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ENG 2010

9 May 2022

Dear, All the People Who Ever Left Me

January 18

Dear Laurel,

I'm writing to you because it seems you will understand. Not my side of things, but his. I recently got into a car accident. I am currently in the hospital.

The world was a blur after it happened. I felt the car door cave in, the windshield crack and crumple, and my head hit the dashboard... or my window – I'm not sure. When I first woke up it was snowing. I could see the snowflakes through the white blinds of the hospital window. My bed was comfortable, and I was draped in blankets. There was a woman next to me, sitting in a chair sleeping. I remember the world feeling silent and heavy.

"You're awake," a nurse gently whispered while checking my IV and staring at the monitors faintly buzzing around me. "How are you feeling?"

When I opened my mouth, all my words were on the tip of my tongue. I couldn't form a single sound, let alone an entire word. "Get some rest sweetie," said the nurse again. She left after jotting a few scribbles on her clipboard and giving me a pitiful smile. That's when I fell asleep.

I woke again to the sound of Mom speaking. "Stephen, it's time for lunch." She was holding my shoulder and placing a tray of food in front of me. I couldn't remember if I was sleeping or not, but it felt like my eyes had been open. The tray was a thick blue plastic with bowls all over it. I remember one having mac and cheese. There was a carton of what seemed like chocolate milk but frosted with ice and already opened. I stared at the food for a while and felt like I was forgetting something important.

"What's going on?" I asked Mom. I was surprised I formed a sentence.

“You can eat soft foods now Stephen. Why don’t you drink some of your shake?” She lifted the frosted carton’s straw to my lips. I wanted to reach out and grab it, but my arms felt like they were filled with iron. I opened my mouth and drank some. It was thick and cold, barely tasting like chocolate, with a strong chalky aftertaste. I didn’t like it, but she sat with me, watching me drink every sip of the liquid. When I finished, Mom squeezed my hand and kissed my forehead. That’s when I realized she never answered my question. I asked it again.

“Stephen, you were in an accident,” Mom replied with tears forming in her eyes. Suddenly, I began to remember the car. I was looking out onto the wheat fields from the passenger seat. Someone I knew was driving.

“Who else?” My words meshed, and sentences got harder to form. My head was becoming heavy again, but I fought to stay awake.

“Adam was with you sweetheart.” She squeezed my hand again. Then I pictured him in my mind. He was smiling and singing, sunlight streaking his face and brightening his eyes. He was holding my hand on the armrest and keeping the wheel steady with his other arm. The road felt like a painting. It was stagnant, one straight line through fields of wheat. The only other car was a white speck in the distance.

“Where is he?” I asked, as I formed my words my tongue became heavier.

“He’s not with us anymore,” she said quietly, with the tears forming again.

*Accident.* People say that a lot, even when there is someone to blame. The white speck, the drunk driver, and a life so dull that day drinking is the escape. That is who I blame. I wish he died instead of Adam.

Love,

Stephen



February 8

Dear Laurel,

Today I moved in. The house was larger than I expected, I guess the life insurance was larger than I expected too. Mom wanted me to have room to maneuver my wheelchair around. In the accident, I fractured my left femur in an area close to my hip, and my right leg is fractured in multiple places. I start physical therapy in two weeks. I need to “learn” how to walk again.

Right now, my boxes occupy most of the dining room, all piled on the wood table, one of the only things of his I kept. He made it for me on our sixth anniversary. I had waited two years by that point. I thought he was going to propose. Instead, he surprised me with a heavy walnut table way too big for our apartment.

“It’ll be great for when we host holidays!”

He said with a smile and sweat dripping down his face from dragging the table through the hallway. I felt my stomach drop with disappointment when he didn’t have a ring. He had expected *me* to propose, just as I had expected him.

“Or for if we have a family of our own,” I said hopefully. I had always wanted to adopt or foster, give my life the greater purpose of parenthood. I knew he did too.

*“When. When we have a family of our own.”*

That same day I threw his lame gift of a candle in the trash and bought him a ring. I would give anything to feel that disappointment again.

The table fits perfectly in the dining room, with the wainscoting on the walls to match. The house is beautiful. Mom decorated it. She used your watercolor portraits I’ve always loved to pick the color pallet. There are even some of them hanging on the walls. The rest of the furniture is still in its plastic wrapping. The kitchen is roomy, and I can see the lake from the windows. The lake is my favorite part.

I’m happy to be closer to the family. Maybe I can come down and visit more often now. I haven’t seen you in a while.

