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And the World Will Keep Spinning

by Jasey Seitz

Grief takes root in my stomach and spreads through my body like ivy. It climbs up my throat and spills out of my mouth, changing from an unwelcome obstacle into the only feeling I know. There are ways to grow from mourning, to come out on the other side a better, stronger person, but sometimes it becomes as much of a part of you as everything else. Sometimes, it seeps through to your personality like ink, staining every facet of your being and refusing to wash out regardless of how many times you try to scrub it away. Polite sympathy and suffocating pity don't get the stain out; they don't even give you the soap to try.

Simon Collins was a close friend of mine. He was a musician, and it lit him up from the inside, keeping his eyes bright and half-finished melodies hanging in the air. Hyperpop was his chosen genre, and often, he would come up to me and request I say a word for him to turn into a beat. I would always comply, spitting out a one-syllable, consonant heavy word that he would then spin into the night's earworm. He brightened every room with the warmest smile and ringing laughter. Almost every Wednesday, we were pressed together on a couch too small for the four people it was attempting to hold.

I vividly remember the worst day of my life. I walked into my study hall, where the serial killer posters lining the walls of the forensic science room had become a welcome sight over time. I closed my eyes and sighed, comfortable in the dim light after spending an hour counting the ceiling tiles of my statistics classroom. I made a beeline for the black two-seater table in the back corner and dropped my bag down, letting out a content sigh as I settled in to wait for Mabel, my best friend. Another friend of mine, Devin, walked up instead, his brown eyes darting around the room and anxiety rolling off of him in waves. His eyes finally met mine, and I could

see the tears gathering along his eyeline. Devin is a bright, bubbly breath of fresh air, not the empty shell that stood in front of me. He was hurting, and Mabel knows him better than I do. Whatever the problem might be, she could help. Devin sat in the seat next to mine, and I noticed Mabel's bag at his feet. Bile rose in my throat. Something was wrong. Something was very, very wrong. "Simon Collins died last night," his voice was flat and it reverberated around the inside of my skull like a bass drum.

The door seemed to open immediately after, and thousands of gallons of a thick, dark liquid poured in, flooding the whole room, making my desk into an island on which I was not a resident, but a crucial part of the foundation. I tried to breathe, to reply to Devin, but I was unable to do anything but sit frozen in my seat, the ink filling my mouth and nose. When I could finally speak, the words came out hoarse, "Oh my God. Oh my *God*." I let the words settle in the air before asking, "Where's Mabel?" There was a point in time where Simon was Mabel's best friend, long before I met either of them, and the thought made my stomach twist.

Devin's reply was one word, quick and simple, "Bathroom." I think I nodded, though I can't be sure, not really. I was preoccupied with the liquid filling my lungs.

Watching Mabel react to the news was almost worse than hearing it. I stood and watched her pace the hallway, her hands alternating between covering her mouth and pulling at her hair. I didn't know what to do. What was there to do? What could I say to someone when every single word feels and sounds wrong? How could I say anything at all when I'm still choking on ink? My eyes burned with the salt from unshed tears, yet I didn't cry. I *couldn't* cry. I tried not to think about it too hard, as I walked to the counselor's office with my numb fingers wrapped around Mabel's wrist. She was still sobbing.

We sat with a guidance counselor neither of us recognized. I shifted under her sad, pitying gaze and attempted to crack my knuckles, but the satisfying *pop* never came. I had cracked them all on the walk over. We learned three of our classmates were in there too, most likely mirroring the two of us: crying in maroon-cushioned chairs too firm to be comfortable, but too soft to be considered uncomfortable. Mabel mumbled their names to me, and an even heavier weight settled on my shoulders. Three other kids were in another room struggling, the same as the two of us. Thinking of my classmates as *kids* struck a nerve. That's all we were at the end of the day. Kids. Kids shouldn't need to try and comprehend the death of a friend. Kids shouldn't *die*.

