

# The Wrong Way

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AFTER THE SERVICE, THE FIVE OF US—DEVAN, GARRETT, MORGAN, STEELE, AND I—crammed into my rental car and drove to a nearby Mexican restaurant. Devan’s sister, Morgan, wrapped in a black pencil skirt that matched her thin, cropped hair, stayed outside to finish her cigarette. When she came in, Steele—the youngest cousin and, strangely, the most boisterous of the bunch—was wearing one of the restaurant’s mariachi hats, which otherwise served as decoration. He was being silly and we couldn’t stop laughing. Neither could the waiter when he came over. Delighted by our energy, he asked, “Is it someone’s birthday?”

No. No, it was not.

Morgan ordered a Coke. Devan said that Morgan was embalming herself from the inside out with Coke, booze, and cigarettes.

“It’s true!” Morgan squealed and we all laughed some more. We were ridiculous. We were, somehow, high on life.

After lunch, we got into the car again. The energy had died back down.

“What next?” I asked from behind the wheel.

“Let’s take a drive,” Steele suggested and we took off into the back hills of Northern California.

Garrett, quiet and serious despite his tattoos and piercings, with a slow and steady type of thought and speech, observed how green the hills were. Steele, as the sole resident of those hills, shrugged. I thought it looked dry, but I was from Vancouver, one of the greenest cities in the world. Morgan and Devan, however, agreed, having also come from Southern California.

“Where am I driving?” I asked Steele.

“Well, we can drive up into the hills by where my friend lives. Anyone want weed?” Why yes, we did.

“I’ll navigate then,” Steele said.

We drove for about an hour, way up into the hills. Steele told us about how one night he and his friend had walked a few miles to a grow-op in the woods, trespassed onto the property, and stolen about a pound of big, beautiful bud.

After much contemplation of my own tumultuous teenage years, I had already come to the conclusion that you can’t make teenagers *do* anything. They will do what they will do, and all you can do is try to gently guide them and hope they don’t get themselves killed. I think it was this philosophy that kept my relationships with my eight nephews and nieces so strong throughout their adolescence. They knew they could tell Auntie Sierra anything and I would never tell their parents, unless I seriously thought their lives were in danger. I preferred to guide them on my own, sans parental influence and the inevitable communication shutdown that came with it.

“Steele, as great as this pot is, I highly recommend that you don’t trespass and steal it again. Seems really dangerous. I don’t want you to die over dank, okay?”

“No worries,” Steele said, “I don’t know how we could ever smoke all that we already have anyway.”

He directed me up a one-lane dirt road, carved into ruts by rainfall and repeated passage. I was worried about my rental car, but I didn’t say anything.

“Pull over here,” he said.

I pulled over and Steele hopped out. He walked off the road into the scraggly trees. A couple of minutes later, he was back with another shaggy blonde boy who also looked about fifteen. They could’ve been brothers. Steele’s real brother, Tristan, had chosen to stay behind with the “adults,” while all the “kids” had left with me. Tristan was too much of a people pleaser. I worried about him. I worried about how what had happened would change him, both of the boys, all of us, really.

Steele’s friend peered into the car and waved. We waved back and smiled, trying to look like we cared about something more than the weed, but we didn’t. The friend handed Steele a brown paper lunch bag and Steele got back in the car.

“Buuuuud!” he said, and the cousins mimicked him.

I thought briefly about all the laws I was breaking. I got a little sick, a nervous stomach, and ignored it, pushed my fears aside. What was important was that I help these kids feel the way I was feeling, which was truly, genuinely *just fine*.



In 1969, in her book, *On Death and Dying*, Elizabeth Kübler-Ross first introduced her theory, commonly known as The Five Stages of Grief. The five stages—denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance—have become so deeply embedded in our modern understanding of grief that we have forgotten that the Kübler-Ross model was originally envisioned to explain the experience of terminally ill patients. Now the stages are used to describe not only how we react to the death of a loved one, but almost any experience of loss. Twenty-two years after publishing *On Death and Dying*, Kübler-Ross concluded, “Any natural, normal human being, when faced with any kind of loss, will go from shock all the way through acceptance.”

This is how loss is done, folks.



I didn’t even want a cat. I’m not a “pet person.” I like pets about as often as I like people. Not that often. Sure, a pet can grow on you, just like a person can, but it takes time to develop that relationship. I don’t

see a small ball of fuzz and love it on sight. So, when William decided we should get cats, I was reluctant. Unfortunately, the man who became my first husband could talk me into almost anything.

