

The Five Stages of Grief for the Young, Dumb, and Broken

Stage Number One: Denial

It's a Monday. A girl—19 years old, in her second semester of her freshman year of college—takes a simple trip to Meijer with her roommate and some twat who's always in her room. She's going to help them pick out a goldfish but will end up leaving with two fish of her own. She's impulsive, they all are. All of them young and stupid and making shitty decisions out of boredom.

This girl will begin the three-minute drive back to her dorm, but before she gets there, she'll get a text from her best friend. It's a screenshot of a texting conversation between her and their mutual friend, Abbey. The last text from Abbey will read simply, "He's gone."

The girl will call her best friend while driving.

"What is she talking about?"

"It's Nick."

"What does she mean?"

"I think she means he's..." She stops. They both stop. They both know where the end of that sentence is going. The girl will reject this thought. *It cannot be true. Nick is across the country, at a rehab facility in California. He's getting better. They're all finally getting better.*

"I thought he was at rehab."

"He got back three days ago." *Three days ago.*

"Keep me updated," she'll say, "if Abbey replies."

"I will." This is the longest conversation they've had in months. High school ended and everyone grew apart. It wasn't a bad thing. The girl is in her dorm room now. She relays the

information to her roommates and others. She's sure it's fine, just a misunderstanding. She goes to the bathroom and sits on the floor, staring at nothing. There are too many people in the room who didn't know him, who don't know what they all went through together. Her friend texts her, confirming everything she didn't want to hear. She does not cry.

The girl picks up her phone and calls her ex, a boy she loved once, a boy afflicted with the same disease. 17 hours away, at a rehab facility in Florida, he answers unsuspectingly, thinking she just wants to talk and catch up as they sometimes do.

"Have you talked to Abbey?" She starts.

"No, why?" He asks.

"It's Nick. He overdosed. He didn't make it." He doesn't understand. Neither does she. They hang up eventually. Her ex's mother calls her next. She cries on the other side of the line, but the girl does not.

It was a gut-wrenching, heart-shattering, soul-swallowing grief which consumed her, consumed everything. The world was dull, blurred, unimportant, unreal.

She'll carry her fishbowl over to her friend's dorm room. The person she feels closest to. The only person she feels close to. They'll look at the fish, she'll tell him her friend is dead. It'll open up a topic of discussion they've never entered before, about who she used to be, about empty-eyed teenagers and a broken family.

Stage Number Two: Anger

They knew better, she'll think to herself over and over in the following days. She'll take a day off of school. *They knew better. They were smart with bright futures and everything going for them. He was going to go to law school. He was going to marry Abbey. He threw it all away.*

She'll remember all the bullshit they all went through, the trauma and scars and nightmares endured. *Why? She'll ask. Why did they do that to each other.*

Stage Number Three: Bargaining

The girl will regret not visiting more often, not being more involved, not trying to get him to rehab sooner. She will remember the beginning, her freshman year of high school, when she brought an old script of oxycontin to school and the boys took it, started a love story between them and the drug. She'll blame herself for it getting this far, but in truth, they were all just young and stupid and making shitty decisions out of boredom.

Her ex will call her and ask if it's his fault.

"I never should have come to Florida. I should have been there." *We all should have done more, been better.* But they weren't. They were just dumb kids hurting themselves and each other, trying to survive the human experience.

Stage Number Four: Depression

The funeral will be held at the local funeral home. On the day of, the girl will arrive outside of her ex's house and park her car exactly where and how she had for almost five years. It had been months since she'd done so, but it was still as natural as it had always been. She'd text him to tell him she's here, just as she always had. They'll hug. He'll cry. They'll smoke a cigarette in the garage, just like always. His mother will cry when she hugs the girl, she's still busy denying.

"How could this happen? This can't be real," she'll say.

They'll drive to the viewing. Half of their high school will be there, including those who looked down on them all that time. Tyler will show up drunk and sob the entire two hours. They

will hug Nick's mother. She'll be smiling, joking, eyes bloodshot and empty. His father will be drunk.

The girl will be unable to walk up to the casket. She will step out of line and take a seat on a loveseat against the wall and stare at her hands for a long time. Abbey will come sit by her.

"He's in a better place now," Abbey will say, "he's not suffering anymore."

Stage Number Five: Acceptance

The girl will cry. She will cry so hard for so long that the world will drown in her sadness. She will walk up to the casket, holding the arm of a crying boy she's never spoken to before, but today, they are all family. Her ex will put a cigarette in the casket, and she'll laugh. She'll laugh for a long time after. The viewing will be a blur of cigarette smoke, crying, laughing, anger, and questions.

The next day, at the funeral, the girl sees every member of the small, toxic family they crafted in high school. Every too thin boy and sad girl she spent all her weekends with. Not everyone makes it. Ben is in jail and Kory is on house arrest. After the service, Jeremy arrives as they carry Nick out. He got a day pass from his half-way house. He's looking better now. The family's all back together.

At the burial, the girl holds her ex's hand for what will be the last time. Everything that they all were seems to dissolve right there in that graveyard. Any semblance of youth, of innocence, drips into the ground with their tears.

When they get back to her ex's house, they smoke a final cigarette. She looks at him.

"I won't do this again," she says.

"What?"

“You go to Florida and you get clean. Because I will not do this again. I will not go to another funeral,” her voice will shake. Tears will spill as she blows smoke into the air, “I will not lose one more family member to this bullshit.”

“Okay,” he’ll say.

“Promise me.”

“I promise.”

Life Does Not Happen in Stages: Chaos is Not Linear

He won’t keep it. He’ll trade one drug for another. The girl will be the only one he tells, some months later.

When the girl gets home, she’ll write a shitty spoken word poem about the “war on drugs.” Weeks later, she’ll try to fist fight a girl talking shit on drug addicts, but overall, things will get easier. The boys will get clean, for the most part, and she’ll start to get healthy, start to wash away the hurt and metaphorical graveyard dirt. She’ll get clean herself, put on weight, develop healthier coping mechanisms, but she’ll always be one bad day away from making a phone call, from becoming who she used to be. She’ll spend the rest of her life working through the trauma they put her through in high school. It’ll permeant every relationship she tries to have. It’ll inhibit her daily function sometimes.

A year later, her ex-boyfriend will call her and tell her how much he hates the month of April. He’ll cry. The girl will not.

She’ll never forget them; stop loving them, her family. No one else will understand why, how she can stand to still see them from time to time, after everything they went through. They’ll never know, never understand. How could they? They weren’t there; in the backyards, the basements, walking down dark back roads, seated around tables, sitting in driveways and

garages, sharing lockers and secrets and drugs and love and hate. Every school dance, every bad day, every Fourth of July, every graduation, every weekend and every after-school time-wasting. They grew up together into some twisted and mangled family tree. And yes, it was awful and toxic and riddled with co-dependency, but it was still love.

“Why?” They will ask.

“Because they are family,” she will answer, as she always has, as she always will.

The girl will find love again, family again. She’ll still be young and stupid and make shitty decisions out of boredom. She bought a hermit crab last week. And tomorrow is another Monday.