

Grief

It's been three hours since they told me you were dead and when they did, I didn't feel anything, so I went to the library where my mother keeps her self-help books and found one about Grief so I could know what I was supposed to be feeling. And then I knew it was okay because it told me I was supposed to be feeling Denial and it defined it and gave an example. Essentially it means that I'm not letting myself believe the truth of the situation. So it makes sense that I'm not sad. The Book assures me that people handle Grief in different ways, which makes sense too, since I'm sitting in my dad's study, drinking one of his nicer single malts and smoking a cigar in your favorite lingerie. I'm kidding. Well, I'm kidding about the cigar and I'm still wearing all my clothes. For now.

See, I must be in Denial, proper noun kind of Denial, because that's the kind of joke I made when you were alive. I'm talking in past tense, which makes no sense, because you're not dead. See, look at how good I am at Denial. No, no, this can't be happening, this isn't happening! As if telling myself that will mean you weren't in a car accident on the I-9 on the way home to meet me for our last Fall Break.

But I'm not feeling Grief, of course. I'm not feeling anything, not even this scotch. No matter how much I drink, I'm still stone sober. What good is alcohol if Grief is going to deny me the blissful black-out sleep of the truly good and drunk?

When I got here I ran around and turned every light in the house on. My dad's in the study now, I can hear his wheezy breath from twenty-five years of smoking and he's saying my name real softly now. Now he's prying the empty glass from my left hand. He wants to hold me. I'm going to put my head on the desk now and just go to sleep.

Elle, there's been an accident. Elle there's been an accident. Elle there's been. Elle. Accident. Like going to sleep. Just like going to sleep.

I slept for two days, but they woke me up for your wake. What is a wake, really? Besides the worst possible misnomer for those of us in Denial. A wake, a-wake, awake. There's something in the sound of it that's too optimistic, that secret hope under every tongue that the dead will sit up in their casket. Not you. I may be in Denial, but I also know that it was a closed casket wake because all that was left of you was in pieces. I know because I passed the crash site on the way to your house and was rubbernecking like every other driver on the road and I didn't recognize your car and your arm. I thought, *It looks like him*. I thought, *It's the same car*. I looked right at it and I didn't see you. I stared. The world loves a car crash. The world loves a sad story.

Your sister held my hand the entire wake. We didn't say anything to each other. She cried. I wore my sunglasses indoors so people would assume my eyes were puffy and raw from sobbing, but the fact is I forgot to put on mascara. And underwear. But that's probably some part of the normal grieving process. I'm so deep in Denial, I'm denying the fact that I should have worn underwear. I mean, Father Gilbert was there and everything. I did remember to wear black, though. I wore the dress you took me to prom in and it's too short and too fancy and I'm not wearing underwear, but goddamnit you love this dress.

Loved?

Annie held my hand the whole time, and in a completely detached way. I'm starting to realize it's not just because she's your sister. She's my best friend. But at the same time I'm aware of how weird it is we've stayed best friends even though we had all been best friends since we were little, because our parents are best friends, except now I'm the girl fucking her brother, or was, and not only that, her twin. There's something really warped psychological shit there, really, there must be. It's all too Southern Gothic Romance for me, but maybe we were all in Denial long before this. That's more Connecticut.

You would have hated your wake. The entire world turned up, our whole town, people from your and Annie's school, even some professors, and then a bunch of girls from my school and extended

family from your side and mine. These people were clearly not in Denial. They were blubbering and sniffing and making all sorts of terrible noises. I seem to be the only one who's doing this correctly.

Annie clung to me today, as if because your body had touched my body, I could be you for her, and now she won't stop calling the house. I haven't picked up. It might be because she's my best friend and I know how she is, but I'm partially worried I've somehow inherited your freaky twin psychic connection thing. You said it got weaker as we got older and you both developed deep relationships with other people, but that sounded too clinical to me for it to be real. When we were fucking I always kind of worried she would know.

People try to talk to me and I don't say anything because all I can talk about is the weather, which isn't appropriate. They'll bury you in the churchyard tomorrow and it's one of those wet, bright autumns you always loved where the rain makes the colors seem super-saturated, all reds and yellows standing out like paint against the black of the pavement and the still unnaturally green of the grass. So all I really want to talk about is the weather. It's all I can think about. How beautiful the world still is without you in it. Denial.