I dug my nails into the seams of the maroon chair, and in the dim lamplight, I zeroed in on the old milk staining my shoes. I stared at my boots, matte black, creased at the toes and the too-long, fraying laces wrapped twice around my ankles. Milk and cream and cocoa powder covered the sides of my favorite shoes, and the only thing I wanted to do was clean them off. I wanted to scrub away last month's dirt because maybe if I scrubbed hard enough, if I really put in the work to wipe away the residue from Devin's words and Mabel's tears, Simon would walk through the door. I cleaned my shoes the best I could with hand sanitizer and tissues in the dim light. I shoved five dirty tissues into the pocket of my leather jacket. Mabel watched me do it, most likely to avoid the eyes of the guidance counselor still frowning sadly at us from the other side of her desk. The phone rang, the shrill tone cutting through the uncomfortable silence like a knife, and we were told we could leave.

Mabel's house was always warm, even when her heat is out, and I never felt alone, even when I was the first one to arrive. Over time, it's become home. Before I had even crossed Mabel's threshold that day, I could tell that, for the first time, her house would feel cold. For the very first time, Mabel's house would feel empty. We knew we couldn't stay in Forsyth, especially not in her ice-cold, vacant house. Every street and building were stained with

memories of Simon, and almost like we willed it, Mabel's oldest brother, Alex, asked if we would want to stay with him for a long weekend.

Alex's house was a welcome change, but even so, there was no clarity. There was nothing at all. There was just a big, empty feeling sitting heavy in my chest. Even when our friend Charlie stopped by for a night, the gaping hole in my chest refused to close. All four days were spent with Mabel and me living in each other's pockets, the both of us fluctuating between happiness tinged with guilt and the crushing weight of loss, but we knew leaving would be worse, somehow. Leaving would make it real, but we knew we would have to return to reality eventually. I couldn't ignore the texts from my mom forever. We did leave our bubble when it was time, albeit reluctantly, and something thick and sticky and familiar began to settle underneath my skin. For the entire hour we spent in my car, I watched my skin turn black and I knew the stain wasn't coming out in the wash.

Worse than hearing the news for the first time was the visitation. It was cold. It shouldn't have been cold, not with the dozens of people crammed into the small rooms and hallways, but I couldn't stop shivering. Vince Guaraldi played softly throughout the whole building, and I knew I would never be able to watch *Charlie Brown* again. I remember writing a note for the scrapbook, though I don't remember what it said, and shortly after I was swept up into the line leading into the second room. The room with the casket. By far, my most vivid memory was seeing the casket for the first time. It was a soft pink with gold accents and sat at the very front of the room. Gross, heaving sobs wracked my entire body and my knees buckled before I had even entered the room. I was physically unable to cross the threshold, my feet staying rooted to the floor. Stepping forward would make the whole thing real, and I didn't want it to be real. I *don't* want it to be real.

I clutched at the door frame, both pushing myself away and trying to stay upright, and my friends watched, three sets of eyes dripping with an emotion somewhere between understanding, concern, and pity. Charlie ushered me outside, and we sat on the concrete for as long as I needed, my fingers twisted in the fabric of her dress and her arms around my shoulders to keep me anchored down. I stopped crying after what seemed like hours, and with shaky hands and trembling legs, I let her lead me back inside.

Once inside the terrible, awful room, I could see Simon's things set up on a small, circular table, his white electric guitar on a stand next to it. There were a few things on the table, but the item that stood out most was a pair of shoes. Simon's shoes. His discontinued, sage green suede Converse One Star shoes with his SoundCloud name written on the edges so that if he were to sit with the soles of his feet together, the two syllables would mirror each other. I left the building soon after.

Sitting in my car alone after the service, I thought of all the things that would never be the same: my favorite songs, the Italian place in the town square, *Winnie the Pooh*; and I thought of how fitting the rain seemed. It rained the rest of the month— or it seemed to, at the very least. It made sense. Simon died and took the sun with him. That was the only logical explanation. At the time, I thought it would stay cold and wet forever. Now, I know I was right. There is no sun. There is no light. There is no warmth.

Trying to move on makes ugly, twisting guilt settle in my stomach, though I know it's considered the healthy thing to do. I can't move on, not when every milestone of my life was supposed to include Simon. He should still play the old, out-of-tune piano in Mabel's basement and let me sing along. He should still run his fingers through my hair after a rough week. He should still engulf me in a hug before he leaves. The ink seeps into everything I do, tinting everything that I am. It's gotten hard to notice where the grief ends and I begin. I've become

intertwined with it, and not a day goes by where I'm not scrubbing at the dark footprints covering my bedroom floor.