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### Grief is love with nowhere to go

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Grief is love with nowhere to go

Your absence has gone through me  
Like thread through a needle.  
Everything I do is stitched with its color.

*Separation*, by W.S. Merwin

I've been trying to think of a sentence that would grab every reader's attention to introduce you to my friend Claire, but I can only think of her face—her Cheshire Cat smile, dark, voluptuous eyebrows, and skin as white as a winter storm—and how much I wish you could see it. I close my eyes, and I'm looking at her looking at me, and she's smiling coyly. She had such a delicate yet striking face. From the moment we met, she always greeted me with a scrunch of her shoulders and a half-smile. I remember the first time I saw this half-smile like it was yesterday, except it was 2014. Claire and I happened to be in the same Spanish 101 class. We sat on opposite sides of the room, but every day, our professor instructed us to form a circle with our desks so we could see everyone's face and more readily communicate with each other. It was a few days into the course when the professor asked us to go around the room and introduce ourselves in Spanish: Me llamo [your name] y soy de [where you're from]. *Me llamo Sara y soy de Ithaca. My name is Sara and I'm from Ithaca.* Claire looked up from her desk and smiled at me when I said "Ithaca." I surmised she must have been from Ithaca, too. Claire and I didn't immediately become friends; it wasn't until the following semester, when we were, again, coincidentally, in the same Spanish 102 class that we hit it off.

Even after we exchanged cell phone numbers and started texting frequently and hanging out sporadically, I was a bit skeptical of her enthusiasm for me and our friendly rendezvous. Every

time I saw her, I got that half-smile. I figured she kept her full smile for people she fully liked and that she was still on the fence about me. Especially considering we only ever saw movies together. I'd invite her to my apartment for a drink, and she wouldn't decline, she'd just not answer. She'd eventually share with me that she was sober, and I felt guilty and embarrassed about my assumption that everyone drinks alcohol. After years of friendship, I realized her half-smile was a signature of hers, and I grew to admire it deeply. Over the years, our dates would expand to lunch or dinner, Easter brunch at her parents' house, piercings, and drinks (Diet Coke for her) at the Argos Warehouse in Ithaca.

Claire was a hard egg to crack, and even after years of platonic intimacy, everything about her is still enigmatic to me. I think that's what I love most about Claire. She kept a part of herself for herself, and I envy that. Claire's sadness was subterranean. I always wanted to pry, to see if her sadness mirrored mine. To see if her sadness outshined mine. I felt compelled to know who was sadder.

I envy not lusting for everyone I get close to know about how fucked up I am. I envy not needing to externalize my fucked upness in new relationships immediately so as to fall back on it if the relationship sours. It's easier to blame the trauma that led to my fucked upness as opposed to my identity (but, I suppose, trauma is and will always be a part of my essence). Claire was private and humble and unassuming, everything I am not.

I've called upon my trauma for the majority of my essays as an undergraduate student at SUNY Cortland. I tell myself I'm merely forcing my audience to empathize, but it isn't empathy at all. I want other people to feel my pain, but I also know they'd never feel it the way I did and still do. I've fooled myself into believing that if I could just understand my pain well enough, I can make it go away. Also, too, if I can make someone else understand my pain well enough, they'll know

what to say and do to make it go away. I project these hopes onto them, and when they don't offer me an escape, a way out of myself, I reject them and feel defrauded. *Your love was supposed to make it all better.*

I'd never claim to begin to understand the particular pain of others, so I don't know why I beg others to understand and disburden me from mine. Pain functions like a loop, its initial effect is singular in the way that it shocks and destabilizes, and that singularity is reinforced every time you display your pain--implicitly in your actions and emotions and explicitly when you share the source of your trauma--for others only to realize your pain is untouchable by them. And then you pull it all back in and it sits heavy on your heart.

Over the summer, I came across a short Twitter thread that perfectly explained why I became obsessed with studying politics and gender relations that I had never been able to articulate until now:

**@mspowaahs**

therapist: i've noticed that you use universalizing language in a way that obscures your own agency and distances yourself from your feelings and motivations

me: as one does

**@NoahTzedek** I feel seen. My therapist is like "you intellectualize instead of feeling" and I'm like "well that's very common with trauma survivors. Learning about trauma and abuse is like exposure therapy and helps create a feeling of control over chaos that we can't understand."

Aha! A breakthrough! I've finally unearthed the motivation for my scholarly zeal: *I intellectualize my pain instead of feeling it*. But what does that mean? What does it mean to *feel* it?

I remember discussing something adjacent to exposure therapy with Claire, i.e., how it could be possible that I've been raped not once but several times in my life, and by several different men, and she sent me a journal article about the correlation between trauma survivors and revictimization (due to an increased likelihood of survivors seeking and/or placing themselves in risky situations as a way of trying to reclaim control). The classical conditioning that occurs when a child touches a hot stove for the first time and subsequently learns to avoid the red hot coil in the future doesn't apply to the psychological phenomenon of rape victims being revictimized. I wish I still had the original article that she sent me so I could explain such occurrences in a much more scientific way, but I'm hoping you get my gist.

