

To Know Grief Intimately

I thought I knew what grief felt like.

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I toddle into the kitchen, the appliances sparkling in the sunlight and looming high above me. The pristine cabinet in front of me closes with a loud boom and the jean clad pair of legs with the pink and white tennis shoes moves towards the stove. This is my world, full of bright lights and beautiful sights, but—

“Mommy, where’s my fishy?” I ask, my voice squeaky and high-pitched. My pigtails don’t even reach the top of the cabinets, but when I stood on my tiptoes I could usually glimpse enough of the tank to entertain my fascination with my beta fish for a few moments at a time. But now the glass tank on the counter is gone, and a frantic, haphazard glance around the kitchen confirms my worst fears; my fishy has disappeared.

The pink and white tennis shoes stop short, and I hear a hiss as something drips onto the hot stove. Ten seconds of silence ensues. Then the shoes come clomping towards me, slow, but steady, and when I peer upwards, Mommy’s sad dark eyes look down at me. She picks me up and settles me on her hip, because I’m still small enough for that.

“Honey, your fishy died today,” she says softly, her eyes full of sympathy. As the realization of what she said dawns on me, my bottom lip begins to quiver and my eyes well up with tears. My fishy died? But I love my fishy!

Mom begins the lecture that every small child receives the first time they really experience death. They give you the same lesson in church, but it’s still very different; the idea of death and the reality of it are very separate from each other.

I listen intently to the words she speaks. Of spirits and bodies separating and then spirits returning to Heavenly Father. In the back of my mind is the image of a small, blue beta fish, swimming merrily back and forth while I watched it for hours.

And I'm sad. But it makes sense, this talk of the fishy's spirit going to live with Heavenly Father, so I know he will be okay.

In less than an hour, I've put my fishy completely out of my mind.

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I thought I knew what grief looked like.

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"Mom is crying," my little sister whispers to me, her bright gray eyes wide with...what is that emotion there, fear? Odd, isn't it, to think that a mother's tears inspire fear in her young? Because I cannot deny at that precise moment that a cold, frozen fear has entered into my heart as well.

If Mom is crying, then something is horribly wrong.

"Did you just say Mom is crying?" My brother sticks his head into my room, his voice just as hushed as my sister's.

"That's what Sophia says," I tell him, trying to hide the panic that's clearly visible in my eyes.

"Crying is worse than when she's yelling," Noah responds knowingly, and then he disappears into his room.

I roll my eyes and try not to show that I'm worried. Being the oldest child comes with a lot of responsibility; namely pretending to be strong when your little sister and brothers are watching you. You can't show fear or worry or sadness or anger even. You just have to be the protector.

"Come on, let's go." I grab Sophia's hand and pull her along with me into the living room on the pretense of entertaining my five-year-old brother.

Pots and pans bang and crash in the kitchen around the corner as we show little Lleyton more toys and hope to spark his interest. Sophia and I exchange glances full of unsaid meaning.

“Who’s gonna ask her?” she hisses.

I roll my eyes, as if I’m not wishing it didn’t have to be me. “I’ll do it,” I mutter. “I don’t see why it’s such a big deal though.” How easily the lie slips from my tongue.

Like a soldier tiptoeing through a minefield, I step carefully around the corner into the kitchen, sincerely hoping I haven’t gotten myself in over my head and wondering if I would survive this encounter. A loud sniff precedes my entrance. For a moment, I simply stand and watch. My mother’s movements, usually determined and meaningful, have become distorted, easily fueled by her emotions. She starts as she misplaces her hand and a pot goes crashing to the floor. An unintelligible exclamation slips out of her angrily.

I swallow hard and take a deep breath. “What’s wrong?” I ask tentatively.

She starts and turns around. When she realizes it’s only me, she seems to relax a bit. “Sorry, honey,” my mom says. “It’s just that my good friend died of cancer yesterday.” Her voice cracks a little and another tear slips out of her eye. “I’m so glad she isn’t in pain anymore, but it’s still very hard for me.”

She’s doing that thing. The same as me. Where you pretend to be strong and you pretend not to be sad and you pretend you aren’t hurting to protect the people you love. In this case, me. I do the same thing for my little siblings.

“Oh, okay,” I say. “I’m sorry.” How do you talk to someone who’s hurting?

Then she gathers me and my siblings into the living room and sits us down to have a talk about life after death. I try to look interested, but it’s the same lesson I’ve had in Sunday School dozens of times. I have a testimony. I don’t see what the point of listening again is.

