Part 1 - denial

At first, I thought I was going crazy until I realized I wasn’t the one. Although, maybe crazy is too harsh a word to use. Grief isn’t an unknown to us feeling but it is the one I wish I could take from my loved ones.

I watch as my mom washes the dishes while singing to herself quietly. Her head bobs to the beat as her body sways gently. If there is one thing I love about my mom, it is her incredibly angelic voice. Seriously, it sounds as if any second the angels will come down to take her with them. She lull anyone to sleep if she wanted to, and she used to do it to me and my sister.

Before my death, my mom would sing her heart out in the house, for everyone to hear but now… now she doesn’t do it anymore. As if grief took her voice away. I just wish it’s temporary, I hope to hear it again.

The doorbell rings and my mom dries her hands before rushing to open it. A man and a woman stand there, both with solemn faces.

“Ah! Mr and Mrs Woodley, how can I help?” My mom asks them cheerfully. She’s always been happy and I’m glad my death hasn’t taken it away.

But her happiness right now isn’t real. I’ve noticed that she’s using joy as a distraction; a distraction to my death. Which is okay. I noticed that there are times when she takes a few minutes to read my favourite book or look at a photograph of me. I suppose she’s trying to come to turns with my death slowly.

Mr and Mrs Woodley are our neighbours from across the street. They are close with my whole family and I used to go to their house when I was little, to play with their dog or spend time with their children.

Their solemn faces turn into confusion as they share a look at my mom’s cheerfulness. I don’t really blame them, I’m sure they expected her to cry or at least look sad. I have no doubt that deep down inside she’s in immense pain.

“Isabelle, we came to offer our condolences.” Mr Woodley says. He nods with a tight, pitiful smile.

“Yes,” Mrs Woodley says, “and we found this in our garden just yesterday.” She hands my mom a small envelope. It’s most likely something of mine, maybe the necklace I lost a few days before my death. The necklace was a present from my mom for my eighth birthday.

My mom grabs the envelope, almost desperately as if wanting to end this conversation as soon as possible. Her face is still smiling but I can tell it has become a pained smile.

“Thank you,” my mom answers. “Have a good day.” And with that, she shuts the door, she doesn’t even wait for our neighbours to turn back.

She goes back into the kitchen and I follow her eager to see what’s in the envelope.

But all she does with it is throw it straight into the bin. With my eyes wide and an ache in my heart, I leap forward to fish the envelope out. It’s just my luck that I’m a ghost now and my hand passes straight through. But I’m not angry because I know she’s trying to cope the best way she can.

I stare back at it hoping that it will somehow open on its own and show me what’s inside. But nothing happens and so with a dull ache, I enter the kitchen. My mom went back to cleaning the dishes as if nothing happened.

It’s a sad thing to witness because I was her first child and she’s pretending that I never even existed. As someone who died I try to pretend I’m alive but it’s when everyone I love is grieving me, I understand they need time.

Her voice carries through the room and fills my ears pleasantly until suddenly she stops. I suppose she just realized that my favourite song has been playing.

I used to play this song on repeat, all the time; in the shower, in the morning, all around the house.

Her actions stop. She gazes into the distance through the window and I walk closer to her. Her breathing is steady as she no doubt thinks back to all the times I have been singing my heart out in the house.

I hope I’ll see a day when she’s truly happy again.

Part 2 - anger

Marnie, my boyfriend, is getting ready to go out… again. His hair gelled back, his shirt unbuttoned, and his face wears an angry expression.

Ever since I died, Marnie has been angry at the whole world. I have no doubt that the whole world must be an enemy to him right now. We were childhood sweethearts, spending as much time together as we could, no one and nothing could pull us apart. And now… I died and he’s blaming me for his loneliness and he’s handling it with anger.

“I’m going out!” Marnie shouts to his mom.

“Again?!” She shouts back. She comes downstairs and stands in front of Marnie with her hands on her hips and a disapproving expression. She’s a single mom and I can only imagine how hard it is for her to see her son wasting his life like this. I’m sorry for her and I know she doesn’t blame me but there isn’t a day that goes by when I don’t wish she would. I know it would be easier for her to cope if she had someone to blame for this.

I watch as Marnie looks at her with his jaw clenched.

“Yes, mom, again.” He answers.

“She’s not coming back, Marnie, and wasting your life like this certainly won’t do anyone any good-”

“I know mom!” Marnie cuts her off and even I jump at this sudden change in his voice. “I’m late, I’m going now.” And without waiting for his mother’s response, he slams the door after him.

It’s painful watching this happen. Marnie has a bright future ahead of him and I can’t bear to think what’s going to happen to him if he continues living the way he does now. Especially since it’s because of me.

We used to go on dates to the beach and we spoke about our future together. I was going to go into teaching and he wanted to be a doctor.

I stay a little longer to see his mom sigh deeply before turning around and going back upstairs. I turn to follow Marnie.