For years, I felt that I elicited this abuse—being (too) flirty, drinking too much, suggestive attire, hanging out with the “wrong” crowd, etc.—and while this new information didn't absolve the entirety of my guilt—how do you get raped the first time, and then “allow” yourself to be raped subsequent times?—it did help me feel less alone. *This is a known thing that happens to others*. I may have a deep understanding of how the patriarchy and rape culture work, but it takes constant work to subvert decades of learned and internalized behaviors and attitudes, and even with constant work—weekly or bi-weekly therapy being a huge chunk of that work—an upheaval of that magnitude is hardly realizable. Trying to resist the structural dominance of rape culture on an individual level, i.e., not being reduced or erased by it, is hard enough, but trying to extract empathy from others, from the collective psyche, a psyche untouched by the direct effects of it, is like getting blood from a stone.

Claire and I intellectualized our pain together. Where her understanding of the effects of trauma may be murky, I'd illuminate it for her, and vice versa. But obviously there were fissures in our understanding that neither of us could fill for one another. Claire was pivotal in my growth as a student, a woman, and a rape survivor. And I'm reluctant to use the word "survivor": surviving trauma is not as simple as it may seem, it is not isolated to merely (physically) surviving the incident.

Claire was a rape survivor until she wasn't.

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In the fall of 2016, Netflix came out with a documentary, *Audrie and Daisy*, about the rape of three teenage girls and the abuse and cyberbullying the young girls and their families faced following the assaults. Audrie Pott, a fifteen-year-old high school student, was sexually assaulted by three or more teenagers, and nine days later died by suicide. Daisy Coleman, a fourteen-year-old high school student, was raped by a teenage boy. Both rapes occurred in 2012, but the girls had no knowledge of each other and their experiences—Audrie lived in California, and Daisy lived in Missouri—but their pain, like the pain of other rape victims, was communal.

After the sexual assault, Daisy had attempted suicide on several occasions. And on August 4, 2020—eight years after her sexual assault—Daisy died by suicide. Ostensibly, both of the girls survived the assault, but Audrie died within days, and Daisy died within years. So what exactly does it mean to survive?

Following Daisy's death, I read a poignant piece in Jezebel written by Emily Alford about the myth of "surviving":

Coleman's recent death by suicide is a grim reminder that stories around sexual assault—even responsibly told ones like *Audrie & Daisy*—are narratives crafted for audiences, not reflections of the real experience of surviving sexual assault. Grieving sexual assault isn't a ladder, elevating the survivor until they overcome the horrible thing that's happened. Grief born of sexual trauma is a ball of knots, the cycle beginning and ending afresh without warning, overlapping and intertwining so that the lines between emotions become difficult to parse and the edges begin to fray. "Why can't you just get over it," is a heartless refrain from rape apologists and deniers in the beginning. But over time, the push for a final, permanent move to acceptance comes from all sides, not just the wrong ones. A story has to end.<sup>1</sup>

In the years after her rape, Daisy co-founded the non-profit organization SafeBAE, which was a student-led national organization aimed at ending sexual assault among middle and high school students. Even as Daisy committed her life to fight for change; to prevent sexual assault; to combat the harassment associated with an assault; and to educate about rape culture, she couldn't protect herself from its grip.

According to RAINN (Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network), ninety-four percent of women who are raped experience symptoms of PTSD during the two weeks following the rape; thirty percent report symptoms of PTSD nine months after the rape; thirty-three percent contemplate suicide; and thirteen percent attempt suicide.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> [https://jezebel.com/daisy-colemans-death-lays-bare-the-myth-of-surviving-1844638046?utm\\_campaign=Jezebel&utm\\_content=1596819064&utm\\_medium=SocialMarketing&utm\\_source=twitter](https://jezebel.com/daisy-colemans-death-lays-bare-the-myth-of-surviving-1844638046?utm_campaign=Jezebel&utm_content=1596819064&utm_medium=SocialMarketing&utm_source=twitter)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.rainn.org/statistics/victims-sexual-violence>

To quote from Alford's Jezebel piece again, "the very nature of PTSD means that the body is locked in a prolonged state of fight-or-flight response, playing out the trauma in fits and starts. Even the term survivor is inefficient, indicating that the person who has experienced sexual violence experienced it in the past and survived—not that they are currently surviving, day-to-day, an experience that is still happening irrespective of the actual date of the violence."

In closing her essay, Alford lambastes rape culture—prevailing social attitudes that have the effect of normalizing and trivializing sexual assault and abuse, and further, norms and institutions that protect rapists, promote impunity, shame victims, and force women to be proactive in preventing their own rape(s)—as a form of gaslighting:

In addition to surviving the assault, survivors must also survive the knowledge that law enforcement, the court system, their neighbors, and lawmakers simply don't care about their rapes or even believe that they happened. It's a cultural gaslighting—we applaud victims for coming forward while maintaining a legal system meant to protect rapists. [...] Even as we culturally elevate people like Daisy Coleman, applauding her courage while making her rape a highly visible representation of a greater problem, we erase the reality of rape survivors—rendering their long-term suffering invisible, even in a national conversation about their rapes.

