

# From Seeing Lisa Dying

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Lisa's speech has slowed  
but her laugh is the exact same.

Imagine blowing bubbles and twirling with bare feet, grass between your toes,  
it smells like *day*.

One floats to you, chooses you, caresses your palm and reflects  
colored light back to you—blues, purples, pink.

You give this bubble more courtesy than a butterfly wing,  
you watch the bubble pop and the mist ghosts over your shins,  
tickles the baby hairs and seeps into your skin.

The form of her joy may change, but it is a perfume you rub into your pulse  
points, keep it close to your collar, take a hit whenever you see a color.

A stranger says,

“Something smells good,”

and you say,

“It is *day*.”

Lisa's joy cannot be washed away, not even when her  
“invasive and mean and terrible” cancer eats away at her brain.  
In spite of this, her laugh is the exact same.

Lisa's speech, as I'm used to, is quick; a lightning strike  
across the sunniest sky—and isn't it just *ironic* that she is a Cancer?

She is a woman of the moon, and she would have had the hair to show for it.  
A woman who was excited to grow old, grow her hair down her back  
and watch it fade from black to gray. She was looking forward  
to a full head of silver one day. The chemo and radiation won't steal her hair,  
but they will have to shave it anyway.

She likes to light candles for people struggling. Once,  
I lost my mother's class ring. She told me she lit one for me after I came to work  
saying, “It was where I always kept it.”

The day of her emergency brain surgery I lit one for her,  
not quite because I believe in that myself, but because she does,  
and she would have done it for anyone else.

Lisa found a pot shaped like a snail and thought of me. She jumped up and down  
like a child and hugged me. My friend recorded it. Her laugh is the exact same.  
Her mobility—well.

So you wake up on a Saturday and you can't use your right hand. Brows furrowed, writing scribbles, aiming for loopy handwriting, getting spiraled shells of gastropods. They glare up at you in pink gel ink.

Lisa called me tonight. She must have known I was worrying. I haven't heard from her since Mother's Day. She changed my name in her phone to my new name, and she couldn't remember what she put me down under. She said she had lost me.

"I'm so happy I found you," she said when I called back.

I missed her call by a minute and a half, but now

I have her laugh preserved in a voicemail, if worse comes to worst.

Her speech is lagging near the end of it, but her laugh, the same.

This high pitched, melodic thing, congruent to her maiden name, though she didn't like to sing.

"Did you get my happy birthday text?" I asked.

"Yes!" she said. "I have been so bad...at answering. I lose words . . . so easily." For a woman who has always been so full of them, this is jarring.

This is a woman who wanted to be a grandmother more than anything. She tells her sons to hurry up and have grandbabies—she always talks about how much she wants grandbabies—because, "We're not sure how much longer I'm going to be around."

This is a woman who wanted to have chickens again someday. A woman who wanted to have a vegetable garden again. A woman who taught me everything I know about plants; this five-foot encyclopedia of botanics. She won a competition for that, once. She answered all but one question correctly. She was so pissed.

When people don't believe my advice for why their peace lily is exsanguinated, it feels like a disrespect to a legacy I was bestowed. I no longer have the privilege of checking with my source. Of calling her and asking, "What is this plant that came in today?" She would tell me, and she would say, "Here is how you take care of it. Send me pictures as it grows."

And of course I'm going overboard, I do that often. As you see, I'm already talking about her in past tense, as if she's dead. I get ahead of myself. I think, "I haven't written in a while. I should try to soon," and the next day, Lisa calls me, and her voice is slow like a tiny hole in a balloon.

Lisa laughs at her mistakes and finds ways to make people smile. She laughed at herself on the phone and she tried to laugh in person when she lost her words—

“It’s the ... um . . . . . the . . . . .  
. . . . .  
. . . . . oh, haha . . . . .  
. . . . . over on . . . the . . .  
. . . . . the . . . uh . . . . .  
. . . . . you know?”

and I say, “Yeah, Lisa, I know.”

I blow air into a punctured balloon. My jokes fly over her head, screeching as they deflate. The balloon weighs nothing, but its carcass lands with a deafening quake.

I don’t know if Lisa believes in reincarnation or an afterlife, I don’t know what the fuck is real and what is fake, but she will find me again. Under any name, in any life. As a mother or a stand-in when mine lives across the country. A woman I meet once and never see again, but if that’s how it has to be, then so be it, as long as I see her once.

And if that were the case, I would probably think about her every now and again and wonder,

“I wonder where she’s at today. I wonder if she remembers me.

I wonder if she wonders if I remember her.”

And will she remember me, when cancer invades the part of her brain I live in?

At the very least, Lisa, will you remember to haunt me?

Lisa likes ancient history and those videos of major home renovations; the estates. Mapperton Live, restoring ancestral homes and shit.

The in-ground, 200 year old, algae infested pool becomes sparkling new—as sparkling as concrete can be.

She pulls the video up on her iPad to show me. They added twelve plant islands to the pool and Lisa teaches me about hydroponics.

Lisa tells me about this game she’s playing, and she’s the top player this week.

And the next. She won a prize. It helped her collect the key to unlock the next room of grandma’s mansion. There are cracks in the tile, cobwebs and broken furniture, fucked up wallpaper, and work to do—at least there was *something* to do.

Her hospital room was barren.

There’s a puny screen attached to her bed, with a knock-off Bob Ross painting a landscape on mute.