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Because I am such an empathetic individual, I thought that when the time came for me to experience grief myself, I would be better at it than everyone else. Wasn't I experiencing grief when I felt the pain that my friends told me they were experiencing? I knew what the wounds would look like, feel like.

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Even from inside the Wilkinson Center, I can feel the bass of the music outside vibrating through me. I'm sad that Orientation is drawing to a close, because it's been so wonderful. After so much anxiety plaguing me about coming to college, knowing that I am going to be okay is a relief.

But as the buzz of conversation fills the room now that the Dating Game has ended, to say that I am entirely empty of anxiety is a false statement. A small pit of worry is nestled in my stomach— and attached to the worry is the thought of an old man lying in a hospital bed, crystal clear, and the sound of his weak voice proudly saying to the blonde nurse, "Oh yes, that's April, my oldest granddaughter, and Alexandra, my oldest great granddaughter." His dark brown eyes that look like of home and his wrinkled hand gently holding mine.

A flood of memories. They flash through my head in a slideshow, one at a time. Fast enough that I can see years in a single second, but slowly enough that I can savor each one as I view it, bittersweet and tender.

"Alex!" My roommate's voice snaps me into the present, back to the whirling color and sound of the Ballroom.

"Sorry, I zoned out," I say with a slight shake of my head. "What were you saying?"

"This guy just invited us to this party tonight," she tells me. "It's off campus, but it sounds really fun."

Instantly, a sick feeling thuds into the pit of my stomach for seemingly no reason. "That does sound fun!" I say halfheartedly, trying to push the feeling back down. Why do I feel sick so suddenly? Is this a warning that I shouldn't go to the party?

"We won't go until after the dance though," my roommate reassures me. I expect a momentary sensation of relief from the dread that's overcome me, but there is no reprieve. "Come on, let's go!"

She grabs my hand and pulls me along the long hallway, down a flight of stairs, around a corner. I'm not really paying attention; the white walls blur together with the buzz of conversation. I see the doors leading to the courtyard outside, watch the colorful lights flash through the clear glass. The beat of the bass is louder now, it keeps vibrating through me, and now something in my back pocket is vibrating and I know what it is, but I don't want to admit it. Slowly, more calmly than I thought was possible, I pull out my phone and see the words. The first time, I don't really read them, they don't make sense to me. The second time they send what feels like a cold knife into my stomach. And suddenly the dread makes sense, the odd feeling I had. I've walked through the doors now, I'm outside in the cool night air, but I can't feel or hear the music. My friends pull me into the middle of the crowd in what feels like slow motion, but I don't really know what's going on.

The world remains whole, but my great-grandpa is dead, and so there isn't a point.

I'm vaguely aware that I'm making conversation with the people around me. How long has it been since I got the news? I don't even know. Why am I putting forth the effort to fake a smile? Probably because crying in the middle of New Student Orientation would be horribly embarrassing. Without a word to any of my friends, I turn and begin forcing my way out of the middle of the disgusting, crushing mass of people. Everyone is too close, dripping sweat and attempting to dance. I can't stand it anymore. Can't everyone just stop and stand still for a moment?

I don't even bother taking my phone out of my pocket when it buzzes again. I know I won't want to read whatever words are there.

Pushing my way out of the crowd, I make my way to a bench and try and breathe slowly so that I can stop shaking, something I hadn't realized I was doing until moments before. An emotional weight is lying on me, but it feels a little better now that I'm surrounded by only the cool night air and not hundreds of pressing bodies. I can't do this. I can't. I haven't even been at college for a full week, but somehow my world has already managed to fall apart.

I have to get out of here.

But I don't have a key to get back to my apartment. My roommate had brought one so I had left mine on the counter. How could I have been so stupid? Instead, I now get to spend another hour trying not to drown in the memories, drown in the sorrow, drown in the emotions. And I have to manage it without letting anyone see it. Because the second someone asks me what's wrong, I know I won't be able to fake the easy lull of conversation or force a seemingly genuine laugh.

Every beat of the music is another sickening thud in my stomach. But I can't sit here and expect to be left alone for much longer, so I force my way to my feet and shove my way back into the crowd, back to the dizzying mess of people. I have to make it through. And then I can go home and let myself feel everything.

Part of me knows that the pain will subside over the coming days. Part of me knows that I will be okay. But I don't want the world to go on without him.

And deep down, I'm chastising myself for thinking that there was any way I could have been emotionally prepared to experience grief firsthand with no prior experience.

I thought I knew. But I didn't.