We went to the Humane Society. He picked out a black cat with white socks. I thought it was overly excitable.

A little multi-coloured tabby walked over to me and nudged against my hand. I petted her and she started to purr. She sat down next to me.

“I like this one,” I told William. He scowled at the cat.

“A tabby? Tabbies are boring. They’re ugly. Look at this one. Isn’t he cute? I’m going to call him Hobbes.”

It was my turn to scowl. “Hobbes is an orange cat—an orange tabby, by the way—not black.”

“Then I’ll name him Calvin. Isn’t that right, Calvin? Yes, it is. Would you like to come home with me and the grouchy lady? Okay,” William said to the cat.

“That cat is spastic. I’m not getting that cat. I’m getting this one. It’s my apartment.”

“Fine, we’ll each get one. I’ll take care of Calvin and you can take care of that boring cat.”

“Whatever,” I said. The ultimate word in any relationship spat.

We went home with two cats.

I named my cat Suzie. I liked Suzie, but I didn’t *love* her. I respected her as another individual living in my home and I believe she respected me. She didn’t go to the bathroom anywhere other than in her litter box. She didn’t scratch my furniture while I was out. She didn’t mew too loudly or too much. But I knew that if she got kitty leukemia, she’d be on her own. I liked her, but I wasn’t about to go into debt to save her. It wasn’t that kind of relationship.

Then, one day, Suzie disappeared.

At first, I thought she was just sleeping or hiding

in the apartment, but as I called her name over and over, shook the bag of cat food, and opened a can of tuna—all to no avail—I realized that she was definitely not in the apartment. I ran to the balcony and looked down at the two-storey drop. Could a cat land on its feet after that drop? I didn’t see her broken and bent body among the bushes. To be sure, I ran outside and scoured the slope below my balcony. No body.

Then I just lost it. I screamed her name hysterically. I begged and bargained and threatened her to show herself. I looked around buildings. I searched strangers’ patios. William tried to calm me, but I became enraged.

“Don’t tell *me* to calm down!” I yelled.

After about a half hour of looking for Suzie while battling a barrage of emotions, I saw her underneath a car. I called to her, but it was as though I was a stranger. She wouldn’t come. I tried to grab her and she fought and hissed. She scratched me until I let go, and then she ran. William and I gave chase and finally cornered her. I got a hold of her leg and wouldn’t let go until I finally had her secured. When we got her into the house, I started crying and couldn’t stop.

Between sobs I said, “I didn’t think I cared. I didn’t think I cared so much.”



In her article, “New Ways to Think about Grief,” Ruth Davis Konigsberg makes the argument that Kübler-Ross broke the “stoic silence that had surrounded death” since the First World War. Konigsberg believes that the twentieth-century evolution from a religious model of grief to the new (North) “American Way of Grief” was the direct result of Kübler-Ross’s seminal work. In less than half a century, grief had developed from an emotion to a “process” that an individual had to “work” through. Rituals of the past had been traded

in for new rituals, such as grief counselling, journaling, “talking it out” with friends and family. Konigsberg points out the insidious nature of the new rules of grief: “So while conventions for *mourning*, such as wearing black armbands or using black-bordered stationery, have all but disappeared, they have been replaced by conventions for *grief*, which are arguably more restrictive in that they dictate not what a person wears or does in public but his or her emotional state” (emphasis mine).

This is how you *feel* loss.



I hadn’t called my sister in three months. She’d left several messages that I hadn’t returned. Since her “accident,” it was hard to talk to her. She was getting better, but it was still a struggle.

The accident wasn’t really an accident. She’d overdosed yet again, but this time had been the worst. Her boyfriend had found her unresponsive, with green froth foaming from her lips. The ambulance came. Her blood oxygen level registered 45%.

“That’s the lowest our machine goes,” the EMT had said.

The ICU nurses had warned us that brain damage was probable, but we paid no heed. April would come out of it because she was a survivor. Then she mistook the remote control for the phone. Then she couldn’t dress herself. It was downhill from there.

After weeks in the hospital, my mother finally took April into her own custody. Our mother hadn’t been able to locate a suitable institution. When I first called, April had been almost totally unresponsive.