I've decided to move on to Anger. It's a word I've always liked because to me it sounds like what it is, not in the way an onomatopoeia does, but more subtly. I think Anger and I think barred teeth growling in a vicious snarl. It's like squishy, cuticle, bomb, obtuse. You always disagreed with me about this, saying words can't have a feeling. Well, fuck you. That's why I ended up an English major and you ended up dead. And by that, I mean you were going to go to business school after we graduated. See, even my jokes are spiteful. A perfect example of Anger.

Today was your funeral and there were even more people than at the wake. Our little town church was standing room only. Our families bunched together in the first pew, all on one side, not like it would have been if we had gotten married here like you wanted to, one day. That's when I realized I

must have moved on to Anger without realizing it. Because all these people that are supposed to matter to me are hurting, and I just don't care. I don't want to share my Grief with them.

Anger flared again during the eulogies. Your dad did this really terrible one about how even though as a father he was supposed to be your hero, you were his, and Annie totally overworked the whole twin thing. Neither of them talked about you the way we really knew you or in a way that seemed at all real. I thought about reading to them from the Anger section of the book, which gives an example, a person screaming, *No, no it isn't fair!* Except I would mean the way they were talking about you, the way they were all pretending, and not about your death. All I know is that I was supposed to say something and that I couldn't say anything. I got up there when it was my turn and all that came out was this long, terrible screeching noise somewhere between a wail and a laugh. A sound so high pitched I wasn't sure I could actually hear it, wasn't sure it was real at all.

Everyone patted me on the back too much when I sat down. Annie hugged me and said, "Me too, Elle." My mom leaned over and touched my hair and your parents were beside themselves, even your dad in his power suit. Your mom's tears looked weird on her loose face, like she had taken more than her normal amount of Valium. I wonder what stage that is. I am definitely in the Anger stage, I know it, because you're dead and everyone around me is crying because they think I loved you so much I couldn't even speak. I loved you so much and it's so, so sad.

Fuck. Them. And Fuck you too. It's your fault I have to put up with this bullshit at all.

Our mothers tricked me today. It's four days after they put you in the ground, instead of cremating you like you would have wanted. I have withdrawn in protest. I haven't showered and smell like sweat and alcohol and I'm still wearing my prom dress. But even if I shower I'm just going to have to shower again, so I mean, really, why would I do that? What's the point to it? This makes me feel Anger, appropriately.

They drove me to your house and I didn't want to be there but it had been a week since I had said a single word and I didn't know how to say anything to them. Not *no*, not *fuck off*, not *please*, *please*, not *here*. They led me up the stairs and past your room, the room where you taught me to play video games, where I threw up in the fifth grade and again after freshman homecoming, where we kissed for the first time, where we had sex for the last time. I thought I could smell your cologne and body wash, the particular way they mix together on your skin, and I wanted to scream. I wanted to scream, but I don't remember how.

But we didn't stop there, they dragged me into Annie's room, which was dark and I was all about the Anger because they had tricked me. But they threw me into the chair near her bed and I decided to make the best of it, so I stretched out my legs and even took off my sunglasses for the first time that week because I really couldn't tell if Annie was a-wake or asleep or even dead.

After about ten minutes, Annie's voice that wasn't really Annie's voice croaked, "Elle?"

I didn't say anything, so she peeled back the covers and blinked, trying to see me in the dark. I was as there as I could be. She didn't seem to believe it. She got up and opened the curtains to let the grey light of the storm spill into the room. She was all rumped up which is so terribly un-Annie that there was Anger again, I think.

She just burst out, "Oh, Elle!" and threw herself across my lap and started sobbing and shaking and I put my hand on her hair which wasn't as blonde as it usually was, but dull and greasy. I wasn't sure what else to do. Annie lay there for a couple of minutes before she looked up at me and all her crying suddenly stopped, cut off as if she had been speaking and she goes, "Elle, have you not cried at all?"

