

Grace and Grief

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Inspiration and strength comes from those who are hurting most: How my sister carried me through her greatest loss

**“Loving can heal, loving can mend your soul
And it's the only thing that I know,
I swear it will get easier,
Remember that with every piece of you
And it's the only thing we take with us when we die”**

A man in a black suit flashed a well-practiced smile. His smile was the perfect mix of happy greetings, comfort, and sympathy. He opened the door for us. The procession line was backed up almost to the entrance. I had carpooled with my sister's friend Cheyenne. We had come early, but we were still late. We signed the guest book and joined the line-up of griever. We barely spoke. The funeral home was well air-conditioned, and it was cold in contrast to the sunny, humid day outside. My skin raised goosebumps in response to the chill as it accosted my skin, still sticky with sweat. Only seconds ago I had the warm sun on my face; I now found myself in a poorly-lit, cold, funeral home.

As we waited our turn, we had no choice but to absorb the sadness surrounding us. *Diamond Rings and Old Barstools* by Tim McGraw was playing. I smiled because it was a country song that Travis pretended to hate. We approached the front of the room, and I could finally see my sister standing with Travis' family. Her blonde hair was curled and she wore no makeup. She stood tall in my borrowed blue dress and black cardigan. She was beside Travis' brother near the head of the casket. I hadn't looked at Travis. I just watched my sister hold herself with more composure than any twenty-year-old girl who was grieving her boyfriend could ever be expected to have. *See You Again* by Wiz Khalifa and Charlie Puth began to play, filling my eyes with tears. The song was a tribute to another person who had died too young – and too suddenly. It had only recently become popular, but its meaning was forever changed for me.

We were close enough now to see the slideshow on the TVs and the picture boards displayed near the front. Travis was scowling in nearly every picture, except those where he was clearly high or drunk. In nearly every picture, Travis grimaced at the camera, but those who were pictured with him beamed.

I turned back to my sister, who gave me a quick, teary smile. Her shoulders caved as she caught my eye; she breathed heavily to control her tears. She was losing composure. *I'm almost there. I'm coming. It's okay. You're okay.*

We stood at the front of the line now. I shook hands with Travis' aunt, who held her baby son. We introduced ourselves, though we had met before. I then shook the hands of Travis' cousins. They were all young boys; the oldest was in grade eight. Travis' grandparents swallowed me into tearful hugs. I awkwardly murmured my sympathies and tried to block out their pain. If I allowed myself to feel it, I would fall apart. I needed to stay together for my sister.

I was almost to her.

I reached Travis' parents, who stood at the foot of the casket. His Dad pulled me into a strong embrace and thanked me for coming. His Mom quickly hugged me. When she pulled away, I held her face and saw tears in her eyes, tears that had been streaking her face for four days straight. "I am so sorry," I choked out. "How is everyone?" I asked as a warm tear fell down my cheek.

Her kind and heartbroken eyes looked softly into mine. "We're okay," she said as she squeezed my shoulder and shot me a smile that was meant to be reassuring. I almost believed

her. Mothers are experts at comforting others – even when they’re the ones who need comforting. I knew no one was okay, but I smiled back at Travis’ Mom and moved on.

There was a gap. Between Travis’ parents at the end, and his brother and my sister at the top, laid Travis. I noticed a stuffed elephant, letters, and his favourite bucket hat around him inside his coffin. I avoided looking at him, but I knew I would regret it if I didn’t see him one last time. I took a deep breath and looked at his face. It was pale and waxy. His eyes were closed. His hands were folded on his stomach. His hair looked wrong. Too puffy. Too combed.

There was a small line in front of Travis’ brother, so I waited with Trav. The finality of Travis’ life hit me like a train. I was numb. For a moment, I was paralyzed. I touched the hard, smooth casket and looked into his not-quite-right face.

When it was my turn, I threw my arms around Travis’ brother’s neck and told him, “I’m so sorry.”

I don’t know if he replied. All I could see was my sister behind him. I caught her eye and smiled at her, as I detangled from him.

My sister rushed to me and fell in my arms, finally grateful to hug someone she actually knew. “How are you doing, babe?” I asked.

“I’m...I’m...Oh...Oh...Kay,” she sobbed. I held her for a little longer before I pulled away to look at her. She reigned in her tears. She allowed herself twenty seconds of unhidden sorrow and was ready again to face the line of people awaiting her. “I’m okay,” she repeated, nodding and smiling at me. Her smile was remarkably similar to the one I just received from Travis’ mother. There was courage in her eyes as she motioned me to move along.

I floated into the next room where I collapsed onto a couch. Cheyenne sat beside me.

“How long do you want to stay?” she asked.