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I often wondered and still do wonder about Claire's loneliness. Even though we both shared a history of sexual assault, our particular circumstances and the way it shaped our lives could never be the same. We shared proximity in our pain, but we lived it in disparate ways.

Claire seemed impervious to pain, both emotional and physical. Our creature comfort the last couple of years was getting piercings together. She had been living in various boroughs of NYC for grad school and then law school, and I'd see her when she came home from school breaks here and there. We'd see a movie together, or get some appetizers at Ciao! or The Ale House in Ithaca, or our nipples pierced. I don't remember precisely when I get my earlobes pierced—my first ever piercing—but probably sometime in my preteen years. Since that piercing many, many years ago, I've never had another bodily piercing.

Claire and I were texting about what we should do when she made it back to Ithaca, and during the course of the conversation, she excitedly suggested we get piercings. I thought she was kidding at first and that the idea was a bit far-fetched—it's quite outlandish from our usual movie date—but I also thought *fuck it, why not?* Claire had several ear piercings already, and she planned to expand upon that. I had no idea what I wanted, and I fretted about it for weeks leading up to our piercing date. I settled upon a helix (the namesake for the piercing is also its location on the ear). The piercing itself hurt, but I enjoy a certain amount of pain.

The next piercing date we had, I got a tragus (again, name and location are synonymous), and Claire got her nipple pierced. I'd never given much thought to nipple piercings other than how tacky—and, to be honest, downright trashy—it looked to have both nipples pierced (both being the modifier in that sentence). (It made me think of a shirtless Matthew Lillard—probably one of his most notable performances was in the movie *Scream*—with his tongue hanging out and shrieking a breathy and wet “aah”—like you would at the doctor's office, and they've got a

wooden tongue depressor shoved down your throat to check you for strep—while pinching and flicking his nipples. Gross. I don't know why I conjure this particular image when I think of nipple piercings, and I have no idea if I've even seen Matthew Lillard doing this in one of his movies, but that's immediately where my mind goes.)

Claire and I were always in the same room together when we got our piercings (both for moral support and safety purposes). Claire took her shirt off and lied on the table while the piercer examined her nipple and placed two black Sharpie dots on either side of it. I gazed in awe at how perfectly round and perky her breasts were. My breasts have always been the same size—quite large, regardless of weight loss or gain—and I've never really liked them. When I lie down, they immediately retreat to my armpits instead of remaining in place like smaller, firmer breasts do. (I never admired my big breasts like others have—mostly men, but also women with smaller breasts—because I associated their bigness with the fact that I'm overweight, and although big breasts are enviable, being overweight is not, so I dissociate my admirable breasts from my unadmirable body. And yes, I am fully aware that this is internalized fat phobia. If I had Sydney Sweeney's figure, then I'd be impressed with my breast-to-body ratio.) I stood next to Claire and held her cold, clammy hand (they were always cold and clammy). Her breasts and stomach were covered in goose pimples. I asked her if she was nervous and she said “no.” The goose pimples said otherwise, but I believed her. Claire's expressions were always impeccably self-contained. I never really had any way of knowing exactly what she was thinking or feeling. She was impenetrable in that way. I was both puzzled by this and covetous of it.

Claire barely winced, if she winced at all, when the piercer skewered her nipple. I was freaking out internally and asked her if it hurt and she giggled—no pun intended; it was indeed a light, subdued laugh—and replied “no, not really.” I could tell the piercer was impressed by her

tolerance of the pain--the only other body piercing that has the potential to hurt more than a nipple piercing is a genital piercing; they're both erogenous zones--and I was impressed that she was my friend.

The third piercing date we had, I decided I wanted my nipple pierced. I liked the way Claire's looked, and as I had ascertained from the act of getting it pierced, it didn't hurt all that much. *She barely flinched!* Plus, I was growing more confident in my body, and I craved the exoticness a nipple piercing would lend to my sex appeal. I also decided I wanted a daith (it's in the crux of the ear's helix). The piercer asked me which one I wanted to get pierced first, and I went with my nipple. Although I didn't think it'd hurt too bad(ly)—based on Claire's experience—I figured it'd hurt more than a daith, so I just wanted it done. *Give me the bad news before the good news.* More than I worried about the pain, I worried my nipple wouldn't get hard and what I, or the piercer, would have to do to get it there and how awkward that might be. But my fears were put to rest as soon as I took my shirt off—the combination of the office being air conditioned and me being nervous influenced my nipple to be cooperative. I don't know if the guy piercing my nipple was new to piercings, or if I just had exceptionally nice tits (I doubt it was the latter but one can fantasize), but his hands were shaking like a washing machine on spin cycle as he measured and dotted my nipple. As I lied naked from my waist up and watched him approach my tender nipple with trembling hands, I got nervous. He told me to take a deep breath before he jabbed the needle in my nipple, and for some inexplicable reason, he stopped halfway through. A paroxysm of pain erupted from my stomach and swept outward through my extremities. My body felt like it was experiencing its own earthquake. The piercer told me to take another deep breath so he could finish the piercing, but it was hard to focus on my breathing when my entire body felt like it was coming apart. I took a slight breath in and he slowly, like a train approaching

a station—or maybe quickly; at this point, the pain had overtaken my senses and everything seemed to slow down—pushed the needle through the rest of my nipple. As he turned around to get the piercing jewelry from the counter, I looked up at Claire and mouthed *what the fuck?!*