“This is so stupid,” she laughed at the hospital.

“This is so stupid,” as she’s sobbing in pain.

“I love you so much,” smiling at the hospital.

“I love you so much,” crying at home.

“This isn’t fair,” after six hours of her organs wringing themselves like wet rags.

“*This isn’t fair;*” and, “Why?” and, “*Why?*”

What I learned from seeing Lisa dying is that death has no bias,  
and there is no fairness when you are tucked in its bed.

There is no way to make this satire. There is no joke I can crack  
or information I can scour for, just some books at a resale store. I don’t know  
if she’s capable of reading anymore. Which, it’s funny I focus on that,  
because she wanted to collect the first edition *Nancy Drews*.

The Grosset & Dunlap issues, starting from the 1930s. She only got one.

I have no idea if it’s a first edition.

She mostly has editions from 1986 to present day.

I have no idea if they are first editions.

They were on a top shelf she could not reach.

She asked me to put the books I bought her right on her tray table.

Will you remember to read them?

Will you remember it was me who got them for you?

Will you be able to see the words

through the black and red pounding of your skull?

Fairy Tale.

The Last Apothecary.

The Unfamiliar Garden.

Did I supply you with the last book you ever read?

Did you enjoy it?

Did you even have a chance to read it?

Were you even able to *lift* it?

Holding a cup of water, your hands shake like you have Parkinson’s—

Jesus fuck, would I rather you had Parkinson’s,

and then I would not have to remember you. Yet here I am, remembering you,  
and cursing Dr. James Parkinson for not coming to visit you.

She is so slow and small and crying for relief she doesn’t get. She gets  
legal heroin in a dropper and it tastes like *shit*. It’s the last thing she will ever  
drink and it looks like tar, she says it tastes like it too. She is crying  
as I close the door and I am not real and she is horizontal and bedridden  
and staring at the white ceiling like it is the bright light before death,  
or the retina-scorching center of a candle flame, or whatever you believe in, Lisa,

I don't know,  
I don't care as long as it helps with the pain.

Even though we know this is the last time,  
I say, "I'll see you,"  
and she says, "I love you,"  
and we *know* it is the last time  
and she has said *too many* goodbyes  
and I say, "I'll see you again."

So I will memorialize her in my neatest, handwritten ink, spray paint her on streets and become a knock-off Banksy. But I'm not doing it for activism, it's the link to a GoFundMe, as if funds will bring her back from the brink of an agonizing death. Headaches and blown veins and heavy breathing and then none at all, holding air in lungs that stutter, waiting on the "okay" from a tumor that steals a life more violently than an armed robbery, swelling her brain, overtaking 35 years of marriage and knowledge and so many amazing *things*.

She's an expert of greenery and blooms and she knows it's hard,  
but you *absolutely* have to smash the snail eggs in your tomato starts.  
"Those fuckers are so invasive," she says,  
"They can tear an entire ecosystem down."

How is it that her brain became the green tomato cursed to never ripen infested with pests that gorge themselves on the flesh of what she grew? And what is the purpose? What is the purpose then of all the knowledge, of all the dreams she possessed? Silver hair and a vegetable garden and chickens and Nancy Drew and grandbabies.  
She does not ask for much, just to live.

Is this just another gluttonous purge of precious growth; another oasis burned to ashes and shards of bone to fill a silver and black urn?

What I learned from seeing Lisa dying is that death can be a paradox of damnation and salvation. Lisa taught me this as she squeezed my hand and her pounding temple and pointed at five orange bottles with her eyes.  
She spoke very clearly. She said,  
"Maybe it would be better if I just got it over with."

Lisa, you died today  
so I watered my plant.

Took the 10-inch philodendron outside and drowned it. Stepped barefoot in the puddle it left and saw you standing with your face up to the rain, arms outstretched at your side, swaying. It was the philodendron xanadu, in the Araceae family which has almost 4,000 species (you were thrilled to share this information with me).

The xanadu. The one I've been neglecting since I got it. I think I got it to remember you. I visited you to remember you and when I came back I couldn't look at it. I almost let it die, like all of the brown plants in your room.

Before I learned that you died today, I woke up sick. My chest has been heavy all week, I know why. I hoped it was the seasons changing but it was a dust storm migrating from Arizona, carrying your name in scribbles. When I learned that you died today I was in the hot car after a hike. I don't go on hikes. I was expecting it to be more like a trail, but it was a hike, and I was outside, your favorite.

I was walking for a long time, swinging in trees and sprinting through creeks you would have loved to see. I was outside and it was green. There was a calm breeze, and you were dying, and I had a feeling.

Lisa, you died on a beautiful day.

It was colored with your approval: green leaves, blue sky, pink and purple flowers, and the smell of the soil was so strong, and it all reminds me of you. The day did not blind me. It was perfect; bright enough for me to climb trees and a huge hill with spindly roots like stairs.

I heard you saying, "Oooh, you better be careful."  
I heard you saying, "I lit a candle for you."

And I can write about grief until it stretches to your premature grave, I can extract every memory of you like sap from a maple tree, make them into a book. The spine will be blue cloth, the pages brown with age, but God dammit, you will know it is a first edition just by looking at it. You will open it to the middle, stick your face in and sniff the old book smell we love.

You will know which tree I harvested the paper from.  
You will have carved your name into it with loopy handwriting.