“I want to stay. You can leave if you want, hon. I’m staying at least until my Mom gets here. In case she needs anything.”

“Okay, I want to stay too,” she replied.

We sat quietly for a long time. Often, she rose to hug a friend or acquaintance and would leave me on the couch. Unlike me, she went to the same high school as most of the griever so she knew more of them than I did.

A group of Travis’ closest friends sat with us for a while. They wore black suits, likely the same ones they wore to prom only one year ago. Their eyes were bloodshot. The smell of their aerosol cologne clung to them like a cloud. They were quiet at first; I think they were stunned. It was likely the first time they experienced real grief and loss.

It certainly was mine.

However, their calmness quickly subsided. As we chatted with them, they became more and more vocal and angry. One would begin crying, saying “It’s not fair! It’s not fair!” The group would then comfort the protestor, until another one took a turn. They rotated outcries.

Tables were pounded, voices were raised, and the tough, tattooed young men sobbed and yelled. They burst back into the visitation room, cutting the line to gather around Travis. They put their arms around each other and stood in a semi-circle huddle, in front of Travis’ coffin. They wept. Travis’ brother joined them.

Many people gawked at the group of boys. No one knew what to make of them. “Are they praying?” an older woman asked me as she entered the sitting room. “I don’t think so,” I

whispered in reply as I looked at them through the doorway. Although the funeral home was filled with the buzz of loud whispers, the voices of the boys was clearly audible from my corner on the couch. Their arms wrapped around each other to hold each other up. They weren't praying. At least, not to God. They were cursing God. They were praying to their friend.

When my mom arrived, she told me that people were confused and annoyed by the boys. They repeatedly came to the sitting room, got excited again, and re-entered the front of the visitation line. Well-practiced funeral goers watched in disbelief as the boys not only cut the line, but halted the procession by standing in the way. The visitation line was out the door and well onto the road now.

It wasn't well-mannered. It wasn't the regular ceremony or ritual. It wasn't proper procedure. *How could there be a proper procedure to pain?* I wondered as my heart ached for the young men in nice suits and beat-up sneakers who were breaking apart in front of their best friend's body. They weren't ready for this. No amount of dead goldfish or grandparents can prepare a person for the impact of the sudden, accidental death of their twenty-one-year-old friend. None of us were ready. None of us were equipped to handle the sudden and detrimental pain now strangled us.

In my twenty-two years, I had never experienced or witnessed anywhere close to the amount of grief I was exposed to at Travis' visitation. Suddenly, my stomach churned at the dry, air-conditioning aroma, and the freshly-cleaned and product-laced carpets. Salt and mucus overwhelmed my taste buds. Grief is a tear streaking a perfectly contoured cheek. It's a deep voice that keeps cracking. It's a faded black dress. It's a messy bun or a perfect ringlet. It's a suit that's just a little too small. . I could feel their pain, I could taste it, I could smell it. It was

all around. It was infectious and smothering. It choked me; I felt its hands around me, cutting off my air supply and wounding my neck.

I sat on the couch and quietly cried as I tried not to puke. I heard the broken voices in the room next door. I cried for Travis' family. I cried for his parents, especially his mom. I cried for his brother. I cried for my sister, who was pushed into the role of grieving widow at twenty years old. Finally, I cried for myself, because Travis was my friend too.

I remembered two summers prior to his death returning home from university, freshly single and alone. My ex had isolated me from my high school friends and when we broke up I had no one to fill my social life with – except my sister and her boyfriend. My sister and Travis allowed me to play third wheel with them often that summer. Travis stuck up for me in nearly every argument my sister and I had (much to her annoyance).

I had gotten to know Travis better than the rest of my family, excluding my sister, of course. My parents didn't like him. My brother didn't like anyone. Travis and my sister started dating when she was fifteen. They were on and off for years. He had an anger problem, like my sister. In addition to my parents thinking Travis wasn't good enough for my sister, he was incredibly shy around them, which didn't help his case because they couldn't get to know him.

However, he was comfortable with me. Every time he came to our house, he made sure to greet the dogs and say hi to me. I had rescued my dog, Charlie, a few months before that summer I spent with him and my sister. Charlie was aggressive towards strangers and had severe anxiety. Travis always sat with him for ten minutes until he gained his trust. Trav loved animals, especially dogs. He was a huge help in Charlie's socialization and behavioural rehabilitation. And, it gave Travis a buffer between himself and my intimidating parents.

I pictured Travis, wearing his Blue Jays hat and sitting cross-legged on the kitchen floor in his skinny jeans and mismatched socks, petting my dog. I could hear him say, “Hey, Meg,” and whisper softly to mine and my parent’s dog.