I lied on the table, still topless, as he did my daith piercing. It hurt substantially less than my nipple, but it still hurt. Claire was next, and she got a rook, which goes on the inner edge of the uppermost ridge in your ear. The piercer had a hard time with Claire's piercing, and she bled a lot, making it even harder. Still though, she remained phlegmatic. Even as he jumbled around in her ear, causing her to bleed more and more, she smiled and reassured him that everything was satisfactory. I watched, horrified. Without moving her head, she glanced in my direction and widened her eyes as if to say mirror what I had mouthed earlier: *what the fuck?!* But I feel like it was more to reassure me than it was herself.

Claire and I left that appointment bleeding and sore. And to my surprise, the pain in my nipple dissipated quickly, but the pain from my daith throbbed in my ear and in my head. When I got home that evening, I took a picture of my tit and sent it to all of my close friends—it was not unsolicited, I had asked them all beforehand if they wanted to see it—and we beheld its attractiveness.

Eventually Claire would text me that her rook piercing just fell out one day. And I'd end up cutting my daith out of my ear with a pair of pliers. I took myself to convenient care afterward because I had a large, fleshy lump in my ear surrounding one of the piercing holes that wouldn't stop bleeding. I figured it must have been infected even though there was no purulent discharge, but the doctor informed me that it was a pyogenic granuloma. Apparently it's a fairly common reaction at the site of minor injuries, injuries such as piercings. It's a small, benign growth filled with blood vessels. The doctor gave me a steroid cream that I needed to swab on it for a few

days. He said that it may disappear, but it wasn't guaranteed. Ironically, the growth looked and felt like a nipple. I did as the doctor instructed, and my ear nipple eventually shrunk into oblivion.

Getting piercings together was the most intimate experience we shared, and we'd never (have the chance to) get another piercing together. As we continued to build and expand on our piercings, I wondered when or if we'd decide we were done.

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In the months before Claire's death, she was posting collages on Instagram that her therapist recommended she create. Art therapy was a new aspect of Claire's therapeutic repertoire, and it seemed she quite took to it. One of the collages contained her sobriety clock. She had been sober for nearly seven years. I was always so proud of her for her commitment to sobriety. Claire never discussed her sobriety in detail, so I never knew how easy or difficult it was for her to manage. In that same collage was a picture of her and I from earlier in the year. It was winter, and we had just gotten piercings—I think maybe when I got my tragus. In all the years I knew Claire, we had never taken a picture together, and I didn't want to take this picture either, but she insisted precisely because we had no pictures together. I look sad and vacant in every shot she took. Partly because it's hard for me to feign a smile on command, but also partly because I was entering a difficult emotional phase in my life. I suppose I *was* sad and vacant. The rest of the pictures in her collage were either solo pictures of herself, or with her boyfriend, or her dog (a pug named Sid). In one of the selfies, she had a pink Furby on her shoulder.

Claire's caption for the collage she titled *MMXIX* [2019]: was a hopeful one:

Don't you gotta wanna hate that moment when 2019 is simultaneously the worst/best year you've yet to haunt the earth and everything you've been

running from for double digit years hits you like a speedball laced with elmer's glue, and bro u are STRAIGHT UP not havin a good time but somehow in the process you collide with the loveliest creatures (including the love of your life & long furbz) that show you: that love isn't just a word on an overpriced Papyrus card, IT'S OKAY NOT TO BE OKAY, healing isn't linear and...You would do the whole shit show over again because climate change will soon kill us all {jk sorta}, it could be exponentially worse, I have access to all of the resources I need, and there is always hope

The caption was followed by two bat emojis. Bats and Furbies would have a significant presence in Claire's last few posts. And not just the typical Furby of the late 90s, but long Furbies. A phenomenon that was both horrific and darling, and as always, perplexing. But that was precisely Claire.

Claire was into everything weird and macabre, and we bonded over our shared obsession with true crime and serial killers. I came across a serial killer coloring book sometime during our friendship and added it to my Amazon cart as a reminder to buy it for her for her next birthday. But I never did. I'm not sure why. I bought the coloring book this past summer along with a 64-pack of Crayola crayons, and my boyfriend and I each colored a serial killer late one evening. He knew the significance of the coloring book, and although it creeped him out a bit, he happily humored me. He chose Catherine Wood, and I chose Ed Gein. In the 80s, Catherine Wood and her lover, Gwedolyn Graham, worked at a nursing home together and started smothering patients as some sort of cruel and odd "love bond." The pair started out choosing victims by name, in hopes of spelling M-U-R-D-E-R but devised a new plan after realizing it was hard to find certain letters. (How many names start with "u"?) Ed Gein was a serial killer in the 50s made

famous by the human paraphernalia authorities found in his house after his arrest: a belt made from female human nipples, a pair of lips on a window shade drawstring, nine vulvae in a box, and bowls made from human skulls among many, many other grotesque things. Gein's gruesome possessions were both from people he murdered and graves he robbed.