“Hello? Who is it?” I said when my mother gave April the phone. I said it in the funny accent like the French castle guard in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. That’s how we’d always said hello. There was no

reply. Then I asked, “April, can you hear me?”

“Yes.”

And that was pretty much how the rest had gone. Only one-word replies to direct questions. Nothing more.

But slowly, after months, April started to change. She could hold short conversations. I remember the first time we laughed together. I said, “Hey! You laughed!”

“Yes, but I’m not as funny as I used to be,” she said.

“Well, you are still funny.”

“But not like before.”

That was now months ago. What she’d said had been true. She just wasn’t as funny anymore and it was hard to talk to her. I knew I’d pushed my delay to return her call as long as I possibly could and I finally called back. No one picked up. I left a message.

The next day I prepared a package for her. The most recent journal I had edited. A letter announcing an award I had won at school. A print-out of my most recent grades.

I wanted her to be proud of me, if that was possible.

The next week, my mother called.

Casey, my second husband, looked at the caller ID.

“It’s your mom.”

My mother never called me. Unless there was a tragedy to share.

“Oh God, someone is probably dead,” I told Casey. “I hope it’s my dad and not my sister.”

But the call was about my sister. She’d had another overdose on the day I had left my message. She’d been in the ICU the last week, and our mother had been at her side ever since, unable to call me back. Or whatever.

“I don’t even know where she got the drugs,” my mother cried.

I had to contact my older brother Dane, since my mom didn’t talk to him either. Not even for tragedies.

He was in Japan. I emailed him to call me as soon as possible. I said it was an emergency.

“Do you know what time it is here?” he asked, irritated, when he called. “It’s three a.m. What’s the big emergency?”

“It’s April. She’s in the ICU. She tried to commit suicide again. Pretty serious this time. She left a note.”

Dane sighed. “You know, she had so much potential when she was younger, but she just failed at *everything*. I mean, she even failed at killing herself.”

April started healing. Mother called and said she was doing better. She’d had a little Jell-O. So, it was quite a shock when she died suddenly a few days later. It was quite a shock for everyone but me.



Kübler-Ross didn’t believe that the stages always came in the same order for all people. Some people skipped stages or got stuck and never progressed. Others bounced back and forth between two stages or roller-coastered through three or four stages again and again, as if they were on a never-ending track. Despite these variations, she believed that all individuals experienced at least two of the stages in their grieving process.



When my son Liam was about five years old, I thought it would be a great experience for him to have an aquarium. So, we went to the store, and on the suggestion of the employee there, came home with a small fish tank, all the fancy little decorative displays, rocks, a beta fish, and an aquatic frog. My son named the two “Fishy” and “Froggy,” respectively.

From day one, Fishy seemed to have quite the personality, for a fish. Froggy, while absolutely adorable with his little webbed feet, wasn’t thriving as Fishy

was. He swam little and didn’t seem to like any of the three brands of frog food that we bought. With each day, he was swimming around less and less and hanging out at the bottom of the tank more and more.

That’s okay, I thought, if Froggy dies, he will float to the surface and I’ll know right away that he has passed on.

A few days later my in-laws, with whom we lived at the time, mentioned that Froggy hadn’t been moving much the past few days, *at all*. As I walked over to the tank, I assured myself that Froggy was still alive because dead fish, and presumably all aquatic beings, float to the surface when they die. Right? I bent down and squinted into the tank. I was met with glazed-over gray eyes. I took a deep breath and stood up.

“That’s okay,” I said to my son’s grandmother Shannon. “I’ll have to...I’ll have to.... I don’t know what to do!”

As the idea of removing Froggy’s remains from the tank and the thought that the beta fish was swimming around in *dead frog water* sank in, I started to panic. I was nearly hyperventilating as I tried to work out what to do.

I turned to Shannon, a nurse of fifteen years, “Shannon, I’m not used to this. I thought I could handle this, but I can’t. You’re used to death Shannon, can you take care of it? I just don’t think I can do it,” I whined. “I don’t know what to do. What will I say to Liam?! Maybe he won’t notice. Maybe we can just flush the frog and he’ll never even notice. Oh God, I can’t do this right now. I need some time to think. I’m going to go take a shower and then I’ll think about it.”

As I walked to the bathroom, I heard Shannon laughing at me and then calling Liam in to tell him that Froggy was no more.

