

I Heard It Through The Grapevine

By third period the grapevine had caught flame; like wildfire word was spreading that someone who was not there would not be returning. Failing to grasp the true gravity of the situation, students began to wrack their brains for students missing that day, their curiosity fueling their desire to get 'the inside scoop'. Sitting in English, I overheard the girls in front of me saying whoever it was had passed away the night before – one of them had seen someone crying during a passing period.

Hearing this, I myself began to think back through the day. A chill running down my spine, I remembered joking to a friend about Taylor faking sick to get out of our geometry test earlier that morning. Suddenly Taylor's empty desk alongside mine seemed much more sinister than it had this earlier when I had been imagining lounging around on the couch instead of being in school. My heart following the initial chill and sinking down into my now heavy feet, I blindly stumbled from class without a word, hurrying to the bathroom.

Before the door of the stall could slam, my now trembling fingers pulled my phone from my pocket. It was the only way to know for sure, the only way to stop myself from collapsing into absolute shock. This wasn't happening. This couldn't be happening. Maybe she *was* just sick. With every unanswered ring, the knot in my stomach grew tighter, and tighter; but when I heard her cheerful voice tell me she wasn't there *at the moment*, I knew. Watching the tears mix with vomit as I flushed the toilet, I felt my life literally begin to spiral out of control.

In the weeks, months, and years following, I felt myself begin to fade like an old pair of jeans, slowly deteriorating into a zombified state of perpetual indifference. In school some teachers were compassionate enough to pity the shocked and confused friends of the girl and thus made what accommodations they could. Some teachers on the other hand, 'out of fairness to the larger student body', most regretfully had to refuse excusing students on account of maintaining the academic agenda. Unconcerned with my educational fate in either regard, I grew increasingly listless by the day.

By night, unaffected by the prying curiosities of my peers, I grew all the more stoic and

uncaring, even towards those who only hoped to help me, like my loving family. One night when my father came downstairs for an ice cream binge during the late-night sports (straight from the carton, much to my mother's shock and dismay), he found me sitting at the kitchen table with every drop of alcohol and every last speck of prescription medication in our home arranged before me. Obviously he was horrified, but I was angry. I was bitter. I was confused. I didn't know where else to go, so I had walked myself right up to the ledge. Maybe with death in such close proximity I hoped to make sense of everything that was happening to me.

By this point I had already been 'politely' asked to not return to my Catholic youth group that met on Thursday nights. Several weeks following Taylor's self-imposed asphyxiation, during a discussion of Christianity's golden boy, Jesus, and his murderous crucifixion, I had become incredibly agitated with the reasoning given for his death. My instructor, with his imitation-Wolverine sideburns and hair, had calmly explained to me that Jesus being betrayed and put to death was to provide a good example for those who follow him; however, after hearing this, with Taylor's face lurking behind my eyelids, I couldn't contain my frustration.

Was that really all death meant? My friend had been harassed and belittled to the point she believed her life really had no value. What lesson was there to be had in that? Where was the justice? When I demanded just that, my instructor once again calmly told me that I was missing the point, to which I returned a point of my own, extending from the middle of my right hand.

My rage pushed me from faith, from love, from reason, and into the unrelenting grasp of depression. For days I slept, and when I wasn't sleeping, to escape reality, I withdrew into myself, refusing to move forward and instead choosing to wallow in my own misery. At the dinner table my appetite for conversation quickly tapered. Though my parents still made amiable attempts at asking the timeless question, 'What did you do at school today son?', my sullen stares soon extinguished their optimism. Desperate to not call it a lost cause, my mother gave me a notebook to write in since I only talked under extreme necessity and seemed unable to communicate verbally with her.

When my mother asked several days later if I'd written her anything, I responded by handing her a skeleton of the diary she'd given me; only the front and back covers and a few tattered pages clung now to the disfigured coils that once bound them. In truth I actually had tried picking up the pen a few times, but once I did, the stream of consciousness always turned into a great flood. After all the anger and tears it evoked, I didn't feel better, I just felt washed out. I couldn't make sense of what I was feeling and so my writing didn't make a lick of sense either. In short, my writing just reflected the train wreck I saw in myself.

After the realization that they wouldn't be able to get through to me themselves, my father, a legal drug dealer – or pharmacist as they prefer – arranged for me a prescription for one of the various anti-depressants our culture advertises to artificially improve the mental state of those considered 'abnormally' unhappy. While my drug-induced contentment was – for a time at least – a pleasant change, reaching into the medicine cabinet multiple times daily made the synthetic source of my happiness painfully clear to me. At no point did the medicine correct what was wrong, it only made it easier for me to ignore; making those brief moments of self-reflection all the more depressing. To feel as though being sad was socially unacceptable only made the feeling all the more repulsive.

When my mother and father realized that helping me was something out of their expertise and ability, even with the help of drugs, I was urged finally to speak with a therapist.

Dr. Janet Tomski was a pleasant-faced woman who was quick to smile, friendly enough to give small reminiscence of a grandmother. Despite this, when I took my first step into her office I maintained my stonefaced charade. I continued to distance myself from the 'Doctor' – this woman I thought they only sent crazy people to talk to – an air of suspicion all but oozing from every pore of my body as I sunk into the farthest corner of the couch in her office. Before even sitting down in the waiting room I had already written therapy off as another waste of my time as I began to prepare for another predictably long-winded speech about teen suicide. What I did not expect, however, was for myself to be doing all the talking, and consequently coming out of my long-hardened shell with every

sentence. Even after I told Tomski my story – not excluding my own suicidal contemplation – she still didn't launch into a speech or spiel of her thoughts. What she instead suggested is something that probably changed my life.

As opposed to letting my thoughts and emotions stew within myself, fermenting and leaving me bitter, Dr. Tomski suggested coming to terms with my past by getting them out of my head, onto paper. While at first I was hesitant – images of the remains of my mother's journal flashing through my head – what made this writing different was that over the weeks I met with my therapist, we workshopped my emotional essays. Whereas before my writing had been merely a replication of my current emotional state, this writing, rewriting, and revising became rearticulation of my thoughts and emotions. Through Dr. Tomski I worked to tease out meaning from my incredibly disorganized writing. While at first it mostly served as means of rambling release, it slowly began to evolve. Instead of simply expelling the thought and facts that had been tied to me like an anchor, dragging me deeper into the depths of depression, I began to take the events of my life that had affected me most and make sense of them in the greater world.

No matter how hard I cried, no matter how many people I claimed to hate or blame because of it, nothing could change the fact that Taylor Leaming put a bag over her head and held it there till her beautiful eyes closed one last time. Nothing could bring her back, and as long as I tried to resist that, I'd be no better off than she. What Dr. Tomski helped me to see was just that. Death is as much a natural part of the world around us as life, and like much of the natural world, it is perfect and unchangeable. To dwell on it is analogous to dwelling over my inability to flap my arms and fly. As long as I have my loving family and friends, the least I can do with my own precious life is live it fully, with Taylor's memory treasured and preserved in place close to my heart.