

# THE DAYS I LOVED YOU MOST

Amy Neff

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*For Jonathan,  
and the garden we have made.*

“If I had a flower for every time I thought of you...  
I could walk through my garden forever.”

—Alfred, Lord Tennyson

# One

## *Evelyn*

*June 2001*

Joseph's words loom before us, waiting. I reach for his hand, calmed by the map of calluses, cuticles rimmed with dirt from planting bulbs this afternoon. My fingers shake in his grip. Sweat forms where our palms meet.

Our children sit across from us on the sagging couch. They are silent. The two lamps nearest us glow yellow beneath their shades. Joseph clicked them on as the room darkened, no one willing to interrupt the conversation to stand and flip on the lights overhead. Moonlight spills onto the dual pianos in the study, glinting off the ivory keys. The windows are open to the night that moved in as we spoke and the air is stale and thick, exceptionally hot for late spring in Connecticut. The only sound is the whirring ceiling fan above and the echo of waves from Bernard Beach around the bend.

When the kids were growing up and our home was still the Oyster Shell Inn, the coffee table hid beneath half-finished puzzles depicting New England lighthouses. Tonight, it's buried in

appetizers, blocks of cheese that have begun to gloss and soften; stems of plucked grapes and a few lone crackers litter the platters. Joseph told me not to go to the trouble—but Thomas had come from Manhattan and we hadn't seen him since Christmas. This rare visit from our son gave me an excuse to walk to the new wine and cheese shop in town. The one across from Vic's Grinders that had been there since the grandkids were young, and Joseph pressed dollar bills into their palms before sending them to fetch wax paper—wrapped sandwiches for lunch on the beach. Joseph tried to talk me out of it but I can still find my way, though I move slower now. The mission kept me focused, my mind from drifting.

No one speaks, waiting for Joseph to continue his ominous preamble, the reason for this meeting. *We have something important to talk to you three about.*

Violet, the baby of the family, now a grown woman with a husband and four children of her own, sits between her brother and sister on the worn sofa. I reupholstered it myself, once the kids were out of the house and the inn was closed to guests, though it inevitably bore the faint stains left by our grandchildren, the filling softening in the center of each cushion once more.

Our kids were raised here in the Oyster Shell, as Joseph was. As I was, too, in a way. Me and my brother, Tommy, and Joseph, inseparable and constantly bursting through the screen door until Joseph's mother, waving her apron and laughing, shooed us out onto the front porch before we could disturb the guests. Years passed and before we knew it, our children marked reservations on a crowded calendar, and swept floors, and helped me roll and cut biscuits for breakfast. Our grandchildren pitched in, too, showed guests to their rooms, unclipped sun-bleached sheets from the line, rinsed sand from stacks of beach chairs with a coiled garden hose. The inn was always full but the faces came and went like static on the radio, background noise to the life we built. Even as we prepare to tell them, I can't fathom it,

how we can leave it all behind. All I want is to begin again, together, at the start.

“There’s no easy way to put this, to tell you. I don’t know how to begin...” Joseph stammers, gripping my hand tight.

Jane, our oldest, fixes her attention on me, her expression difficult to read. She used to hide her emotions under her wild mane of hair. Now it is professionally relaxed and cut to her shoulders, a look more in line with the other news anchors. Her lanky limbs and long neck became an asset; she moves with a learned grace that escaped her as a gangly teen. I have to turn away from her gaze, afraid my face will betray what I haven’t told her.

Thomas stares at Joseph, his mouth a hard line. How similar their frames are, shy of six feet, built like swimmers with wide shoulders and narrow torsos. But unlike Joseph, who had dark hair until his sixties, when it began to thin at his temples and turn white, Thomas started graying young. Silver threads glinted in the light beneath his cap when he graduated from New York University; how serious he was, smiling only for photos, even on a day of celebration. His face looks thinner now than at Christmas, and I don’t know if he and Ann cook together at night or if he eats dinner alone at his desk. He wears a suit, here after a long day of meetings with other executives. He slid out of his jacket only because of the stifling heat. Even his sweat is contained, caught in his hairline, not daring to trickle past his brow.