Love,

Stephen



March 22

Dear Laurel,

Physical therapy is terrible and painful. Regular therapy is a waste of time. My regular therapist says he’s “worried about me.” He says I’m depressed. So does Mom, who visits every

day now. She helped me unpack the rest of my things and even printed and framed photos to put all over the house. Some are of the family. Some are of Adam and me.

I haven't been to town much. It's quite small. It has little brick streets and old shop buildings. The library seems very large and historic. The town has a long pier on the rocky coast that looks over the lake. The sunsets are beautiful. You would love it here.

"You need a dog. I read dogs help provide reassurance to people who are grieving," Mom told me when we were sitting on the porch. I looked at her blankly and said nothing. "It's either that or take the meds your psychiatrist prescribed."

I'm not going to take pills to make me happy. Adam made me more than happy. Then God stripped him from the earth and saved the loser who killed him. Maybe I deserve to be depressed. Maybe that's what God wants. Catholics always say everything happens for a reason. Catholics also hate gay people... at least our church did. Maybe I shouldn't have survived. Maybe God wanted me to, but I wish I didn't.

Mom keeps bringing Sadie over to run around on the property and swim in the lake. I must admit I look forward to seeing her little golden face and floppy ears. There is a dog shelter in town. I am going to visit it tomorrow with Mom. We are just going to look, and I probably won't get one. I'm barely feeding myself once a day. Eating feels like a chore. Shoving meals in plastic Tupperware into my mouth, chomping on Mom's prepared foods. How would I remember to feed a dog? Sadie is enough right now.

Sometimes I want to walk into the lake and let the waves take my last breath. It's only a few hundred feet from my back door. It would be easy. It would make it end. Catholics hate suicide, but I'm glad I'm not Catholic anymore.

Don't worry, I won't. Mom would have no one left.

Love,

Stephen



April 3

Dear Laurel,

He's been dead for 76 days.

Also, I caved and got a dog. She is [REDACTED] up, just like my life. She is a black lab, the shelter said she is probably two. There is a large shiny scar down her face and a weird fleshy socket where her right eye used to be. She was abused. When I walked into the shelter, she was the first one they brought out.

"This is Mailbox. She's been with us the longest," the woman at the shelter said. Mailbox cowered behind her, shaking. "She's shy but she'll come around."

"What's with her eye?" I asked with a dead expression. Then we talked for an hour and Mailbox started to warm up to me. I brought her home that night.

She cuddles with me when I watch TV. We play frisbee by the lake sometimes, but she gets distracted by the ducks and chases them. Other times Mom brings Sadie, and they play while we drink coffee and talk about nothing. Mom was right.

Also, I started smoking again. Not cigarettes, as you know. I would never smoke a cigarette. They don't even make you feel numb. I've been smoking a lot recently. Mom pretends not to notice like she doesn't see my ashtray on the back porch. At least I don't smoke in the house. I remember when we used to smoke together. Our teenage selves would sneak out to the backyard after Mom fell asleep. After, you would play music in your room, and we would watercolor together. We would laugh for hours at the smallest things. I haven't laughed in a while.

On the bright side, I started gaining weight. The doctor says that's good, that I need to gain more, but I feel disgusting.

During my senior year of college, I had the flu for three weeks. Adam and I were living together at this point. We had been dating for a year. I was sick during finals and had to drop my classes. Adam decided to do the same and take another semester with me. He resigned from an internship at an engineering firm, one that paid well, just to stay with me for a few weeks. He brought me buckets as I threw up and cleaned up my throw-up when he didn't bring the bucket in time. He stayed close to me too. We watched hours of television together. He didn't even care about getting sick. For those three weeks, it felt like he only cared about me.

After, I had lost fifteen pounds. I practically starved myself because I couldn't keep anything down. Adam bought me high calorie shakes to help me gain weight again. I didn't feel disgusting then.

Maybe I can invite the driver over for dinner sometime. Cry tears of forgiveness for him. Maybe we can walk on the beach. Walk into the water while I talk about Adam. Tell him stories. Maybe there will be another accident. One where Adam isn't the one who dies.

Love,

Stephen



June 16

Dear Laurel,

Mailbox almost died yesterday. We were playing frisbee on the beach. It was a windy day, the sun was setting, and the waves were crashing hard. On one of my throws, my frisbee landed near the water. When Mailbox went to retrieve it, she saw the ducks.

“Mailbox, come here!” I kept yelling, louder and louder. She was either ignoring me or couldn’t hear me over the wind and water. She started swimming out to them, chasing their quacks and flapping wings. The peaks of each wave got whiter as I approached the water.