We’re walking through crowded streets, full of people smoking, doing drugs and making out. I look at Marnie most of the time. He’s wearing a scowl on his face and his eyebrows are drawn together. He’s looking around at people; or girls, to be exact. Most of the girls here are almost wholly naked and I hate to think that Marnie is going to bed one of them, if not a couple, before leaving to get drunk and waste another evening.

We enter a club. The noise is so loud I’m sure I’d hate it if I were alive, but, a perk of being a ghost, is desensitized senses.

This place is so incredibly crowded that people walk through me as I keep close to Marnie. They feel hot when they pass through me and I feel uncomfortable.

Marnie, not wasting time it seems, goes up to a girl while I stay behind. He whispers something in her ear and disappears into the back. My heart aches at the person he has become; using girls to forget about me; taking his anger out on his mom and his friends. All the while blaming me for how he feels.

I wait for him outside of the club and somewhere in the shadows so no one can pass through me.

Marnie comes back out with his hair tousled and a smug smile. I feel sick watching him walk closer to a couple of people. They must be our age. Marnie fist-bumps some of them before being offered a cigarette. He takes it with no hesitation.

I want to walk up to him and shake him out of this careless behaviour. But I stay where I am and watch as he smokes before being offered a bottle of alcohol. He takes it eagerly and downs half of it straight away.

Not too long later, Marnie takes another full bottle before saying goodbye to his companions. This is the time that I follow him. I already know what’s going to happen but with a heavy heart, I don’t allow myself to miss the following events.

  Marnie sways from side to side as he walks to the cemetery. He hasn’t drunk anything from the new bottle yet, he’s saving it for later.

We come up to a stop at a grave; my grave. There’s a small bench in front of it which Marnie sits on. It’s a small bench but he sits to the side as much as he could. He does this to leave room for me and I sit down next to him every time.

  He stares at my grave and I stare at him. His eyes blurry with tears. It’s evening and the sun is already almost gone. The sky is beautiful; warm tones like red and yellow but they’re mixed with cold tones, blue and green.

Marnie and I loved watching sunsets together and there’s nothing more that I want than to just let him know I’m right here watching the sunset with him again.

He takes a long sip before focusing on the sky. Tears stain his cheeks now.

  “Why’d you do this to me, huh?” He whispers at first. I know what’s to follow and my own eyes sting. “Why’d you leave me!?” He shouts. I flinch at his harsh tone.

  I drop my head onto his shoulder feeling his warmth. My own tears drop down my cheeks, onto the floor before passing through it, disappearing.

  “I hate you, Morana!” He sobs. He drops the bottle and it smashes against my gravestone. It’s okay, though, I’m not mad. “I have to live, every day without you, while you rest in your damn grave.” He drops his head into his hands. “Why’d you leave, huh? It’s your fault! Everything that’s happening to me is your damn fault!” He glares at my grave. I watch him, crying silently. He doesn’t mean that. I know he doesn’t but it hurts nonetheless.

  “Damn you, Morana,” He sobs, shaking violently. “I just want you back.”

Part 3 - bargaining

“If only I called again.” My dad mutters to himself as he opens a car’s bonnet. He’s a motor mechanic, and everything about his job must remind him of my accident. “I should have left early…dammit!” He pulls his hand back quickly, he burned himself.

Ever since my death, he has been blaming himself for not preventing it. The second he wakes up I catch him muttering about how he would have saved me if only he checked up on me more frequently, if only he ended up taking me himself. If only, if only and constantly if only. It’s almost as if he should have predicted the future. This is crazy because he’s blaming himself for something that cannot be changed anymore.

“If only I could take it all back.” He mutters again and gets back to work.

It’s really unhealthy for him. And, even as a ghost, I hurt along with him and with my whole family because I long to be with them just as much as they with me.

“I should have gone with her.” At these words, I walk closer to him and hover my hand over his shoulder, just close enough to feel his warmth. I watch his hands work on the car and at one point, I see a teardrop.

My dad has never been one to be emotional. I always knew he wanted to be strong for us and I admired him for his strength. Seeing him now, tear after tear dropping from his eyes as he relentlessly works on, is breaking my heart.

“You shouldn’t push yourself so hard, dad,” I whisper to him despite the fact he can’t hear me. Because even though he has no idea I’m with him, I hope that one day he will get better and stop blaming himself for my death.

   There were many times when I saw him staring at a family picture and my heart clenched at the realization he has no idea I’m with him every single day.

  After work, he gets into his car. And I get in right beside him and just like every single day since my death, he’s preparing himself for the trip. I have no doubt he is thinking back to my accident; by the way his palms get sweaty and he gazes out into the road frantically as if worrying he will be next. I don’t blame him, it’s easy to become paranoid when a person you love gets into an accident. It’s almost like a curse. He thinks that if he does one little thing wrong he will die.

  I watch him and his wide eyes, hands gripping the steering wheel tightly and his stiff posture.

  “I promise I’ll work harder, but God, let me make it back to my family.” My dad mutters again.