“Your mother and I...” Joseph teeters on the edge, eyes filling. I’m not sure he will be able to bring himself to say the words. “You know how much we love each other, how we’ve always had each other in our lives. We love you all so much, too, please know that...it’s just that we can’t imagine life without the other at this point...” I nearly cut in, to carry the blame, to save him from being the one to break their hearts. Our children, our babies all grown up, who used to grab me behind the knees, all bursting love and need, clamoring into my lap, never close enough, and then they were walking to school, and driving away, and

leading lives that had nothing to do with us, making friends and choices and mistakes and falling in and out of love, our blood and bone the fabric of their bodies but not their innermost lives, and all the while Joseph and I still here, an island of two, disoriented and mystified by the years that slipped us by.

He takes a deep breath, gathering strength. “We don’t want to leave the last chapter of our life to chance, with some miserable, drawn-out end for everyone. I know this is going to come as a shock, it feels shocking to say it, it took us a while to come to terms with everything, but we feel it is the best decision...”

“And that is...” Thomas prompts, impatient when Joseph can’t go on.

“We are planning to end our lives in one year. Next June.” Joseph’s voice breaks.

“I’m sorry—what did you say?” Violet’s eyes widen.

“We don’t want one of us to die before the other. We don’t want to live without each other...we want a say in how our story ends.” This explanation comes out more gentle, but his voice is pained, doing his best to ease our burden onto them, to conceal it in a love letter.

“*What?*” Thomas says.

“Yeah, what are you even talking about?” Jane sputters, setting her drink on the table as though she may need use of her hands.

“This will be our final year.” It’s surreal to hear Joseph speak the words aloud, although I had been the one to say them to him first. *This will be my final year.*

“You’re joking.” Jane stares back and forth at us, searching for the punchline.

“We’re not joking,” I say, desperately wishing we were.

“I don’t understand,” Violet pleads.

“Let us explain.” I lean toward them, easing onto the edge of the couch.

“Please, because this is pretty sick.” Thomas lurches back into the cushions, away from me.

“Your father and I, we are getting older...”

“You’re not a hundred! *Jesus*. You’re not even eighty,” Jane argues. “What are you turning, seventy-six?”

This time next year I’ll be almost seventy-seven and Joseph will be seventy-nine, paltry corrections I don’t make. “We are *getting* older, I said. Please, let me finish.” I reign in my nerves, all the justifications we’ve rehearsed now trapped behind my tongue, my throat thick with all the loss to come, everything we will miss, the grief we are inviting into our haven. Thomas shuffles in his seat, fuming. “We understand there will come a point of no return, when one of us may be unrecognizable to the other, when we may not be able to take care of the other, when we may not even remember each other. And there’s no way to know when that day will be, no way to live forever as we are now. We have already lived longer than any of our parents, with the exception of my mother...and you all know how horrible that was for so many years. We don’t want that burden for you, we don’t want that burden for each other.”

“There are nursing homes, for this reason exactly! There are rational solutions—” Jane interjects, but I barrel on.

“We don’t want that life. We don’t want a half-life. We don’t want a life without each other,” I say, feeling like I’m losing air.

“So what the hell are you proposing, seriously?” Thomas crosses his arms.

“We are proposing a final year,” Joseph says. “A final year to live the fullest version of ourselves, to leave behind happy memories for you and the grandkids, to be able to go out on a high note instead of you all remembering some withered version of us.”

“Oh, so you do remember you have grandchildren?” Jane scoffs.

“Of course we do.” I barely get it out, tears threatening to fall. “We’ve put a lot of thought into this.”

Thomas exhales through his nose, almost a laugh.

“What about us? What do you expect us to do without you?”

When Violet's outburst isn't met with rallying cries from her brother and sister, it hovers in the humid night air between us.