I don't remember sending Claire this, but I know I did because the text exchange is eternalized on her Instagram (the last vestige I have of Claire's life and personality). I sent her a meme of Kermit the Frog talking to evil Kermit the Frog where "normal" Kermit says to himself "don't be weird at this social event," and "evil" Kermit says "give strangers unnecessary information about serial killers." The text I accompanied with it said "I saw this on goodreads and thought of you hahaha." Claire posted it on her Instagram with a typical dark but clever caption:

"So did you know that Jeffrey Dahmer had a spaniel mix named Frisky? Also many people theorize that Dahmer's behavioral problems began around age 4 after he underwent surgery to correct a double hernia. Further, his favorite color was navy blue and he really likes the new mango Diet Coke flavor." Oh wait that last one is actually about me.

Claire had the most intricate and superlative sense of humor. I was often impressed at how sharp and transcendent her wit was. In one of our numerous chats about Claire, her boyfriend and I both shared how much we revered Claire's sense of humor. I never had the chance to meet him, but I'm happy to know he cherished that aspect of her as much as I did. It comforts me knowing he loved her fully.

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“PlushieCouture” on Etsy has nearly 1,300 Furby variations: tardigrade Furby (they call it a sea pig, but it most definitely looks like a tardigrade); octopus Furby; Beetlejuice sandworm Furby; Buzz Lightyear Furby; a piece of toast with Barbie legs Furby; stick of butter Furby; TMNT Furby; Cat in a Hat Furby; Remington bullet Furby; Spine furby; Tooth with plaque Furby; and California Raisin Furby, among so many others. You’d be surprised how quickly they’re sold and how quickly new variations drop.

One of these custom Furbies will set you back about \$100. I’ve been browsing Etsy intermittently over the last few months trying to find the long or odd Furby—there are some vendors that create strictly “long” furbies, and then there are others like PlushieCouture that make “odd body” furbies—of Claire’s dreams. My desire to buy a long or odd knockoff Furby to the tune of \$100 or more is the grand fiction of consumerism, that having something tangible will bring me closer to whatever the commodity is meant to represent, in this case, one of sentimental value. The presence of a long, or odd, or long and odd Furby will not dissolve Claire’s absence. If anything, it will magnify it. I know this, but I want it nonetheless.

I asked Claire’s boyfriend about the significance of long Furby, and he said there was “NO rhyme or reason. They’re just so weird looking that they were entrancing. Like who does that?! Sews a furby [sic] into a snake?” *Indeed, who does that?* Everything about Claire was mysterious but transfixing. Like how and why did she discover long furbies? The subculture seems occultish, but leave it to Claire to find and exalt it.

When I first connected with Claire’s boyfriend, Charles—or, I suppose, her ex-boyfriend; he shared with me that they had broken up shortly before her death—I was bent on insinuating myself into his life. I thought about offering to visit him in the city so we could meet at a coffee shop and reminisce about Claire. I wanted him to tell me how happy Claire was and what their



relationship was like. I know she loved him dearly because one of her last Instagram posts mentioned her finding the love of her life. Claire never spoke in such ways. I wanted to meet the man who comforted and nourished Claire's delicate heart. I wanted to hold his hand in mine and feel what Claire felt. I've also wanted to ask him why they broke up, how it could be possible for two people who loved each other so much to go their separate ways. But I also didn't want it to seem like I was digging for the cause of their breakup as a means to unearth a motive for Claire's death—I was fully aware that even asking a question like this could imply that he had something to do with Claire's death. And as much as I wanted to know every detail about Claire's life in her months and weeks and days, that question would have been unfair to him. Besides, it was none of my business. I wish I could say I was above speculating why and how Claire died, but I'm not. I want to know exactly everything she was thinking and doing in the days and hours and seconds before she died.

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I often wondered—and still do wonder—what I could have done to prevent Claire's death. Feeling like you may have caused someone to harm themselves by not doing enough to prevent them from doing so is a hard feeling to shake, even when you fully realize a text or a phone call or a visit won't be a pivotal healing moment precisely because a text or phone call or visit didn't and couldn't lift me out of my despair when I was actively suicidal. Depression is so often described as a pit for a reason. A text or phone call or visit may be a thread in the rope that pulls you out, but it's only a thread. And, again, I found a twitter thread that illuminated what I couldn't put into words:

**@garrcie** I love all the suicide prevention posts, but to me the “check in with your friends” language isn't helpful. People don't die because no-one checked in on

them, and its [sic] not fair to their family members or friends to imply they could've been saved with a text [sic]

**@garrcie** Its' [sic] also not fair to people who are suicidal to increase the helpless victim based language around mental illness. many [sic] of them are deeply loved, and acting like a check in [sic] would save them really minimizes a condition that is real, and multifactorial

**@garrcie** the narrative blames people who are suicidal "how are you feeling this way when you are loved and supported?" and it blames their loved ones because "you could've [sic]/shouldve [sic] done more to prevent this"

