



Choosing Suffering over Safety, by Bonnie Rose

"Can you walk, sweetheart?" I say these words to our dog Stella who is dying. It's time for breakfast and if she walks from our bed to the kitchen, maybe that will be a sign. Maybe she will be alright. So I ask her again, "Can you walk?"

As I ask, I remember eleven years of sleeping twisted like a pretzel so the dog could get a good night's sleep. I remember mornings, how she rose at dawn and stomped her Pointer's feet on the mattress to get me up, to flush me out of the brush of sleep as she would a wild quail. Now it's nine a.m. and she sighs at the foot of the bed, eyes alert and breathing rapidly.

When my mother was dying, I didn't ask that question. I didn't ask any question. I didn't want to know the answer because the answer would change everything. We didn't talk about the cancer - how it was devouring my mother's bones and internal organs, how it was planning to steal my favorite person. We didn't talk about love and loss, or her longing to see me find a life that would blossom. We didn't mention how death would assassinate that joy for her or how death would rob me of the pleasure of coming home from college for Thanksgiving break and seeing her face at the kitchen window, eager to hear every detail of my life. Death would kill that. So we didn't talk about it.

I was immobilized. Together in our once safe home in Briarcliff that last morning my mother couldn't speak. She wanted something from me. She wanted my help. I was seventeen and I didn't know what to do. Something bad was in the room. I was too scared to show my fear. I wanted to fix it. I didn't know what to do.

So I held her hand, tears without sobs pouring down my cheeks, bewildered in the face of unspeakable death. She looked at me and said "Thank you." Thirty-six hours later, she died. Those were the last words she ever said to me.

Somehow, through the years of living, ministry, dying loved ones, lost pets and lost loves, I'm learning to ask "Can you walk?" I'm learning to ask the other hard questions and be still and present with the answers. I am learning how to suffer.

I took my first cautious steps toward suffering in *Shadowlands*, the Broadway production where by fluke and connections, I was cast as an understudy for eight weeks. The play is about C.S. Lewis's transition from intellect to experience. When Lewis was a child, his mother died. He never cried, never allowed himself to feel the loss. Late in life, when Lewis was a crusty bachelor professor, he met his true love Joy

Gresham. Shortly after they met and married she got cancer and died. When Joy died, he allowed the devastation to overtake him.

He said, "The boy chose safety, the man chooses suffering."

Eight shows a week, sitting backstage listening to the monitors, I hear those words: The boy chose safety, the man chooses suffering.

And now, every day, I make the choice between safety and suffering. Will I have the courage to face what happens and keep my heart in the room?

Because I don't know if I can walk. I don't know if I can stand. There are days I stagger about this stage called earth, confronted with the sorrows of being human - the loss, the death, the indignity of perpetual change.

But sometimes suffering is not suffering.

Those last days with Stella, I would gladly suffer again. It was an honor to hold her as she let go. It was a joy to put her needs first. It was a joy to ask, "Can you walk?" and be in love with whatever was true. It was joy to cherish her, to understand that love is love and it doesn't matter if she's just a dog, and that death can never kill a love like that. Suffering is not suffering. Suffering is the new joy.

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