Jane's eyes flicker between Joseph and me, then narrow on the cheese dish, as if it is hiding information. I can see her working through the facts, processing the things we've told her, comparing them to what she knows to be true, and coming up short on a *why* she can comprehend.

Joseph gives the saddest smile, scraping for any semblance of strength and certainty, and it tears me in two. "We love you all. We want this year to be a celebration, filled with time together as a family."

"Celebration?" Thomas asks, incredulous. "Sure. Okay. Never mind the million questions I have—is one of you dying or something?"

I offer a soft smile. "We're all dying, Thomas."

"Real nice, Ma."

"Seriously. Are you dying?" Jane is a hound, stock-still, ears cocked toward a rustle in the grass.

I had promised myself not to tell them. Not yet.

"Mom." The force of Jane's attention prickles my underarms, the lights too bright. "Mom," Violet echoes, picking up the scent.

My diagnosis confirmed after endless tests, a name for my silent, secret battle. A reason. A thief of memory, of function, of being recognizable to myself, of recognizing the ones I love. The root of every fear bound in a single word. *Parkinson's*. Medications that should be helping, but don't. The disease advancing and aggressive in ways doctors didn't anticipate, can't explain. Part of the unluckiest third of patients, with hints of dementia to come, a nightmare I know all too well. The rot and bleach smell of my mother's nursing home, the way she yelled, slipped between decades, threw things, didn't know me. An end that would be more painful, even, than this.

"Why are you lying to us?" Jane wields the accusation, sharp against my throat.

“We aren’t lying.” I grasp at the loophole, clamping my trembling fingers beneath my knees.

“Well, you certainly aren’t telling the whole truth.”

“Evelyn,” Joseph concedes, “maybe they’d understand...”

“Understand what?” Violet whips toward her father.

“Joseph—”

“They are going to find out...” His shoulders sag with the burden of what’s untold, all his strength spent to lead us here.

“We discussed this.” I resist an urge to hush him, to drag him into another room.

“Discussed what?” Violet’s eyes ping-pong between us, a child begging to be clued in.

“I knew it,” Jane says, throwing up her hands.

“I haven’t said—”

“This is unbelievable.” Thomas stands and stalks to the fireplace, leaning his elbow on the mantel.

“Tell. Us.” Jane emphasizes each word, jamming keys into a locked door.

“Evelyn...”

“I didn’t want—”

“You can’t expect us to buy this,” Thomas says.

“Mom, what’s going on?” Violet’s voice is tinged with fear.

“What could possibly be worse than you and Dad telling us you’re offing yourselves in a year?” Jane asks, and despite myself, despite the absurdity of this conversation, or perhaps because of it, I stifle a laugh. It swells in my throat like a sob.

“You all treating me like fine china for a year. That would be worse.” It comes out before I can stop it, a partial admission that is the first full truth.

“So you are dying,” Jane says.

“In one year’s time,” I agree, desperate to get back to where we started. *One final year. Next June.*

“This is so fucked,” Thomas says.

“Mom, come on.” Jane’s words are an outstretched hand, urg-

ing me to climb in the rescue boat. She, more than anyone, knows how it feels to tread water, braced for danger. “Did you really think we’d let this go?”

I exhale, my resignation an anchor. *Stage two*. Six months ago, stage one felt devastating. *It’s progressing quickly...normally it could be months, years, between stages, there is no way to say, but with you...* Now, I’d give everything to clamber back down the rungs. Joseph is right, of course. The shelter I built around my condition is no more than sticks and twine. Even without my admission, they would dismantle it soon enough.

“I have Parkinson’s. It’s advancing quicker than the doctors predicted. I wanted to keep some semblance of normalcy as long as possible, but the way it’s going...” I reveal my hand, my tremor a tell even the best poker player couldn’t hide.

“Oh, Mom,” Violet begins.

“Jesus,” Thomas says.

“Mom, god. I’m so sorry. I wish you told us...but I thought, isn’t Parkinson’s—like Michael J. Fox? The fully functioning, not at all dying actor?” Jane asks.

“Different people respond differently. My doctor says it’s an unusual case...”