**@garrcie** suicide prevention is about a lot more than hotlines and check ins [sic]. Suicide prevention is about access to quality mental health care for everyone, affordable housing, culturally competent providers, LGBTQ resources,

**@garrcie** destigmatizing seeking care for mental illness, destigmatizing men's mental health, harm reduction for substance misuse, parenting classes, and more

**@garrcie** ultimately suicide prevention is about creating a world where people don't need to rely on 1 am phone calls to stay alive

**@garrcie** i obviously don't mean to minimize the importance of social factors and support, of course humans need love to survive. but [sic] we need to think about and talk about suicidality as a [sic] institutional problem not just a personal one

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It wasn't until the end of August or maybe even sometime in September that I finally mailed Claire's parents the card that I had bought for them shortly after I learned of Claire's passing. I was angry with them for shrouding Claire's death in secrecy, robbing the people closest to her of the news. I told them how very sorry I was to learn of Claire's passing and how I couldn't imagine the pain and grief of losing their only child, especially a child like Claire. What I said was true, but what I didn't say was *what the fuck is wrong with you?* I shared with them a strange and persistent vision I had of Claire: her, as a bridesmaid, at my wedding. I wasn't planning a wedding—I didn't even have a boyfriend. And even if I had had a boyfriend—and a relationship serious enough to warrant a wedding—a wedding wasn't something I wanted. I had been married before, and I didn't picture myself doing it again. Maybe because my first wedding was to a very bad man, or maybe because I've never aspired to the stereotypical feminine things in life. Either way, a marriage wasn't on my radar, but all of my best friends gathered in one place, wearing beautiful gowns and holding flowers and smiling the smile of love was. I wanted to bask in love with Claire.

I gave Claire's parents my cell phone number, my email, and my home address, hoping they'd get in touch with me, but they did not. Considering how guarded they were about Claire's death, I didn't expect to hear from them, but I really hoped their understanding and empathy of my love for Claire would trump the ignominy they felt about Claire's life and death.

I also sent them a print of a digital illustration that I had a woman on Etsy make of Claire. I took a screenshot of my favorite photo of Claire from her Instagram, and I told the artist she had complete creative authority for whatever she produced.

Shortly after Claire moved to the city for graduate school, she posted a photo on Instagram of her and her pug, Sid. She's kneeling and wearing a black dress with a flower print, a pair of black

Ray Bans, bright red lipstick, and she's holding Sid, who's dressed in a taco costume. Claire and I shared more than just an affinity for true crime: we also loved bold lipstick. I bought her a glittery green lipstick in 2016 that she modeled in a separate Instagram post.

What the artist made was more fantastic than anything I could have ever imagined. It captured Claire's luminescence in a way that made her seem ethereal. I framed the print, and it hangs above my bed along with a framed print of a bat that I bought from Society6. I have no idea what, if anything, Claire's parents did with the print I sent them, and my only hope is that they, too, see Claire's brilliance and that they don't hide it like they did her death.

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When I thought about Claire's death, and her parents having to come down to the city to clean out her apartment, I thought about my parents having to clean out my apartment in Cortland if I ever gave in to my suicidal ideation. I don't know if relating Claire's actual death to my hypothetical death was empathy or theft. I think it's probably a bit of both. But I do know one reason for not taking my own life is abhorring the thought of my parents having to go through my things, deciding what to keep and what to get rid of, crying as they worked through the detritus of my life. You collect all these things in the course of your life that have, on some level, meaning and/or worth, and in an instant, it all becomes junk.

Did Claire's parents keep or throw away the green lipstick I bought her?

I spend large portions of my time coveting what my friend's have and daydreaming how much better my life would be if I were them. I envisage the things I'd do differently if I was them and other things I'd appreciate more if I was them. When Claire first moved to the city, I asked for her address so I could send her packages and cards. It took a year or two before I googled her

address to see exactly where she lived. Curiosity quickly evolved to astonishment. The price of a studio in her apartment complex was more than three times what I was paying for my apartment in Cortland. She was only about six blocks from Central Park. She lived alone with her pug and cat. She was going to graduate school and dating in one of the largest cities in the US. Even though I knew Claire to be a bashful person, I drew her into a fantasy of a woman-about-town, living life in a glamorous yet raw way, like if you mashed the shows *Sex and the City*, *Gossip Girl*, and *Girls* together. I pictured her walking her dog around the streets of Manhattan, and going to SoulCycle classes, and sitting in grad school lectures, and flirting with hot men on Tinder—the quality of men you could only find in someplace like NYC—and going to lavish nightclubs. I wondered how she couldn’t be ecstatic with life.

I blotted out Claire’s lived experience and only considered the one-dimensional conceit of the American Dream that, as a society, we’ve believed to be real and achievable. *What isn’t there to love about living in the dreamiest city in the world?* And then I question whether anyone looks at my life and does the same thing and wonders how I, too, am not ecstatic with life. This wasn’t fair to Claire, and it isn’t fair to myself, but I keep doing it. Why am I sad? Why can’t I *just get over it?*

Wherever you are, there you are.

