

Dialects of Grief

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I want you to know that I love you all very very much...

It was this text from Catherine that spurred my friends and me into action that night. Soon, Alex was on the phone with the Vanderbilt University police, Munachi spoke quickly with the Nashville Police Department, and I spoke with our other friends, Andrew, Elena and Halee, who frantically searched Catherine's dorm room across campus for clues about her whereabouts.

Time sped up, though I felt as if we were under water and racing towards something we weren't fast enough to reach. We passed phones around like platters at a family gathering. No answer. Unlocked door. Empty room. I watched and listened as my friends' lips made attempts at rushed, comforting sentences that only added to the uncertainty and chaos.

And then the silence settled. Alex, Munachi, and I waited. On the other side of campus, Halee, Andrew and Elena waited.

Almost an hour passed before I got a text to come meet the others at our campus' residential education office. Relief washed over me with the prospect of news. As I walked, I counted in my head all the times I had passed Catherine in the last year without stopping to catch up. I silently vowed to make a better effort to check in on her more, something I would tell her as soon as I saw her.

My pulse quickened as we passed several police officers stationed outside the office's entrance. Then I burst into the conference-style room. Halee, Andrew and Elena sat close enough together at a conference table that they appeared to be devising some secret plan. Other adults I didn't recognize hovered in the background. I didn't understand why they were there.

Where was Catherine? Had she hurt herself? Which hospital had they taken her to? How bad were the injuries? Was she awake? Could we speak to her?

Elena stood first, not in greeting, but as though she possessed an omen. "Oh, Taylor." Her words dissipated into the air.

As she approached me with open arms, I staggered backwards. But then I deflated and found I couldn't escape. Over Elena's shoulder, a red-eyed Andrew stared at his hands, and Halee hunched over in silent tears. Munachi closed herself into an office.

I eased myself onto a windowsill, my back pressed against the cool glass. Alex held one of my hands and rested her head on my shoulder. Rachel held my other hand and desperately tried to catch my eye. In front of us, Halee and Elena leaned into Andrew. I stared ahead.

The police continued to linger outside the office, causing a scene in what was already the most highly trafficked dorm on a Saturday night. Outside, the world went on. Greek parties raged across the street, and people walked past in cropped shorts and Hawaiian shirts.

What had started as a ripple became a tidal wave as the news flooded campus. We were at the center of that wave, and for the duration of that night, we huddled close and watched as it radiated out from us.

The first seismic wave had hit us unexpectedly and from all directions. We'd had no brace before our impact, but now I felt as though we became the brace for everyone else as the news began to trickle outward from us. Then we lost all control as more people found out and started to gather at Branscomb. Every time the door creaked, I prepared myself to witness yet another person buckle under the news. The sounds were hollow and tormented, and, from my vantage point, I forced myself to watch and listen to each person.

Before I knew it, I was caught in the crossfire of grief—random and misdirected. Casualties lay haphazardly around the room like empty cartridges. Grief counselors cornered us, offering full bottles of water but empty condolences. Crying in friends' arms, throwing books against a wall, screaming behind closed doors, pacing in circles, staring into space.

As the night wore on, I found the air only became harder to breathe. I shared that space with at least a hundred other people in the over-sized conference room that provided as much comfort as a hospital room. My lungs labored under the imagined gaze of everyone in the space, because the little voices in the deep crevices of my mind were creeping forth again.

Look at what you've done, they taunted. Others' crying and my own venomous subconscious became an incessant soundtrack that, even now, can find its way back into my memory.

Two years before sirens embedded into the melodies of that night, I was a new freshmen on Vanderbilt University's campus in the fall of 2015. I tell people all the time that the fact that I ended up at Vanderbilt felt like an unforeseen fluke.

First of all, I vowed that I would go north for college. I'd lived in Ohio for the majority of my life, but having been born in Massachusetts and partially raised in Connecticut, the northeast had always beckoned me like a promised land.

Secondly, I don't remember applying. I wish I were exaggerating, but I truly don't remember writing or submitting any essays, creating a student portal account, or even ensuring that Vanderbilt was on my Common App list.

And, lastly, after I'd received my acceptance letter, my dad was the one who pushed me to visit the campus. At that point I had resigned myself to going to the Ohio State University, since it was my best financial option. My dad practically forced me to take a last-minute trip to Nashville, but once Vanderbilt's campus unfolded around me, I knew I wanted a part of it to be mine.

Unsurprising feelings of excitement and dread marked my move-in experience. I quickly dove into my studies to stave off the homesickness I felt during the first few weeks of freshmen year. As a result, I spent countless hours in the Common Room of the floor of my dorm, Hank Ingram House.