I realized I had taken off my sunglasses and she could see how I was (and am) dry-eyed and not even puffy and red like I had already cried myself out. She was looking at me in this way that reminded me so much of you, her eyes the same greenish-glass, that I couldn't look away. It was Annie that

broke, Annie that lifted herself off my lap and turned and reached and pulled something out from under her pillow. It was a little velvet box. Then she was on the ground in front of my feet, in between the chair and the bed and she opened the box and inside was a diamond ring. For half a second I thought *Annie's proposing*, and a beat later, *I didn't know she was a lesbian*. But then she started talking. Her words tumbled out in one, long, breathless stream.

“He asked Mom and Dad for it near the end of the summer so he could propose to you at Thanksgiving in front of the families so you could plan the wedding for spring, just after graduation. He had already booked the church like you two always talked about. It's an heirloom, my great-great-grandmother's, remember? It's family tradition that the first born son gives it to his bride and even though you'll never marry him now, Elle, my parents and me too, we all want you to have it because it should have been yours and it's just not fair.”

This was the moment I must have known Anger the best, because I slapped Annie so hard the box flew out of her hand.

I thought seriously about digging up your body this weekend, which makes me think I may have entered the Bargaining stage of grief. You have been dead for a month and I seem to be flying along here. Clearly, I'll be fine in no time.

I'm not sure exactly what kind of thing I would be Bargaining for. It's not like I'm planning to hold your body hostage or anything. The Bargaining stage makes the least sense to me. The example in the book doesn't even make any sense. The example is saying something like, *I would give my life for so-and-so to still be alive*. How does that even make any sense? As much as I love you, I'm pretty aware that trading my life for yours is 1) impossible and 2) actually pretty fucked up because I would be bringing you back into a world where I was dead and I'm pretty sure you wouldn't enjoy that. I know you being dead hasn't made my life all that spectacular.

My version of Bargaining is that I shower and change my clothes every day and talk to my parents when they talk to me and in exchange they'll decide I've recovered enough to go back to school. I've even seen a shrink a few times per my parents' request; though they seemed pissed I have nothing to say about the sessions. What can you say about sitting in a chair and trying your best to make conversation for an hour three times a week? It's about as stimulating as a colonoscopy in there. Maybe it's needed, but the best you can hope for is feeling vaguely uncomfortable and sleepy.

That's the kind of joke that you would of smiled half sideways at, rolling your eyes. The therapist calls deflecting. I insist to her that I'm actually just very witty, but this just causes her to shake her head and write in her notebook. I'm trying to put a serious face on and talk about my feelings but honestly, this Bargaining makes no sense to me. Because I don't know what she wants me to say.

Her name is Dr. Dixon and she likes it when I call her Melissa, even though that makes me feel like she's in high school and not really a doctor at all. She reminds me of that guy, Frank, who used to come to high school parties even though he had graduated a while ago. In retrospect, he really wasn't all that old. He was probably our age now. My age now. But there was something desperate in him, in all that striving to connect with us, that Melissa has whenever I'm in her office. Though she always wants me to talk and she never seems to really have anything to say. It's kind of wildly unfair and not really helping with that whole connection aspect.

I spent the first couple of sessions telling her about our families and our lives. How our fathers met at an Ivy, how your mother went to the women's college that eventually got absorbed by that Ivy, and how my mother went to my school. How everybody met at some dance or social or game or some other tradition not really in practice anymore and how everyone fell in love and moved to Connecticut a couple of miles away from each other so their pasts were never that far past. And then how our mothers were pregnant together and how you and Annie were born only a month before me and how we all grew up together in the same bathtub. How when we were old enough you and I got together and

were together from then on always. How we kept growing up together and went through CCD together and drank and learned how to roll a joint together. How we graduated high school at the top of our class together and went to our parents' alma maters and visited on weekends and for the few remaining traditional events.

I even tell her about you dying and the ring and slapping Annie because I was running out of material. I regret that, because now all she wants to talk about is Annie and how I should call her. It's just been Annie blah blah Annie blah blah blah for the last two weeks straight. Blah blah blah.

This week she started things out by saying, "Elle, would you consider Annie a sister?" And I had no real way to answer this question besides a literal, "We would have been if her brother and I have gotten married. But, you know, he's dead now." I know she won't like that, so instead I burst out: "I can't stop thinking about digging him up."

No room has ever been so silent.

