



## Roots and Flowers

*Loss, Grief, and Growth*

BY Kim Cooper Findling



Seven years ago, after losing our baby, my husband and I came home from the hospital to find a tree in the driveway. A group of friends had gone together to buy us a six-foot tall crab apple sapling sprouting optimistically towards the sky, roots tied up with burlap.

"We are so sad for you," was written on the card above nine signatures, names we'd known for years now marked in ink like strength laid down before us. "This tree should bloom every year about now."

And it has. Some years we aren't certain. We begin watching in April; nothing happens. A few times Central Oregon's enduring winters have made us wait until late May or even June. One year my father shook his head solemnly and declared, "It's dead." But it wasn't. A week later, the tree exploded with delicate white blossoms.

It occurred to me last year—while considering the most marvelous, extravagant blooms yet—that our friends may not have known if they were doing the right thing those years ago. Like so many witness to a tragedy, they may not have had any idea what to do at all. Perhaps they debated: Would we want an entire tree? Did we have somewhere to plant it? Would we want to be reminded of this event every year? Should they send flowers instead, or food?

After my baby died, I believed that I would forever after be sure-footed in the face of others' heartbreak. I would be that person at

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grief's doorstep who knew exactly what to say, what to do. I had been there; tragedy would translate. But then a friend's dad died. Another friend miscarried. Someone I cared about got cancer. I froze up—I didn't know anything, I had no idea what to do. It turned out the only tragedy I knew intimately was my own.

The truth is that tragedy is messy and unpredictable. Grief is personal. Every mourner needs different things at different times. If I am honest with myself, I know that seven years ago I could not often name that need myself. It changed from minute to minute, day to day. Sadness yawned, gobbling up all that it could, but accepting no solace. Grief was a gigantic vacuum that nothing but time could fill.

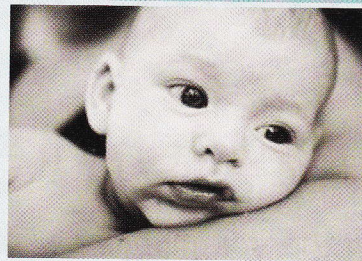
Maybe that's why I tend to remember the months after as solitary, even though so many people reached out. I kept the dozens of cards we received; they are in a box in my closet, nestled among our son's ink-stamped footprints, wedged under plaster casts of his hands. The envelopes arrived for weeks, bearing small cardboard ambassadors of compassion. Images of hearts and flowers and birds authenticated our pain. I will always be grateful to those who were brave enough to come to my front door and cry with me, even if they didn't know what to say. I have worked to forgive those who couldn't. The very hardest human thing might be seeing someone you care about suffer; worse than one's own suffering surely, and the reason that in the face of a friend's grief, most of us feel totally inept.

But those nine friends made the perfect choice with the gift of the tree. I have never received a more ideal present on any occasion. Even planting it was healing—something productive and distracting and therapeutic to do with that first day home, when we couldn't see beyond this knife wound of sadness but knew that whatever the future held, things would never look the same.

And now every year we wait, and watch. Every year we remember, and cry. Every year, we see beauty bloom from sadness. Our daughters run and laugh in the yard under white-lace blooms, ask to be lifted to bury their noses in the flowers of their "brother's tree." This is life—bad things happen, but good things persist.

I love how this tree anchors my very own yard, reminding me of lovely, fragile things—strength and friendship, love and pain. I love how it took a chunk of sorrow and gave it roots and flowers. 

*Kim Cooper Findling is a nationally published essayist and journalist. Her work has appeared in Horizon Air, Hip Mama, Central Oregon Magazine, Oregon Quarterly, Pregnancy, and The Best Places to Kiss NW. Her first book, Chance of Sun, about growing up in Oregon, will be out this year. Kim lives in Bend with her husband and two daughters. See [www.kimcooperfindling.com](http://www.kimcooperfindling.com).*



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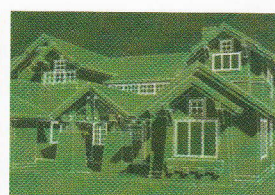
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