While I stood under the cleansing waters of the hot shower, I thought of John Updike’s 1969 poem “Dog’s Death.” The poem is about a family pet, whose

life is cut short just as she is “beginning to learn / To use the newspapers spread on the kitchen floor / And to win, wetting there, the words, ‘Good dog! Good dog!’” Never having had a natural affinity with the fauna of the Pacific West Coast, I surprised myself with tears every time I read the final stanza:

Back home, we found that in the night her frame,  
 Drawing near to dissolution, had endured the  
 shame  
 Of diarrhea and had dragged across the floor  
 To a newspaper carelessly left there. Good dog.

In the shower, I was thinking about writing my own poem that showcased, by the death of Froggy, my many failures as a mother. As I was structuring the poem in my mind, I heard a little knock at the bathroom door.

“Come in,” I said, and I heard my son enter.

“Mommy?” he said, “I have something to show you.”

My breath caught in my throat and I knew that my son was about to confront me with the terrible truth that I had never known how to care for any sort of aquatic animal. What had I been thinking? With fear, I pulled back the shower curtain, ready to face the worst.

“See?” my son said, with his hand outstretched.

“Mmm,” I said, “a cookie.”

Later, Shannon told me that they had a short memorial service for Froggy at the toilet, just before they flushed him to Froggy Heaven. Liam hadn’t reacted visibly or otherwise to the service. And my son never again mentioned Froggy, or his death, to me.



The Kübler-Ross grief process has been compared to the Schopenhauer learning process. Arthur Schopenhauer

said, “All truth passes through three stages. First, it is ridiculed. Second, it is violently opposed. Third, it is accepted as being self-evident.” Applying the Kübler-Ross stages to this model means associating denial with ridicule, anger and bargaining with opposition, and depression and acceptance with accepting the truth as self-evident. Reimagining Kübler-Ross’s model in this way is supposed to simplify it, but it still funnels reactions into specified stages.



Dane said that when he told our oldest brother, Shawn, about April’s death, Shawn became extremely angry and had yelled, “How could this have happened?”

I laughed. I couldn’t help it. Dane didn’t say anything on the other end of the line.

“Um, well, a lifetime of drug and alcohol abuse?”

“I just can’t believe it,” Dane said.

He couldn’t see my frown. “I don’t understand. She’s done this so many times. How can you be surprised?”

“Yeah, but she always survived. She always pulled through. I thought this would be like every other time.”

“Well, you had to know,” I said, “that someday she’d get it right. You had to know.”

“No. I never thought,” he trailed off.

“Are you going to the funeral?” I asked.

He said he couldn’t, but I thought that he just couldn’t bring himself to do it.

When my mother called to tell me when and where the service would take place, she started crying. She told me how she’d left for one week—just one week!—to attend a Jehovah’s Witness convention in Southern California. She thought April would be okay. April had really improved, she said. She didn’t know April was doing drugs again. When she’d left, she told April that she only needed her to do one thing while she was

gone—just one thing! She'd asked April to water the plants. When she'd come back, all the plants were dead. She was so angry, she said. She'd asked April, "Why couldn't you just do this one thing for me?"

Two days later, she found April on the floor. She said April had already turned blue.

"If only I hadn't been so hard on her. You know? About the plants?"

"That's ridiculous," I said. But then I thought, What if I had just called sooner? I immediately shook my head. No, that was silly. That was crazy talk. It wouldn't have changed anything. Not one thing. My sister had always had a death wish.



Grief counsellors have expanded the Kübler-Ross model to include seven stages:

Shock or Disbelief

Denial

Bargaining

Guilt

Anger

Depression

Acceptance or Hope

I'm unclear as to how stage one (shock or disbelief) is radically different from stage two (denial). Don't disbelief and denial go hand in hand?

What do I know? I'm no expert.

Some experts have also pointed out that the "grief-cycle" may not be limited to merely emotional "side effects." Associated physical and social symptoms may take the form of insomnia, loss of appetite, self-imposed social isolation, and difficulty functioning at home, school, or work.



The day after my sister died, I walked into the student lounge of the History department. All my friends from the department were there. As one, their faces turned towards me. Surprise. Shock. Eyes widened to exactly the same degree. Mouths ever so slightly agape.

"Why are you here?" Isabel asked.

"I have class."

They continued to stare.

"I have class," I repeated. What was I doing wrong? My sister wasn't going to be less dead if I skipped my classes. Plus, I had assignments due. A midterm coming up.

They all rushed me at once. Encased me in their arms.