So I said something like: "I don't understand why no one asked me what he would have wanted. I was the closest person to him, closer than Annie even, his twin for chrissake, and they just buried him. Forget all that Christianity crap, he didn't want this. Now he's trapped here and all we ever wanted was to go somewhere else. We would have had the nice, big wedding for the parents and then disappeared into the world. It's what we wanted. He was so much, he could have done anything he wanted, anywhere he wanted. But now where is he? He's in the ground. They should have cremated him and thrown his ashes to the wind. Not fucking made sure he was stuck here forever. Because I get the whole Christianity thing, but if there's some sort of revelation or whatever, his body is in pieces anyway, I saw it. Besides the fact he was an atheist."

This is the most I've spoken in a month.

"If you dig him up, what would you do?" Her interest had been piqued, even though I have no desire or need to pique anybody.

“Nothing. I'm not going to. I just wish I could. I can't change anything, I just want to.”

When I got home today, Dr. Dixon had already called my parents and they're letting me go back to school to finish my senior year. Without you.

The thing about winter is that there's two kinds of winter. Happy, excited, anticipating Christmas winter and after New Years oh-fuck-it's-cold winter. The latter is pretty charmless, bleak and desolate and empty. That's where we are now. Which is how I know I've moved on to Depression. There's no other way to feel when the world feels like this.

I didn't go home for Christmas. I stayed here. I take walks in the woods, knee deep in snow, and most of the time I think about you and how we used to walk in these same woods, making the same plans over and over again. Get married. Move to Morocco, London, Prague, a new place every week. You picking up jobs and I would have written or painted or maybe taught whenever we went. Now I stand in snow and wretch up everything inside me and cry. The tears are hot on my cheeks and there's no one around to lick them off.

I walk and I think of echolocation and about the tree falling in the forest. There's no one for me to echo off of, no one around to hear me fall. I do not exist. I am no longer real. How am I supposed to prove my existence except through another person?

I'm reading the Depression section of the book again. It's telling me I'm feeling despondent, anxious, empty, hopeless, irritable, restless, and even guilty. Guilty. That's a funny one. Cute even. I have all the other symptoms: insomnia, loss of interest in activities I once enjoyed, like sex, loss of appetite, aches and pains, problems concentrating, but guilt? Why should I feel guilty? I'm not the one that purposely drove my car into oncoming traffic. Not that I know it's how it happened, I never read the reports, I don't really know anything about how any of it happened. But I could imagine.

This is what I've kind of pieced together from what I know about everything. This is how I see it: You were rushing, rushing, rushing home because I missed you. I imagine you feeling that anticipatory excitement the same as I did, but then you didn't. Because then you saw our whole life before us as one long and endless string of the same, the same as it had always been and no way out. No Morocco or London or Prague, just Connecticut. Getting caught, getting locked in, not being able to do everything we wanted. It would just turn into children and white picket fences and everything all over again, just like our parents had done it. No way out because you loved me and could never leave me or disappoint me or our families. So you pulled the steering wheel, hard. Because there was no other way out.

Does that sound familiar?

I ran into Annie today. Your sister, your twin. She was here, in my little college town, and I was walking and I saw her and she was smiling. Apparently she's going through the stages even more quickly than I am, skipped right over Depression and got out of the cycle entirely. There's no one on around and then Annie walks on in, looking the same as ever, except maybe thinner. Sometimes my life doesn't feel real.

Her face cringed when she saw me, walking toward her on Main, very distinctly cringed in a way I couldn't distinguish; something between horror and pity and disgust. A halfway house of feelings I can't even begin to conceptualize right now. Her friends recognized me too, their faces looked more shocked than anything, but really, what the hell? They all know I go to school here. They smiled and greeted me politely after their initial responses and the friends kind of faded away until it was just Annie and me, standing in the snow near that goddamn giant Christmas tree they still haven't taken down even though it's half way through January and most of the lights are burnt out.

Annie hugged me but she felt like you and smelled like you in a way that made me want to

vomit, and I released her quickly. She looked hurt but I didn't know how to fix it. How do you fix this? But she was always the kind of person Emily Post would admire and she tried to, anyway.