“Okay, so let’s see another doctor,” Thomas says. “Have you gotten other opinions?”

“This is why I didn’t want to tell you. I’ve spent the last few years getting poked and prodded, trying to find an answer that will lead to a different outcome, but there isn’t one.” My voice catches, the bare facts of it, the certain and inevitable course I bloodied my knuckles fighting, only to surrender now as though I had never stood my ground. “I don’t want to waste what time I have left in hospitals and clinics and waiting rooms with you three researching and spinning your wheels searching for some imaginary cure. This is my decision. My diagnosis is not up for debate.”

“You should have told us...we could have helped,” Thomas says. “This doesn’t affect just you—”

“What can we do, there must be something—” Violet asks.

“Wait, okay,” Jane interrupts. “So you have Parkinson’s... I’m sorry, Mom, seriously, so sorry...it’s terrible...but you said you both were...wait. Dad, what do you have?”

“Oh my god—” new horror dawns across Violet’s face “what do *you* have?”

Joseph squints with confusion. “What do I have?”

“You said you both were ending your life,” Jane says, her emotions in check, a doctor studying her chart. “What do you have?”

“I don’t have—”

“Your father has made a unilateral decision that my death calls for his. If you three can dissuade him, I’d really appreciate it. I’ve been trying.”

“Evelyn,” Joseph warns.

“*What?*” Thomas says, rubbing his forehead. “Okay, you’re both nuts.”

“You’re perfectly healthy?” Jane says, her voice dry.

“As far as I know.”

“And you want to kill yourself because Mom is?”

“I would prefer we both live, but she has made it clear that’s not an option,” Joseph says, injured and gruff. Now there is nothing to hide behind, every card on the table, no trick to this disappearing act.

“Is this some twisted game of chicken between you two?” Thomas asks. “Because we can call your bluffs now.”

“I’m not bluffing,” I say, already wanting to turn back the clock, to end the night by hugging them close, by assuring them we would be there for them always, a lie I could make myself believe by sheer will. How badly I want it to be true.

“Unfortunately, neither am I,” Joseph adds. Could he really go through with it? Could either of us? To confess it, to bear the

weight of their pain and fury and grief from our words alone... but to *do* it?

"I don't even know where to start," Jane says.

"I thought you had more sense, Pop," Thomas challenges, glaring at Joseph.

"Thomas." My tone is firm, but not harsh. We expected Thomas to react this way. We prepared for it.

"Don't *Thomas* me," he sneers. "This is so selfish. How do you expect Violet and Jane to explain this to the kids?"

"We've thought about that." My tremor, out in the open now, distracts me from a lengthier explanation. Joseph grips my hand tight once more, steadying me, and I'm grateful.

"I don't think you have," Thomas shouts. "You're acting like lovesick teenagers—"

"Thomas, cool it. I can't think." Jane cuts him off, the authority of the eldest sister trumping the status he holds in the finance world. Our firstborn...it's hard to believe she, although never married, may soon be a grandmother herself; her daughter, Rain, confessed they have been trying. A baby I may never hold. A gnawing loss that leaves me raw, picturing Rain sitting in a hospital bed, her baby pink and new against her chest, a chair that should be meant for me pulled up to the bed as she hands her little one over, my great-grandchild, except I am not there. I will never see that life unfurl, will never feel those tiny fingers curl around mine, will never see my granddaughter inherit the secrets of motherhood, the way it binds us together. I held my babies as she holds hers, and I should be there to show her, to give her tired eyes a moment to close, to say, *give me that baby*, the one I've loved for as long as I've loved you, which is to say, before we ever met, for my entire lifetime and forevermore.

He turns his attention to his younger sister. "Violet, you can't be okay with this."

Smaller than her tall siblings, inheriting my petite figure while Jane and Thomas got Joseph's height, Violet reminds me of the

porcelain dolls she loved as a girl, her wavy hair and full lips and eyes shiny with tears, her fragility beautiful and palpable.