From the corner of my eye, I saw a flash of gold-blond and heard heavy footsteps. I looked up, worried it was my sister. It was my Mom. She sat down beside me and interrupted my reverie. She held my hand and said “holy, there’s a lot of people here,” to which I responded with a nod, still zoned out.

‘Go see if your sister needs anything,’ Mom said warmly.

I rose obediently and found my sister dehydrated. She requested water.

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I don’t remember leaving the funeral home or how I got home. I was an exhausted witness to complete sorrow. I couldn’t imagine how my sister was feeling.

I didn’t go to the second visitation that afternoon, but when my sister returned, she was drained and tired. Someone had given Travis’ brother pain killers. He got high and started a fight. He was kicked out of his own brother’s visitation. My sister recounted to me these events with a voice filled with concern and amusement.

“I’m worried for him. But...only at Travis Pepper’s visitation would there be a fight,” she said with a choked laugh. Her smile didn’t reach her eyes.

“I think he’d approve,” I said.

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The next day, the church was crowded for Travis' funeral. After the wearing visitations, everyone seemed to be better, somehow more accepting and ready for closure. Grief had beaten them into submission. The boys calmly followed procedure. There were no outbursts of any kind. The dark circles under their eyes gave the illusion that their tears were spent, the well was dry. This is, until Travis' aunt and uncle read tear-jerking tributes with choked voices and puffy eyes. His uncle laughed as he remembered how Travis loved to pee on things outside – something I had personally witnessed after many parties and cottage weekends. I wondered if he was peeing on the tracks when he was hit. He was carried out to *Hallelujah* by Leonard Cohen.

As Travis led the way, a tidal wave of black overwhelmed Church Street. Grievors stood on the sidewalk, unsure what to do next. “Now, we go to the cemetery,” my Mom and the few other adults told the sea of weeping twenty-somethings. It took twenty minutes to drive just down the street; the road was congested by Travis' farewell party. People impatiently honked their horns and shouted in frustration at the overwhelming and unexpected traffic as Bowmanville's main street continued to flood with cars.

The parade of mourners walked somberly to the far end of the cemetery, towards the open grave beside a blue coffin. A minister led a prayer, and then asked everyone to give the family some privacy. We all backed up several feet, but still lingered among the dead, unsure where to go. My sister began walking with us, but was gently grabbed by Travis' grandma. “You're part of this family, Paige,” she said.

I had always been awestruck by my sister's charisma. Her charm had earned her popularity in high school, but the charisma that prompted Travis' family to absolutely include her in their private and final moments with their loved one was something different – something extraordinary. In her time of grief, old friends that she had lost touch with reached out to her,

new friends from college piled into a small car and drove four hours to support her, and neighbours sent flowers. It takes a special kind of person to inspire the love and devotion she received from her friends, acquaintances, coworkers and strangers.

I looked around me at the ocean of grievers. The number of grievers, and the depth of their pain made me realize that Travis had his own type of charisma. He was well-liked and deeply missed. I always enjoyed Trav's company, but I hadn't considered his unconventional popularity. I thought he was just my sister's nice, stoner boyfriend. As I looked around and saw most of his graduating class, there was one word I could think of to describe Travis. It was "friend."

A few minutes later, my sister rejoined us. I was standing with my mom and a few of my sister's high school friends. She joined our circle and answered everyone's individual inquiries about her well-being. "I'm alright, I'm okay," she repeated convincingly with reassuring nods and smiles. Friends began sharing memories of Travis. "He had so many friends. Everyone loved him," someone said. My sister zoned out. She was looking at her feet and kicking the dirt and grass below her shoes.

While someone was speaking, my sister began to sing. Everyone stopped to look at her. She swayed in her long blue dress. She had a horrible voice and sang *Photograph* by Ed Sheeran off key. She sang more to her shoes than to the audience, who gawked at her. After a few verses, she realized she was singing out loud and had spectators. She shyly smiled, a little embarrassed. We all smiled back at her.

My sister has always been the class clown, and the family comedian. Her hysterical, loud laugh is usually funnier than her jokes. She was always laughing, joking, and smiling. Except, she hadn't been. Until this moment, I hadn't seen her smile in five days. Until then, I didn't

realize I was holding my breath. I held my breath because I wasn't sure if my sister was drowning. When she giggled – I exhaled in relief.

She wasn't wearing makeup as she usually did. Her big blue eyes were watery with tears that threatened to fall at any moment. The hot August sun highlighted her light, blonde hair as she swayed. Her freckles, that were usually concealed, danced across her nose as it crinkled with her smile. She was beautiful. Even in her grief, her smile was healing.