“Elle, how have you been?” her brow furrowed. “Are you okay? You don't look...like yourself. You...well, I haven't talked to you in forever. I didn't even know you were at school right now.”

“Where else would I be?” My voice cracked. It had been so long since I had spoken to anyone.

“Oh, my parents figured you would have gone home by now, since you weren't home for Christmas. We missed you, Elle. I still have, well, we're keeping the ring for you. Whenever you're ready.” Her smile wasn't patronizing even though I was feeling patronized. She looked so normal. It made me want to hug her, break down in tears on the street so she could lick them off for me because she was the closest I had to you, to anyone. I didn't say anything. I was silent, staring at her and the way Annie and you had the same nose and eyebrows and chin and how looking at her was like looking at you in drag, so beautiful.

“Elle,” she said again, “Elle, are you okay, seriously? You don't look okay and you still haven't been home and I miss you and I mean...”

And she just looked so much like you, and so alive and real and now that I kissed her. On the lips. And she responded, kissing me back, her tongue sliding into my mouth for a second. She broke it off quickly and I looked for her reaction and there it was—she was flustered, upset. She felt something. Annie walked away from me without a word.

And I kept watching after her as she walked away, thinking: I'm going to be like that someday. Fixed, whole again. Done with all this Grief. How perfect. How lovely. How not.

Maybe I'm supposed to feel guilty in all this Depression, and I can think of plenty of things to feel guilty about, but instead I just feel nothing at all. I must be doing this right.

You are dead. See. Acceptance. It must have come in with the spring flowers and now

everything is warm and sticky all around me including the fact you are dead. It is so simple and true it rings outward over the pond. I am not sad. I exult. Sometimes I wonder if I was supposed to feel sad at some point in all of this, this nine months of grief, ending in a beautiful firestar firework firebird celebration, right here, right now. I am in the same woods I cried and wretched in. But now I am free. I release you the way you released me.

I am walking, right now, to our favorite spot on the river. We called it Ophelia's Bend and sang about his green grass bed and being tumbled into bed. It is just after sunrise and no one is here, on the path. I don't need to look up at all, I can feel the world around me, swallowing itself. But I am here, all of a sudden, strange as that, strange as you not being here, but I am here.

Today is graduation day and because people don't actually know what the word irony means, I could call this ironic. Because you are dead and not here to correct me I can be colloquial instead of proper.

Right here, right now, you are dead, but I can't do this alone, so I imagine, I dream of you and we are walking. We are always walking, but in the dream it is different somehow. The way we walk is not fumbling and separate. I do not bump into you, weave in and out. My feet are as sure as yours. Our feet move in a rhythmic falling like the light is shining through the trees is not from the sky, but from us, singing outward. We are walking on our trail near the river.

It is spring and I can smell and taste the world as I breathe in honey and freesia and grass and clean air so new after months of nothing but the smell of snow empty in my cold head. I am melting and I can feel you melting beside me and I know you taste it too, all mixed up in the spring you can taste me on the air the way I can taste you. You, all heavy, dark sugar of black cherries and something almost like leather, deep and earthy, but also the salt of the ocean even so far from the coast, the baked heat of the beach rising in invisible spirals from your skin. We reach our bend in the river where the trail goes on but also lets you choose to keep walking or descend into the river, shimmering clear and

copper in the new light that is waking up and stretching itself all over these woods like the belly of a snake, cool and thick skin even in the heat, like pennies, like my hair in sunlight by summer's end. I don't know what I look like, but when we look at each other, I can see myself reflected in your eyes and I catch myself glancing out beautiful, but only in your eyes. Only in your eyes can I catch that.

And now I am dreaming of you and you look at me. Staring at you is like staring at the sun, it blinding. You are golden. You are the ocean rising up to swallow me, so far from the coast. You are the sun and the light and the heat. Your eyes flash the sky back and forth back and forth to me and I am lost. I am a little doll in your eyes, staring out with something I couldn't see before—with sadness. Both of us are so profoundly sad, but it's all so beautiful and I can feel the light in my hair and see your muscles rippling under your brown skin and summer has come and gone and come again so fast as you reach for my face, like it's a flower, and you hold it and look at me for the smallest second before you kiss me.

This is Acceptance.

Am I doing it right, Caleb?