"We're so sorry," they wailed.

Why? I wondered. They didn't know my sister. They didn't know how long she had suffered.



In 2007, the *Journal of the American Medical Association* published "An Empirical Examination of the Stage Theory of Grief" which reported the results of the three-year Yale Bereavement Study (YBS). Using Selby Jacobs' hybrid theory of grief that synthesized Kübler-Ross's stages with those identified by several other researchers, the study followed 233 participants whose family members died of natural causes. The authors hoped to determine whether the specific pattern of stages of bereavement was "normal or not." They excluded participants whose loved one died from unnatural causes (like accidents and suicides) and subjects were excluded if they appeared to meet the criteria of complicated grief disorder, "so that the results would represent normal bereavement reactions."

As noted by other grief experts, the study was based on the *assumption* of stages of grief. The article opens with: "The notion that a natural psychologi-

cal response to loss involves an orderly progression through distinct stages of bereavement has been widely accepted by clinicians and the general public.” At no point in the article do the authors question these assumptions. Rather, they seek to find patterns of “normal” grief that they already believe to exist.

Jacobs’ hypothesized stage theory of grief includes disbelief (or numbness), separation distress (identified as yearning, anger, or anxiety), depression-mourning, and recovery. However, the YBS specifically questioned participants regarding disbelief, yearning, anger, depression, and acceptance. Finding what the researchers hoped to find, the YBS reports that “the 5 grief indicators achieved their respective maximum values in the sequence...predicted by the stage theory of grief.” However, just one page later, they note that “in terms of absolute frequency, and counter to the stage theory, disbelief was not the initial, dominant grief indicator. Acceptance was the most often endorsed item. Evidently, a high degree of acceptance, even in the initial month post loss, is the norm in the case of natural deaths.”

How am I *supposed* to feel again?



It was my first creative nonfiction class in my first week of courses at the University of British Columbia. After years of doing what I thought was practical, I had applied to the Master of Fine Arts Program in Creative Writing. I got in.

I was elated. I was going to be a nonfiction author.

In that first class, about twenty minutes were set aside to discuss the Perils of Nonfiction. All the horror stories about everyone who had ever written a memoir and been burned. An heiress to a fortune disinherited. A reputation ruined. A relationship destroyed. Then our instructor said, “As for myself, I decided to wait

for my father to die before publishing my memoirs.”

I nodded. That’s what I’m going to do too, I thought.

The following morning, my phone rang. The caller ID said it was my brother Dane. We hadn’t spoken in two years. I thought, This can’t be good.

I didn’t pick up. I waited until he left a message so I could see what he wanted before I replied. His message only asked me to call him back.

When I called him back, he said, “I don’t know how you are going to take this, but Dad is dead. He died this morning.”

I had the urge to laugh, to start laughing and never stop. To laugh with my whole body. But I swallowed it down. I didn’t want to offend the brother who felt no qualms about offending me.

“Oh?” was all I could manage.

Then he told me the whole story about my dad and his worsening illness and his refusal to go to a hospital and how they found him sprawled on dirty sheets in his double-wide trailer.

“I understand that you may not feel...much, about this,” Dane said.

“No, I guess, if anything, I feel ever so slightly relieved.”

Then Dane got choked up. My steel-hearted lawyer brother who’d had—at best—a complicated and painful relationship with our father, started to cry. He tried to explain himself, “Now that he’s dead, there is no chance it will ever be better, you know?”

“It was never going to be better, Dane.”

When I hung up, I told Casey, “My dad died today. What were the chances? Yesterday, I was thinking about how I was gonna wait ‘til he died to write that story, and he died *the next fucking day!*” Then I laughed.



The funny thing about being a “grief expert” is that your expertise is not in any way related to the depth or frequency of your own experience of loss. In fact, you can be an expert in grief without having grieved at all. As long as you’ve watched enough people do it, you’re good. If this is indeed what makes an expert, then Russell Friedman and John W. James are two of the top professionals in their field. These “professional grief recovery specialists” have co-authored three books on loss and have worked with over 100,000 grieving people during the past three decades.

“The Myth of the Stages of Dying, Death, and Grief” argues that more harm than good has come of Kübler-Ross’s theory. Damage is caused to griever when they “try to fit their emotions into non-existent stages.” I wonder, instead, about the witnesses—the friends, lovers, bystanders, co-workers—who try to fit the responses of people who have experienced a loss into these non-existent stages. The witnesses who want them to conform, to see them feel the way they think they should feel.