Hank 3's Common Room was an interesting space, in that it quickly fell to the ownership of a handful of people: Alex, an aspiring biological anthropologist who probably drinks more tea than the entire United Kingdom; Elena, a violin prodigy whose punctuality would distress a drill sergeant; Halee, a history buff who can be brought to tears by Harry-Draco fan-fics; Munachi, a lemonade connoisseur with a painstaking commitment to playing devil's advocate; Andrew, a small-town activist and future human rights lawyer who loves musicals; Catherine, a football-loving, country-music-hating overachiever and Nashville native; and me.

From the Common Room, homework devolved into goofing off and making brunch plans, or graphing our productivity against number of Brookies we'd consumed. The Common Room was a place where laughs echoed through the ventilation, earning shouts from the upper floors to "shut up." Rumors of the fun we'd have every night spread through the freshmen corner of campus, and before long, Hank 3, what we called our floor, became known as the place to have many laughs and minimal productivity.

In retrospect, I find it impossible to point to a single moment that cemented our friendship. I can't even remember when or how I met most of them. The endless hours spent together in the Common Room have blurred into a constellation of memories that define any friendship.

I do, however, remember the moment I realized I liked Catherine. She had intimidated me from the start. Standing at least two heads taller than me and possessing the warm disposition of a Golden Retriever puppy, she was so likeable I knew I couldn't compete with her. I remember warily watching her on move-in day. Parents, siblings, and RAs dashed around trying to get everyone settled. Suitcases, hampers, desk lamps, bedding, and futons paraded down the halls in the arms of nervous freshmen girls and their families.

But like a lone traffic cone in the middle of an intersection, Catherine stood in the middle of the hall, presiding over the crisscrossing paths of families and volunteer movers. She offered to help carry belongings, cleared people from the hallway as carts rolled through, and greeted everyone who passed her way. Who the hell is *this* girl? I'd thought. Rumors of her various distinctions had also made their way back to me. A member of a gifted high school program at Vanderbilt. Class valedictorian. Cornelius Vanderbilt Scholar. She was an image of perfection with the accolades to prove it.

At first, I tried to keep my distance, but then I found myself staring up at an Epsilon-Delta Theorem proof sprawled across a white board for my Calculus exam the next night. Catherine stood to my left staring at the same proof.

“Do you have any idea how to do this?” I asked.

“I did this morning when Rafter explained it.” She turned to me, her crooked grin distorting her face. Her front teeth, one slightly protruding, lodged against her lower lip. She swept a dangling strand of hair behind her ear and shrugged her shoulders, her signature move.

“The only thing I’m going to get right on this exam tomorrow is my name, and even that might be questionable,” I said, diagnosing our predicament as callously as an experienced doctor would detect a broken bone.

Catherine let out a laugh I hadn’t expected, and my flinch made her laugh harder. Her laugh sounded like a scratched record with skips in the track, and even now I can hear it sometimes. I glanced sideways at her. The smile was just as genuine. The preconceived notions I’d harbored about her, solely based on hearsay, dissipated in between those brief moments. As we scribbled formulas across the whiteboard, we started sharing more about our lives before Vanderbilt. I no longer cared if our formulas were correct. Our shared laughs made the looming exam seem less threatening, because at least we both could call yet another person a friend.

As I stood in Catherine’s room a week after her death, I thought about how narratives of suicide had seized the topic of conversation during the summer of 2017. It started with the new Broadway-hit musical, *Dear Evan Hansen*, and climaxed with the release of the Netflix show, *13 Reasons Why*. I finally gave the show a chance, but I hated it from the start. In the final episode, the show’s producers didn’t shy away from the main character’s suicide, and like the two rapes before it, the show forced its audience to watch the horrors of the reality it portrayed.

The months since Catherine’s death have changed how I see *13 Reason Why*. The unapologetically realistic portrayal of suicide unearthed me. Thinking about it continues to do so. Still, if the show made me feel and see everything I didn’t want to feel and see, wasn’t that exactly the point?

I don’t want to talk about suicide. I find no joy in it. The very subject cripples my words. Even now my mouth stumbles over *Catherine*, and *that night, when it happened*, and all the other ways I’ve come to talk about the night we lost her. I thought about this as I looked around her room—at her rumpled bed and messy desk. I ran a finger across her color-coded, organized whiteboard calendar for the upcoming month. In my mind, darkness took its grip on September 30th, though nothing on the clean, white block suggested it would be unlike any other day.

Unlike the Netflix show, Catherine hadn’t left tapes behind for us. Though, I sometimes wonder if she had, would she have dedicated one of the tapes to me, and gone through all the ways in which I failed her as a friend?