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I sent Claire a few messages in early March that I hadn’t received a response to, but I wasn’t immediately worried. It was normal for days and sometimes weeks to pass before we answered each other or before one of us reached out simply to say “hi” or “I miss you” or “I love you” or all of those things. But when I went to send her another message a few weeks later and noticed my

previous messages had sent as text messages—and not as iMessages that are typical of Apple to Apple devices—while simultaneously noticing that the message I was actively typing was also a text message and not an iMessage—the blue “send” arrow was green—my stomach immediately dropped. My first thought was *oh my god, she’s dead*. But I know I tend to be fatalistic, so I considered other options: she was too busy with law school so she turned her phone off; she was going through a hard time and turned her phone off; she was in a several week long inpatient program and her phone was off; she got sick of her phone and just got rid of it; she couldn’t maintain her relationship with me anymore and blocked me; she got a new phone and it was an Android, and she hadn’t responded to me for any of the reasons above. I was spiraling and couldn’t make sense of this green message. To be sure of her safety, I googled her full name plus the word “obituary.” I didn’t want to hit “enter,” but my gut compelled me to. I found her LinkedIn but nothing else. Some of the pressure eased, but I still didn’t have a good feeling. I decided to follow up with an email. Still no response.

I didn’t want to think anything bad had happened to Claire, so instead I got angry with her. I willed myself to believe that she had “ghosted”<sup>3</sup> me, and I was angry with her for being so flippant toward our relationship and my feelings. I text my friends and told them how angry and hurt and confused I was that Claire had apparently ghosted me, and I asked them if they had ever been ghosted by a friend. I also ran through the list of other possible scenarios with them, and no one agreed with me that she might be dead, especially because there was no sign of an obituary. It just didn’t make sense. Their refusal to jump to the same conclusion I had pacified my delirium slightly. I was a bit embarrassed that I even thought she *maybe* dead. *Of course Claire is alive.*

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<sup>3</sup> Definition of “ghosted” from urban dictionary: “When a person cuts off all communication with their friends or the person they’re dating, with zero warning or notice before hand. You’ll mostly see them avoiding friend’s phone calls, social media, and avoiding them in public.”

She may be struggling right now, but she'll pull through whatever this is because she always pulls through. If she needed to cut me out of her life in order to heal, then so be it. I didn't want to think of myself as having a toxic role in Claire's life and therefore needing to be cut out of it, but Claire would occasionally cut out poisonous relationships—good for her!—and I'd much rather have her be alive and safe but no longer wanting me in her life.

But the thought that she was dead would linger.

Months passed before I'd find out that Claire had died. And I let the months pass. As much as I wanted to know, I also didn't. I didn't want to know if she ghosted me, and I certainly didn't want to know if she was dead. I had every opportunity to reach out to Claire's boyfriend on Instagram and ask, but I chose not to. To this day, I still don't know what happened to Claire, and I probably never will. I have a few suspicions, but they'll always be suspicions. Sometimes I think not knowing confounds the grieving process, and sometimes I think it's better that I don't know so that I can't compartmentalize Claire and the life that she lived to her last moments. She was an infinite number of moments.

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I had a dream about Claire recently. I was in a freight yard, running through the shipping containers and trying to escape the laser blasts of the people chasing me—their guns were like something out of Star Wars. As I lost energy and my chasers closed the ground between us, I vanished into a shadowed area the size of a small closet. My plan was to wait in this sliver of poorly concealed space until my hunters gave up and retreated or found me and put an end to my escape. But Claire foiled my plan. She manifested out of nowhere, grinned at me, jumped into the light and started shooting at my mysterious chasers. I was hesitant to join her but her fervor

for the fight rallied me into action. I jumped out and we started blasting our guns in every direction. They were closing in on us, and our demise felt imminent, but we were laughing. The action and near calamity of the situation felt both real and like a video game. I was terrified for my life but intoxicated by Claire's presence and the urgency and excitement of the fight. As the gun battle came to an end—no one really “won,” the enemy just disappeared like smoke from a fire—Claire and I dropped back into the shadows and looked at each other, panting from the thrill of the fight and laughing hysterically. I couldn't stop staring at her. Just as I began to relax and contemplate her smile—it wasn't a half-smile, it was full and uninhibited—I realized something was amiss. Even as I was fully immersed in the dream, I became conscious that it was just that, a dream. Her presence was palpable, but she was a chimera. I felt both cheated and gratified. I started sobbing. Sobbing because I knew my dream could shift at the drop of a hat, and she'd be gone just as quickly as she had appeared. Sobbing because I was so happy to see her. Sobbing because she was so happy to see me. Sobbing because she was alive and this was real. Sobbing because she wasn't alive and this wasn't real. Before I could say or do anything, I was jolted into consciousness. I was paralyzed in my bed, sobbing.

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Years after my sexual assaults—some at the hand of the very bad man—I still struggle with shame, guilt, fear, anger, embarrassment, mistrust, helplessness, hopelessness, worthlessness, numbness, loneliness, depression, anxiety, PTSD, and suicidal ideation. For me, grief has become praxis and learning that healing isn't linear, that even if I think I've dealt with/accepted/moved passed an overwhelming emotion or experience, I may, once again, be at the mercy of its reemergence. And even if I continue therapy and antidepressants for the rest of my life, I'll never know what life is like minus trauma. But I do know I can soften its effects.



