written and written and written. I don't have much else to say, which is new for me. I wake up in the morning and don't have anywhere to go. Which is also new. I take long walks and nobody calls to see when I'll be back, again new.

My life is the stillest it's ever been and I'm learning how to sit in the quiet. I'm learning how to appreciate the quiet. How to bask in the quiet. I'm learning how to sleep with both eyes closed. I'm learning how to trust. I'm teaching myself to believe that love won't die if I reach for it. I'm teaching myself to believe that loving me is not a death sentence. I am trying to put my guards down. I am attempting to let people close enough to touch me. I'm learning that I don't have to live this life by myself. I am convincing myself that I will not die at 23.

I am attempting to debunk all the lies I told myself while I was isolated and mourning. Isolation and grief are a dangerous combination that can easily distort one's reality. I have to tell myself now that I didn't kill him. That knowing me didn't kill him. That knowing me may have made his life better. I'm trying to convince myself that knowing and loving me is a really good thing. But it's hard. I still hear the voice of a classmate who told me death follows me. I tried to ignore him but after going to six funerals in one year I couldn't help but wonder. I couldn't help but keep to myself.

For a while I spewed my heart to strangers on stages but wouldn't talk to the people I saw every day. I was convinced I was dangerous. But I am not. I am not the ocean that swept Erik away. I am not the man that pulled the trigger on Corey. I am just a girl who has received a lot of bad news, who has known too many people that death has taken away. In spite of that, most likely because of that, I fought hard to seek joy.

Clawing out of depression is not an easy task. I've learned how to laugh and smile and experience genuine joy, but some days are really hard. Some days I find myself crying on my knees in the middle of the kitchen because I miss them and I

miss the version of myself that existed before all the loss, the version that felt untouchable. Some days I cry because I am incredibly grateful to be alive. Because I know what it's like to have death be so close to you, you can feel her breathing on your neck.

Opening up again is hard, especially when you've experienced how dangerous it is to love someone that death can take away. ✨

# REARRANGE

## AUGUST 2013

I AM A WOMAN WITH A VERY STRONG SENSE OF SELF. I know who I am, what I stand for, and what I aspire to do in life. I got this way because I had to. The world tore me to pieces, I had to put myself back together as best as I could.

It was the hardest thing I had to do and it was so lonely. But I didn't notice the loneliness so much because I was busy putting in work, answering the hard questions, becoming comfortable with my reflection, with my voice, with my talents and abilities. Also, I tried to ignore the loneliness because at the time it was just extra stuff to work through on top of a mountain of bigger issues. Now that that mountain is a molehill the loneliness seems bigger.

I am the first person I see in the morning and the last person I see at night. Some days it seems like loneliness is my only companion. On those days I am grateful for my strong sense of self. It keeps me from being afraid of the stillness the feeling brings. I eat meals with the feeling, go on long car rides, cry cleansing tears while loneliness watches. Then I wash my face and go outside.

I read a lot of books, and the consensus is that loneliness is a normal and very large part of life. Because the older you get the more people you lose. Lovers decide not to love you anymore. Friends move on before you are ready to let go. Parents get older and leave you for that "better place" - sometimes it's Florida, sometimes it's death. Next thing you know you're all alone again rearranging your life.

Trying to make new friends, find better lovers, get replacements for the parents you no longer see. It's like there are spots

in your heart multiple people are supposed to fill and when one of those spots is empty you feel it and you have this strong urge to fill it. That takes time because if you rush and fill it with the wrong person that could hurt much more than the loneliness feels.

So take your time and get well acquainted with yourself, because you are the only companion you are guaranteed to have for the entire duration of your life. I am learning to accept this and am preparing for a lifetime of me. I do that by doing this - taking the time to get to know myself; to nurture myself; to be kind to myself; to fall in love with me over and over again. Because that is what it takes to be alone without being lonely, you have to be able to look in the mirror year after year and love the person you see. ✨