I think these two are on to something. Friedman and James were the first to point out that since the premise of the YBS study was flawed, so too were the results. They also argued that “since Kübler-Ross’s feelings were processed through the filter of her life-long unresolved grief and retained anger,” so too were her responses to those she interviewed, as well as the conclusions she drew from her research. Friedman and James highlight the fact that in “My Own Grief,” the final chapter of Kübler-Ross’s last book, “she tells the gruesome story about an episode involving her father and a cherished childhood pet that caused her to make an oath never to cry again. That event, along with a host of other personal grief incidents, resulted in her bottling up a lifetime of anger that she admitted she didn’t deal with until very late in life.” Is it any wonder then that Kübler-Ross asserted that anger was

the one and only stage that *everyone* dealing with loss experienced?

But anger isn’t absolute. In fact, no single grief response is. Friedman and James argue that the prevalence of the stage theory, which is so deeply rooted in North American culture, makes many patients identify with particular stages that they aren’t feeling, just because that is what they think they should feel. To quote Friedman and James, for example, a typical conversation with a patient might go like this:

Patient: “I’m still in denial.”

Friedman: “Do you deny that your loved one has died?”

Patient: “No.”

James: “Then you are not in denial.”

Similarly, griever, and sometimes even their doctors, look for and often find a diagnosis of clinical depression, when really, they are just *sad*. And being sad, Friedman and James argue, is a pretty “normal” reaction to losing someone in your life. You know what else they think is “normal?” Whatever the griever is feeling at any point in time. Every individual feels and processes loss in their own unique way.

This is how you feel grief, folks: however you feel it.



When I was no older than twenty, I came home one day from work. My boyfriend, Chris, approached me nervously.

“Hey, your mom called.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah, your grandma died.”

“Oh no! ...Wait, which one?”

“Um, your dad’s mom?” He said it like a question.

“Oh, thank God. I really like my mom’s mom. Whatever, my dad’s mom was a bitch.”

His eyes widened in shock.

“Am I supposed to be sad that this woman died when she was only nice to me one time in her entire life? No wonder my dad’s so fucked. That was the woman who raised him. She once cornered me in a room when I was about twelve and said, ‘Why are you dressed like that?’ Of course, my mom bought all my clothes, so I was just wearing some pretty regular shorts and a shirt. She said, ‘You want the boys to look at you? You want them to look at your body?’ It scared me. Then she said, ‘You’re gonna get raped. That’s what happens to girls who dress like you. They get raped. Dressing like that is like asking for it.’ I was twelve years old.”

I shed no tears for her.

Some years later, my dad’s dad died. He had been living in Stockton, California and once, on a road trip to Las Vegas, I thought about pulling off the road and stopping in to say hi. But I was afraid it would get around that I had been travelling to Las Vegas and I was nervous about my mom finding out about it—our relationship was tenuous at best—and having her judge me for going to the epicentre of sin was something I wanted to avoid. So I kept on driving. When he died, I had a flicker of regret that I’d never once contacted him after I had left home at fifteen.

About a year after that, my mom’s dad died. She left a message on my machine. She was crying. I knew she loved him very much and I knew he’d been a good man and a loving father, but I didn’t return her call. She had hurt and manipulated me too many times. I needed to protect myself. It was sad that he died, but he’d had Alzheimer’s for the past few years and, anyway, he was very old—in his nineties—so it had been bound to happen soon. When I heard the message, I sat down and I wrote in my day planner, “Lloyd Matthews Parsons died today.” When that year was up, and it was time to take out the old calendar pages and insert the new, I saved that page. I still have it.

Not long after my mom’s father died, I was at work in my little windowless office between the Intensive Care Unit and the Cardiac Recovery Unit of Providence St. Vincent Medical Center in Portland, Oregon. There was a patient dying in the ICU. The family wanted to do everything they could to prolong their (grand)mother’s life. The woman just wanted to die in peace. She kept pulling out her tubes. The nurses and the doctors talked to the family and helped them to realize that it was time and they let her go. She died surrounded by those who loved her.

I sat in my office and cried.

A nurse walked in and I tried to cover it quickly.

“You okay?” she asked.

I had a history of sharing with this particular nurse, so I told her why I was crying.