I'd like to think the persistent confusion and devastation over Claire's death comes solely from a place of selfless empathy, but I'm aware enough and honest enough to know that that isn't the case. Of course Claire's death is devastating in and of itself, but it's also a foretoken of the sexual assault survivor curse: suicidality—for the percentage of survivors who experience suicidal ideation—haunts you like the cursed videotape in the movie *The Ring*. If you know the movie, you know that once you've seen the video, you're doomed. There is no escaping death. (I'd almost feel guilty using a movie to compare Claire's death to suicidality, but she loved horror films, and I know she'd approve of this reference.)

Existence is perpetually in doubt.

I've been following the poet Chen Chen on Twitter for a few years now, and he recently tweeted a Mary Oliver poem and his thoughts about the poem that perfectly elucidates the struggle I've experienced trying to negotiate my will to live with my will to end things. Something I'm working toward is realizing this isn't a separate self—it's all me.

**@chenchenwrites**

We shake with joy, we shake with grief.

What a time they have, these two

housed as they are in the same body.

--Mary Oliver, "We Shake with Joy"

**@chenchenwrites** thinking about how this very short poem is composed of all single syllable words, until the end, with the word "body"—

how this two syllable word is the (trembling) container for both joy and grief

My body both trembles with joy and grief. My will to live and my will to die are nurturing forces inside me that stem from the same root. I have an intimate relationship with both of these selves—how could I not? I live so I can macerate in love, to waste away life rapt in humiliating devotion. To become softened by love is also to become hardened by it. In order to let love fray the edges of your heart, you also have to become hardened to its disappointments. Without expectation, you cannot love, and you cannot love without expectation. To expect is to wait and to anticipate, and the very act of waiting and anticipating is yielding your heart to someone else. Its beauty is as unparalleled as its ability to devastate.

My life feels like a waiting game. A game where I'm trying to outwit and outpace the trauma that has been slowly trying to pull me under. A game to see whether or not an old trauma could do me in, or if a new trauma will deal the final blow. I've often found my autonomy and agency subjugated to both external and internal forces that are beyond my control, and death is one of them. And I often wonder if Claire felt the same way.

I wonder if and hope I'll get to a place where I'm no longer waiting. But I do know, in learning to love myself and continuing to open my heart to others, I am wishing for a future. And that is good enough for now.

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In the same conversation I had with Claire's boyfriend about the significance of her admiration for long Furby, I also asked about the significance of the bats. He told me that Claire loved bats because "they are small and cute and kind of look like dogs but they're also spooky and gothy." He dedicated a plaque in remembrance of Claire and her affection for bats at a bat sanctuary in

the area, and the owner told him he placed the plaque in the “Geribatric” ward for old bats—a pun so perfect you’d think Claire had a hand in it.

I had always been loath to use the term “goth” when it came to Claire and her personality because I always associated gothiness with “posers,” people on the fringes of society that place themselves there with the duplicitous purpose of rejecting mainstream society while also coveting its acceptance. I lumped all Goths into this category of dark, dramatic grunge, and I wouldn’t allow myself to see Claire in that light. *She isn’t a poser, so how could she be goth?* Maybe I did this precisely because there were so many aspects of Claire that were unknown to me so I filled the gaps with my own narrative. I’m disappointed that I allowed myself to indulge in this kind of gross stereotyping—and just how reductive it is—of Claire. I failed to embrace her fully. And so did her parents. We owed her so much more.

I recently got a tattoo of a bat on my right ring finger. It’s a minimalist outline of a bat, and some of the lines are barely noticeable because the tattoo artist had a hard time tattooing my finger while holding the skin taut. I hoped the pain of the tattoo would mimic the pain I felt the last time Claire and I got piercings together. I hoped the pain would summon the pain of my grief, but it didn’t. I barely felt it. And I was disappointed. I wanted to feel more. Is it possible to feel *too much grief?*

How do I mourn Claire unselfishly? I almost wrote “how do I mourn Claire’s loss” unselfishly, but the way the question is framed centers myself and my feelings in Claire’s death. *Claire died.* How do I mourn Claire? How do I mourn Claire’s death (to me)? How do we mourn death altruistically?

It’s weird to have relics of someone’s life after they’ve gone. I visit Claire’s Instagram page and scroll through it as if she could post something new any day now. And I visit often. I still have a

free sticker I nabbed from a live “Last Podcast on the Left” show we saw together at the Haunt in Ithaca. I don’t listen to podcasts, and I had no idea what Last Podcast on the Left was, but Claire loved it so I happily joined her. The one relic that I never want to lose, but I also feel like could become too much to hold on to, is our text thread. I’m not sure how far back it goes, but at least a year or more. It sits at the bottom of my Messages app, buried under active conversations. Claire’s number could easily be someone else’s by now, and the idea of that breaks my heart. I can’t believe the world continues to rotate without her.