“I can’t imagine.” Violet speaks but she is quiet, unsteady. “But I don’t think they’re selfish. It’s devastating to think about, but also...kind of romantic.”

Thomas tents his fingers over his nose, head bowed, eyes squeezed shut. “You’re sick, you know that?” He lifts his gaze to his older sister. “Jane, be the voice of reason here?”

“I can’t begin to process this.” Jane twirls a grape stem between her fingertips. She picks at it, peeling back to reveal a raw green between the joints.

She doesn’t cry and she isn’t angry. She is trying to understand, but details will not help her. A decision like this is too foreign, unthinkable—loving someone this much terrifies her.

“You have both lost your minds.” Thomas shakes his head, his expression clouded.

Joseph opens his mouth to explain, but I interrupt, trying to get this train back on track. “You’re obviously upset, and we understand.” Even as I speak, I know it is inadequate, but my mind fogs, can’t find the words we had planned, the soothing explanation we hoped would give them peace despite their sadness.

“Upset? This is insane. You can’t do this.” Thomas’s voice catches.

I continue, feeling myself fading as I speak. “It’s a lot to take in, and you will all need time. But for now, we just needed you to know. There isn’t anything left to discuss.”

Joseph nods. I can sense him watching me. He has always been in tune with the slightest shift in my mood. His brows soften in the center when he reads what I am unable to hide. My stomach knots, what was hypothetical days ago is now set in motion, the timer set, the hourglass flipped. I don’t have much more to give, the nerve I’ve worked up will fall away if they keep tugging, my certainty false and shattering as I look into our children’s eyes. Tonight is no different, and Joseph knows what I need without

me asking. "We hope one day you can understand and until then, that you trust us and our decision." He releases my hand and rises to his feet, signaling the end of the conversation.

"So that's it, huh, nothing left to discuss? Just trust you?" Thomas stews, furious. He glances at his sisters for backup, but at least for now, there is no fire left to storm the castle. Violet is deflated. Jane, solid ice.

"You're going to miss your train," Joseph says, his voice gentle.

Thomas opens and closes his mouth, and a moment passes where it seems like he might argue, or more will be said. There is a haze over the room, as if we are all sharing the same lucid dream. Thomas folds his jacket over his arm and stalks into the foyer. Joseph follows, and Jane and Violet rise, the spell broken. It suddenly feels very late. The waves roll endlessly, audible again in the space our children's protests had filled. I don't get to be hurt that Thomas didn't kiss my cheek or say goodbye. This is our doing. And yet, there is a pang when I watch him walk away. Jane begins to stack the dishes, and I motion to her not to bother; she ignores me and clears them to the kitchen.

Violet sinks beside me on the love seat, her knees folded beneath her like a child. "I'm so sorry, Mom. For what you've been going through, for how you've been feeling. It's awful. I wish I knew...but don't do this, please."

I can see panic creep in, leaching into her sadness, and the guilt I've been battering down swells. How to explain to them that death is the last thing I want. "I wish it were that simple." Tears fall fast now down my cheeks. I hug her, burying my emotion in her curls.

I overhear Joseph, a final appeal to our son. "We're not asking for you to condone this. I know you don't. But don't disappear, Thomas, please."

Thomas meets his father's gaze with a glare, then walks out without another word. The screen door slams behind him.

"This conversation isn't finished," Jane says as she grabs her

purse. She won't meet my eyes but she leans and gives me a hug before she follows her brother. She agreed to drop him at the station to catch the last train to New York before heading home, and I worry now if he will make it in time or be too upset to find the right platform. He should have stayed over, but he always travels back to the city before midnight.

Joseph escorts Violet out, and she threads her arm through his and lingers at the door as if memorizing the living room before it vanishes. She'll cut through the garden on her way to her house next door, the one I grew up in—my mother left the cedar-shingled cottage to Joseph and me when she died. I wonder when Violet will tell Connor about our decision. He's a good man who loves her but never learned to ask about the sadness written across her face.