I don’t know when it happened. Maybe when the ducks finally flew away or maybe before that, but I lost sight of her. Her dark body was lost in the vast abyss of the lake, the dark green camouflaging her coat. I kept calling for her, my screams getting swallowed by each crash. That’s when I started swimming. Seconds felt like minutes. She was just a dog. She could swim. I don’t know why I was so worried... until I saw her.

She was hidden behind a wave that swept by us, her legs paddling and splashing, dampening the sound of her shrill whimpers. Her breaths were loud and full. I was frozen for a

moment, my breaths shortening and eyes watering. I swam out to her; she was out deeper than my feet could touch. When I pulled her back in, putting her small paws on my shoulders, I cried.

I carried her back to the house. She didn't stop shivering for hours. I held her the rest of the night and we fell asleep on the couch together.

Remember our old dog, Brick? He was a fat yellow lab and stomped around because he was so old and frail. Every time I pet him, hair would get stuck to my hands. I would always have to wash them after, or else I would find yellow dog hair in all the worst places. That never stopped us from loving him though. I think you loved him the most. When we were little, you would wrap scarves around him and put him in t-shirts, then top it off with your small plastic tiaras. Sometimes we would pretend he was a horse and attempt to ride him, but he would run away before we could grab his collar.

I feel like I talked about Brick a lot with Adam. For some reason, my memories with Brick are vivid and clear, always happy, like there were never any fleeting moments of bad behavior. I don't remember mourning him. Maybe I was too young to comprehend it. He died when I was seven. With Adam, I feel like my memories aren't memories. They're continuations of the life we had. They keep him alive.

I feel like I've been mourning him wrong, that there is some proper way I should follow. I haven't cried enough. I haven't begged God enough. I haven't succumbed to the desires of self-harm and suicide. I've been walking into the lake of my emotions and *letting* the waves take my last breath. Hoping that if I stay underwater, I won't have to breathe again on the surface. If I act like he never died, maybe I'll hear his voice again. I have his physical being in an urn on my

mantel. I have his memories stored in my mind. I have his appearance lined along the walls of my home. His pieces will never be whole again.

Love,

Stephen



July 12

Dear Laurel,

I started making breakfast again. I cook his favorites. Sunnyside up eggs, wheat toast, sometimes sausage or bacon. I even make coffee. I leave it black, just like he liked it. I still hear him, waking me up every morning with his loud leather dress shoes clunking down the hallway. I feel him in bed next to me, his breathing like a rhythm. Then I remember he snores and he's immediately dead in my mind. I wake up and realize the breaths are from Mailbox. Then the images of the crash come to me, his blood scattered across the windshield, the sound of his skull being crushed. Do you know what that sounds like? It sounds familiar.

My therapist enjoys it when I talk about Mailbox, which is good because I enjoy talking about her. Ever since I saved her that day, I've been thinking about you. I've also been talking about you in therapy.

When you were in the hospital, the aura of death surrounded us. It surrounded you. Your hair shaved and patched from chemo, your weakening arms that could no longer hold a paintbrush, your skin becoming paler. I would sit with you every day and talk. You would ask me about high school, about my crushes, and about what I wanted to major in the following fall. You wanted to know every minute detail of my life, to hold onto it before your own was taken. I slept in that hospital room; it became more familiar than our home.

When we knew it was time, Mom and I were on either side of you. You seemed so lost in your own sickness that I knew I would never hear you again. You were trapped inside the prison your body became. But after all the time we spent together, no matter how severe your cancer became, I still couldn't say goodbye. So maybe I never will.

Do I have to say goodbye? I'm still writing letters, pretending you're going to read them. You could be reading them, through whatever fabric separates you from the living. You could be gone forever, nothing but a spark of life that sizzles out after 21 years. Am I supposed to come to terms with someone so close to me just flat-out leaving? You, Adam, and whoever comes next. Is there some profound discovery about grief I should come to? Should I be thankful and claim everything happens for some twisted reason?

Ever since the dog that finally gave me a sense of stability almost drowned, I can't help but feel that I've been doing something wrong. That I was punished again. That I should hate myself even more than I already do. Your death wasn't my fault. Adam's death wasn't my fault. I know that. I've always known that. My therapist tells me that all the time. It's annoying. I don't want to kill myself. I don't want Mom to stop visiting me. I don't want to feel this gut-wrenching absence in my life anymore. Moving away from it didn't help.

Maybe all these maybes I keep saying should be erased. I should come to conclusions and stop wading in my own sorrow. I don't need to say goodbye. I can still visit you. I can still visit Adam. I can keep you in my life as much as I want. Hanging fragments of our time together on the walls, reliving each laugh we let out together. You and Adam are all the people who ever left me, but I don't need to let go of something worth holding onto.

Love,

Stephen