“It’s weird,” I said. “My own grandfather died not long ago. I cared about him. He was a sweet man. But I didn’t cry. I haven’t cried at the deaths of any of my grandparents. Now, someone I don’t even know is dying and I can’t help it: it just seems *so sad*.”

“You build up those walls of yours. It’s hard to let ‘em down, but easier when there is no risk. What do you have to lose by mourning for someone you don’t know?”

I sat stunned.



Friedman and James haven’t been the only ones to counter the Kübler-Ross model of grief. George Bonanno, a professor of clinical psychology at Columbia University, shares the belief that grief does not come in stages. In fact, he finds that most people are resilient in the face of loss. His book, *The Other Side of Sadness: What the New Science of Bereavement Tells Us about Life After a Loss*, is the result of thousands of interviews over the course of two decades. He concludes that resilience is the primary reaction

to grief and trauma. In other words, individuals who have suffered a loss don't necessarily even grieve. If they do not grieve, then Kübler-Ross's Five Stages of Grief lose all meaning in the face of death.



As the excitement over Steele's score settled a bit, I started driving down out of the hills. It wasn't long before one of the nephews asked who had a pipe.

"I almost brought one," Morgan said.

"I didn't even think about it," Devan said.

You, Garrett? No? Anyone? No.

They began to despair.

"Whatever," I said, "we'll just make an apple pipe."

Huh? Morgan and Steele had never heard of such a thing. Devan and Garrett had, but had never used one.

"It's easy. You just poke a few holes in an apple and you've got yourself a pipe."

They were impressed.

We drove by a little mom-and-pop market in the middle of nowhere. Devan, Garrett, and Morgan ran in. They found an apple and bought some Cokes and snacks that were more chemical than food—ideal for Morgan's self-embalming—but would serve the purpose when they had the munchies.

"We got an apple!" Morgan said with delight as she got back in the car.

As we started to pull out of the parking lot and back onto the road, they asked me how to make it.

"Well, we need a pen."

No one had a pen. Really? We checked the rental car's glove box. Nothing.

"Ahhhhg," I groaned. As soon as I found a place, I turned around and we headed back to the market.

"Someone go inside and ask to borrow a pen," I said.

Resistance. They couldn't do that. The cashier would *know*.

"No one is going to know anything other than we are going to ask for a pen."

Morgan went inside. The owner was in the back. She saw a used pen on the counter, grabbed it, and ran back to the car.

"Go! Go!" she said. "I stole a pen!" Her excitement was ridiculous, but we got a good laugh out of it anyway and I made a show of gunning the engine as I pulled back onto the road. For a moment, we were gangsters.

Steele directed us to a place we could go. "Beautiful sunsets there," he said.

I pulled in to an overlook just above the small town where Steele lived. The valley spread out before us and beyond that, more mountains. The sun was going to drip down behind those hills soon.

Devan grabbed the pen and started trying to jam it through the core. It was harder than he thought. "Here," he said, "let the expert do it."

I took the apple from him. I didn't say that I hadn't actually made a pipe before or that I'd only seen it done once and that was years ago. But I handled the apple like I knew what was what. I managed to get the pen through the middle, although it got stuck. I bit down on one end of the dirty pen and pulled. I looked like a pro. Then I took one small, deep bite from the skin in the middle of the apple. I spit out the cold, tart fruit with its waxy skin.

"This will be the bowl," I pointed to the bitten space. "Now I have to get a hole through the bowl down to that shaft without breaking the apple, and it can't be too big or the pot will fall through. This is a delicate business, this."

Somehow I did it. But smoking it wasn't easy. The apple's fruit was moist. It took some time to heat up the interior of the apple and get the smoke flowing.

They weren't quitters though. As they struggled with the apple pipe, we chatted.

We talked about how great it was to see everyone, even if it was for April's funeral. Steele found the whole situation ironic. His mother had always been the one who tried to keep our rag-tag team of dysfunctional family members together. It never really worked. Her death was the one thing to finally manage it, well almost (Dane was still in Japan). But who knew when we'd see each other like this again? Family reunions were out of the picture, unless, maybe, someone else died.

I watched the setting sun and I thought about the last time I saw my sister. The summer before her "accident," I'd gone to visit her and Tristan and Steele at their home in Maui. Tristan was graduating from high school and April had paid for plane tickets for my son and me to visit. She had been sober for two years.

