

Roadside Assistance

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Life Experience

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Holiday traditions have always been fluid for me. They flow easily around changing circumstances. My son decided as a youngster that duck was his bird of choice, so I abandoned the Thanksgiving turkey and gravy for duck a l'orange and roasted bacon brussel sprouts. After divorcing my son's father, holidays divvied up between us meant that Santa had to reroute his sleigh every other year. When I remarried, holidays extended to new birthdays and graduations and weddings as our families blended.

But, in November of 2017, my husband's death from cancer eclipsed Thanksgiving altogether. The rather lackluster Christmas that followed was salvaged by being transformed into an engagement celebration for my son and his girlfriend. But, 2018 would be different. I was determined to take back the holidays, to resurrect some solid traditions. I found a yellow legal notepad in my desk and started a list.

Soon I had lists for menus, gifts, greeting cards, and decor themes complete with timelines to accomplish all related tasks. I wasn't exactly lolling in an opium den, but list making had become an addiction of sorts. The yellow legal pad made me feel safe and happy. I looked forward to checking it at the end of each day, marking off items, adding notes, and keeping it on my nightstand as I slept. These pages were my armor that would protect me from the agony of the holidays of the previous year. These lists would give the holidays back to me and to the people I loved.

On the day before Thanksgiving 2018 I was ready. I had a few finishing touches to complete the Christmas tree that I had donated for the Festival of Trees at the convention center in memory of my husband. My eleven-year-old niece and I had established this as our new tradition to replace the tree trimming she had helped her uncle and me do together at our

home every year since she was a toddler. Reclaiming the holidays meant being fully present and participatory with family and friends at this special time of year, and I had detailed lists for how to accomplish these goals with every important person in my life. As I drove out of the convention center parking lot, my son called. I assumed he was just getting the last minute details nailed down for our upcoming Thanksgiving celebration.

“Mama, the police just called. My Dad is missing. He didn’t show up for work yesterday or today. He’s not at his place either.” My son sounded tentative, like he was trying to pronounce unfamiliar words.

I didn’t panic. My ex-husband often spiraled out of control in the throes of manic depressive episodes. He had just recently been committed to a psychiatric hospital during the summer and we had hopes that he was fully invested in resuming treatment and following a new drug protocol.

“Don’t worry, honey. He’ll call soon and we’ll go pick him up wherever he is this time. Then we’ll get him back in the hospital,” I reassured.

“But Mama, he left his wallet and phone at Mema’s,” my son added in a soft voice.

A memory from three days prior flashed through my mind. My son and I had been to a movie and then cooked dinner at his place. While we ate, his phone rang. He looked at it and said it was his dad. I was relieved when he let it go to voicemail and told me he’d call him back later. I understood and sympathized. Answering a phone call from his dad would have entailed at least an hour of listening to a loud, rambling, one-sided conversation with my son only able to interject a few times (*Oh yeah, Sure Dad, and Yes Sir*) into the tidal wave of complaints, conspiracy theories, grandiose plans, and religious epiphanies his father would send surging through the phone.

In sync with the scene replaying in my head my son said, "Mama, I should have taken his call Monday night."

I launched into my stock speech that I had reworked to fit the situation as needed for years. The "You aren't responsible for your Dad's behavior, choices, health, living conditions, legal problems, etc." speech. But I felt a chill and a tightness in my chest that was a mixture of fear and anger and guilt.

Early Thanksgiving morning the next day I got the call. I went immediately out the back door and got in my car. I had to go tell my son that his father had hanged himself before anyone called him with the news. I had to be there for him when he was forced to face this horror.

I wasn't thinking clearly and took the highway as if I was going to my son's old apartment instead of the route to his new place. I needed a list. I needed time to write down and organize what needed to be said and done instead of being tossed around in this maelstrom. This highway route would add an extra fifteen minutes to the drive to reach my son. I cussed at myself for being so stupid. Before I knew it, I was driving through a red light. Fortunately, there were no other cars in sight, but I knew I was dangerously out of control. I didn't know how to do what I had to do. I needed help, I needed direction, I needed a list. There was no time to construct a plan, so I prayed.

Then I saw the billboard beside the highway. It was just a plain background with a few simple words. I have no idea what it was intended to advertise. I have driven back by that sign since to try to figure out what product or event or organization was the reason that billboard was erected by the roadside and still do not know. But I do know that the billboard spoke to me with confident authority that focused me and made me believe I would be able to steer my son safely through this storm. My desperate grip on the steering wheel relaxed a bit. I breathed deeply and released my need to reduce this pain to a plan written on a piece of paper. This tragedy would

not be endured by a prescribed set of steps and tasks on a list. I would have to do as the sign directed.

It read simply, "You'll Figure This Out."