Joseph returns alone and joins me on the couch. The living room emptied, echoes of all that was said float before us.

"That went well." His voice sounds strained from talking, like he needs to cough. "Should we not have told them anything?"

My heart is heavy; I think of the stem Jane couldn't stop twirling, of Violet's tears, of Thomas's anger. Joseph and I discussed whether to tell them at all, if it was more humane to give them time to prepare, if it meant a year of agony. But I know the cost of a secret, and this isn't one I could keep. "It was a lot to take in. They need more time."

"I hope you're right," he says, sounding unconvinced.

"You gave me up pretty quick." I swipe at my cheeks, don't admit to the sliver of relief within my anger, not to have to hide, to make excuses, to be discovered in a moment of humiliation.

"I know, I'm sorry...it seemed wrong, it didn't make sense, without them understanding everything."

"I wasn't ready." I sound petulant, but there is so little I have a say in anymore.

"I'm not ready for any of this." Joseph's attention lands on the empty sofa, his own pain an offering to their imprints left behind.

“That makes two of us.”

We sit in silence, not the tense silence of moments before, but one taut with awareness of bearing either end of a heavy weight, complicit in each other’s decision. Perhaps he’s wagering I will change my mind, or that this conversation, my conviction, will escape with my fleeting memory.

“What now?” I ask.

“Now we spend this year together, you and me, and the family. Retrace the footsteps of our life...relive the memories we’ve shared. That’s all I want.”

“I knew you’d say that,” I tease, his predictability both bitter to the taste, and a balm.

“Is it the worst thing to want?”

The lightness in my voice fades. “No, it’s not. But you’re healthy...you have more time.”

“I’ve spent too many days without you.”

I lean against him, ever so slightly. My years in Boston, his years overseas, memories so distant they belong to someone else. “So long ago. Certainly we’ve made up for it since then.”

“I will never stop wishing for more time with you.” His eyes fill once more, the reality settling between us, exactly how short one year can be.

“There will never be enough, will there?” My chin quivers, and he folds me into his arms.

“And you?” He whispers in my ear, “I know you’ve thought about it. I know you’ve dreamed of all the things we could do.”

“Besides getting you to change your mind?” I pull away and look at him squarely, my eyes rimmed red. The finality of a single year reverberates through my body. When it was only me, it seemed less scary. Like I could float away, leaving only ripples to show I had been there. Now it is twice as heavy. Two stones, sinking to the depths, to the unknown.

“Please, Evelyn. Tonight was tough enough.”

I back off, exhaustion shrouding reason. Conceding, if only

for now. “You know the answer...” I shake my head. “But it’s silly. It’s not possible, I don’t know how, or if I could...”

When I don’t continue, he offers gently, “The symphony?”

I glance into the lamplit study at our dual pianos. The glossy black Steinway I rarely play. A showpiece my father bought in the twenties that I begged to use, but under my mother’s critical eye, always felt like swing dancing in a museum, inappropriate, verging on reckless. I prefer the Baldwin, the one Joseph bought secondhand, with its warm honeyed wood, the yellowed keys, the bench that holds sheet music within its hinged seat, the cushion that sags in the middle. The piano I taught Jane to play on, where I attempted to teach Thomas and Violet, though it never stuck. Where I conducted beginners’ lessons and entertained guests when the kids were young and every room of the Oyster Shell was full, impromptu concerts in our living room, bursting with music and swaying couples and laughter.

The biggest dream on my list: *play in the Boston Symphony Orchestra*. For a lifetime I’ve practiced, and that dream was the reason, the heartbeat humming beneath. An impractical, implausible yearning that bloomed within me when I held the hope of a different path, that I’ve never been able to quiet, despite reason and logic and the trajectory of my life. Even now, as I face its end. I don’t acknowledge it, how much of a stretch this dream of mine has always been, how laughable it is now. My idea seems small, selfish, in light of the anger on my children’s faces. And yet, the need remains, pulsing and aware of the minutes ticking by.

Instead I say, “We’ll have to find a way to say goodbye.”