When I stepped off the airplane and sucked in that first breath of hot, humid air, I had this sinking feeling that I'd made a mistake. I pulled Liam—then six years old—close to me. Then I heard April's characteristic excited shriek and saw her running toward me. She hugged me fiercely and I smelled the alcohol on her breath. My sister had never been sober for more than two years.

I got into the car with her. I let her chauffeur my son, her sons, and me when I knew she was intoxicated. By the time we got to the house, I was sick. I vowed never to put my son's life in danger like that again.

The next morning, I said sternly, "I'm driving for the rest of the trip." She didn't argue, and we didn't discuss why.

The next day, we drove to Wailea. As a special treat for Tristan's graduation, my sister had paid for a couple of nights at the Grand Wailea, the nicest hotel on Maui, east of Lahaina. We didn't ask how she got the

money. We knew better than that.

The Grand Wailea was right on a white sand beach and had waterslides and manmade rivers and pools. It was gorgeous, but I was on edge. Our mother had arrived that morning and it was difficult to make the forced, polite conversation that our pained and broken relationship called for. April kept running off to "take care of errands." I watched over Liam, but Tristan and Steele were the perfect cousins and they, along with a few of their friends, took my little water bug on slide after joyous slide. I stood by the edge of the pool where one of the slides ended. Liam would climb the stairs to the top, wave excitedly to me, and then look for my face every time he came sliding into the wading pool. I smiled at his easy childlike bliss.

Then, something caught my eye. One of the teen girls who was friends with Tristan was talking to a security guard. They came walking towards me.

I thought, Oh no, oh no, not again.

I had been in exactly this situation before: at a hotel with my sister, a security guard comes looking for her because she's stolen another guest's six-pack of beer. She gets kicked out of the hotel.

The security guard walked up to me and asked for April. My head was swimming. I could not believe it was happening again.

"Why?" I choked out.

"Well, this young lady had her purse stolen, and she says she's here with April, so we just wanted to make sure April knew that we are doing our best to track down the thief."

I was shocked, but relieved beyond measuring. This time April was not the thief.

I ran into April as I was headed into the bathroom near the pools.

"Oh! There you are!"

Her eyes were red and glassy and I knew she had been drinking.

“Hey, I need to talk to you.”

She nodded. She knew she was caught. She knew what was coming: lecture, guilt, more self-hatred that she would drink down with another bottle.

We went into the bathroom.

I stood her face-to-face with me and put my hands on her shoulders. I looked into her eyes. They started to swell with tears.

“I want you to know,” I started, “that I know that you’re drinking.”

She nodded.

“And I also want you to know that I don’t care and that I’m *never* going to stop loving you.”

She was almost confused. She’d never heard those words before. She didn’t know how to respond, what to say, so she said nothing. Instead, she fell into my arms and sobbed and I held her for a long time, past the point where my arms started to ache and the muscles between my shoulders began to burn.

I was brought back to the hills of Northern California when one of the nephews pressed the pipe to my arm.

“We got it working. It’s your turn.”

“Oh no, I’m going to pass. I have to drive, remember? I have to be the responsible one.” We laughed at that. How ridiculous it was to think of myself as responsible after I had contributed to the delinquency of a minor.

“Yeah,” Devan said. “Aren’t you supposed to be the adult here?”

“Whatever, you’re all legally adults, except for Steele. I am only responsible for Steele.”

“But why did you do this?” Devan continued. “No one else at that funeral would have taken us out to lunch and then on a back hills adventure to find pot.”

Then I told them about the time I wanted to die. About how, living with my sister at the age of fifteen, I’d experienced my first true love and my first true heartbreak. How it feels to think your heart is going to crush and crumple until it implodes and leaves a big gaping cavity in your chest. Devan nodded his head. He was the only one who knew.

I told them about how I couldn’t imagine continuing that feeling, living with that feeling, and how I wanted it to end. How when my sister had come home and found me, in a ball on my bed, sobbing and soaked through with sweat and tears, she’d told me that it would be okay and how I just needed to get through today and tomorrow would be better.

I told them how she had poured a dash of vodka and a shot of Kahlua and topped it with milk. She’d handed me the glass and a tiny pill.

“What’s this?” I’d asked.

“Flexeril,” she’d said, “a muscle relaxant. Down the hatch.”

I had taken that pill and drunk every last drop and I’d fallen asleep and she had been right. The next day had been better.

“Sometimes,” I said to the four kids before me, “the wrong thing is the right thing to do.”