  He was never particularly religious. I look down at my hands, in shame almost, that I caused him such pain he must make promises to higher powers.

  There’s nothing wrong with him believing in God and I’m happy if he finds religion to be his peace, I think it’d be good for him to believe I’m safe. But he must feel not capable enough to handle this and I’m conflicted. He was always a strong person, physically and mentally and I never would have thought that he’d break.

  My fingers clench into fists but I take a deep breath. I’m in no place to feel angry at myself. It wasn’t anyone’s fault that I died, it was a terrible accident. And that’s it.

  I’ve followed my dad’s car since I can’t physically sit down I had to walk and now we’re in front of our house. The lights are all off and my dad stays in his car. I join him and see him resting his head against the steering wheel.

  “Why didn’t I call you? If I checked up on you, you’d be alive.” He mumbles. And then his body shakes as he lets out a quiet sob. “You’d still be alive.”

  “It’s okay,” I whisper. I try my best to embrace him and pretend he can feel and hear me. “It’s okay.” Tears well up in my eyes. “It’s not your fault, dad, I’m okay.” I cry quietly. And together, we sob quietly.

Part 4 - depression

I watch as my sister wakes up.

Day in, day out she wakes up and falls back asleep. Like a ghost herself, she drifts around the house in search of a distraction. She gets up from the bed before going to the toilet. She comes back and gets back under the covers and I sit down next to her with tears pricking my eyes.

There’s nothing I can do. There’s nothing I can do and she will go on living like this - present physically but absent mentally.

  The previous day I watched as she took her diary out, for the first time in years, and with tears staining the page she wrote to me. And I read every single word from over her shoulder.

I miss you, she wrote at the end, I hate everything without you.

  And I watched as she put it away under her bed mattress and fell back asleep.

  A knock on the door wakes my sister up but she stays laying down. Mom comes in.

  “How are you doing?” My mom asks her gently.

  “Fine.” Daisy whispers, closing her eyes. My mom comes up to her and touches her forehead with the back of her palm.

  “You don’t have a fever, what’s happening?”

  “She’s gone, mom.” My sister pauses and her breath catches in her throat. “And she’s not coming back.”

  My mom only smiles gently and leans down to kiss her forehead before leaving the room without a word.

  Daisy gets up and goes to stand by the window. I can see the utter heartbreak in her expression as she searches the world for a bit of happiness. I stand next to her and touch her hand… and although my hand passes through I can feel the faintest warmth coming from her body. For just a split second I allow myself to imagine I’m really here but Daisy’s cry pulls me back into reality. I turn my head to look at her and, indeed, her cheeks welcome new tears as she takes deep breaths.

  “Why’d you leave me, Morana?” She whispers.

My lips part but no sound comes out. Because what do I say? I didn’t want to leave. I didn’t mean to and I will forever wish I could still be alive. So that everyone could be happy again and my sister didn’t have to cry anymore.

Part 5 - acceptance

  It’s been a couple of weeks since my death and my family is getting better.

  My mom walked into my room. She did it by accident but nonetheless, it was good for her. She had been doing laundry and a shirt of mine was in there, as my sister wears my clothes sometimes, and in a rush to get everything done as quickly as she could she walked straight into my room. It was a shock for her at first, all her folded clothes dropped and she gazed around the room. She broke down for the first time since my death and it was heartbreaking to watch. But in the end, she even looked through a few of my things and smiled at pictures on my desk.

  Marnie, too, had a moment one day at a cemetery. After another bad evening, he blamed me again at my grave but something in him must have broke because he apologized. For his behaviour and all those angry words, he said while I sat right next to him. He even apologized to his mom and had her help him to get a therapist. I’m glad he’s trying to get better, I hope one day to see him starting a family.

  My dad realized how wrong he was to try and bargain me back to life in a cafe. An old lady with her grandson sat behind him and she spoke about how what’s in the past is in the past and that blaming ourselves for what happened wasn’t good. She lost a child a couple of months ago, her grandson’s mother and I can only imagine the pain they’re in. But in the end, my dad got into his car and didn’t whisper any ‘if only’s…’ I can only be glad he’s becoming more confident driving again.

  My sister… she’s struggling more than anyone else. But she’s getting there. She woke up one day in the morning and got dressed properly. She even went downstairs to eat breakfast with my parents. They all talked about me and she said that her bleak world is gaining colour. She found an old video of us on her phone. It’s a video in which I tell her how beautiful life is and how much I love living. I suppose she’s living for me now and as long as she’s happy doing it, I will be right with her.

  On a Saturday, my family invited Marnie and his mom over for dinner. It was a little quiet at first as I sat with them in an empty chair they left for me. But they quickly started to remember all the good times with me, all the good and happy memories. I’m glad they’re all together because it’s easier to overcome something with people who are close to you. They’re all healing at their own pace and in their own way but in the end, they all lost someone; a sister, a daughter, a girlfriend.

It’s okay to grief because like William Cowper said: “Grief is itself a medicine.”