Instead, my friends and I had to grasp for reasons, since investigators sealed away the grim details in police reports, and her father held the memorial services states away in Oklahoma, where he lived with his second wife and second family. What we did get were plans for her future and the end of her life resting on her desk in maddening proximity: a list of graduate school programs, a list of RA programming ideas for residents, a list of who she wanted to have her belongings, a list of details for her funeral arrangements, a list of the people she loved.

Catherine had always loved making lists, a habit that comforted her during the spring of our sophomore year in the wake of her mother's unexpected death. At 9:43 a.m. while I was at work, Catherine had received a call from her stepdad who lived in Nashville. Her mom had been in a car crash on I-65 on her way to work. She didn't make it, he had told her—the same words I would text to my roommates a year and a half later.

Catherine told me she remembered shaking. First her hands, then her knees. Even though I knew their relationship was fraught with tension, and I had grown used to studying while she and her mom debated things Catherine's stepfather had done, she told me none of it mattered anymore. Her last conversation with her mom, she told me later, hadn't been particularly heart-warming. So, on the day her mother died, Catherine's tears poured out while the texts and calls poured in. As the day wore on, more people began reaching out, inundating her with texts, calls, Facebook messages, and emails that would have overwhelmed even a celebrity.

While Catherine's world was falling apart in Hank 3, I was working as a TA across campus. Throughout that day I'd been feeling nauseated from a stomach bug, I'd willed myself not to get sick, hoping that flooding my body with water would help the feeling pass. It didn't.

When time came for me to clock out, my stomach lurched with excitement rather than a wave of sickness. I entered Hank 3 from the end of the hallway that would allow me slip into my room without passing the Common Room and thereby avoid calling attention to myself and having to greet everyone. I planned to swallow some Pepto Bismol, crawl into bed, and worry about my neglected homework in the morning. As I was turning the key in my door, Elena spotted me down the hall. She rushed over and in a low, but hurried voice, said, "Catherine's mom died in a car accident today. I think she'd like to see you."

In a post on the one-year anniversary of her mom's death, Catherine wrote a detailed account of the day. The inclusion of my name caught my attention, but what she wrote caught me off guard. *Taylor got back after work and I was beyond happy to see her. I had wanted to see her all day.*

Before I could compose my face after Elena's news, Catherine rounded the corner. She bounded over and caught me in one of her famous bear hugs. An onlooker might have guessed I'd lost my mother given the way she was holding me.

I whispered, "I'm so sorry" so many times that the words started coming out in the wrong order. My friends and hall mates spent the remainder of the evening sitting in the Common Room, and providing what we could with our company. Some of Catherine's high school teachers came by

too, and their adoration of her was evident in their faces, gestures, and offers to let her stay with them for the night. She refused though. Hank 3 was her home now, she said, and we were her family. When the clock crept towards 10 p.m., I rose from the campfire circle we'd created in the Common Room.

I tried to exit as inconspicuously as possible. "I'm feeling really sick, so I'm going to turn in," I whispered to Alex and Elena. But when I stood, my body convulsed, and I felt my face drain of color. A cold sweat erupted across my skin. Catherine looked at me, and immediately, I knew that she realized something was wrong.

Whenever people tried to describe her, they always seemed to struggle, as I do, to capture her unfathomable kindness. She possessed a genuine selflessness that I'd not encountered before, and that I am unlikely to find again. I imagine relief flooded her when she realized she could redirect all the attention surrounding her towards someone else who needed help: me. I didn't leave fast enough, and she swooped to my side.

"Catherine, I'm fine," I protested uselessly. My nausea had grown worse over the course of the evening, but I'd choked it down. How ridiculous, I thought, that my mere stomach bug should cast a shadow over the tragedy she'd suffered. "Please, just spend time with everyone who is here for you. I'll just go to bed. It'll pass."

But the pain twisted my insides, and my throat kept gulping in anticipation of getting sick. Catherine, who missed nothing, clung to me like a vine to a tree. With tears in my eyes I begged her to leave me, and to be with people who came to see her. She wouldn't listen to my protests, and didn't leave me that night.

A few days later, Catherine and I sat in my room. She'd just dropped General Chemistry from her schedule and taken a break from classes for the last couple days. I sat at my desk, my freshmen roommate, Elizabeth, sat at hers, and Catherine nestled into my black armchair. We talked for hours in the confines of my room. Normally, Elizabeth could string sentences together at the speed of light and with the complexity of a doctoral thesis, but that time she was unable to say anything without collapsing into a stream of "Oh my God, Oh my God."

Catherine didn't find being in the spotlight agreeable, a trait she apparently shared with her mother. She told me as much, and she then grew silent. A grave expression clouded her face.

"Catherine." She looked at me. Her grey-blue eyes shimmered in the harsh, fluorescent light. I leaned towards her so our faces were level. "I may not have ever had the chance to meet your mom, but I know I would have loved her, because she raised you. That's all I need to know about her." In that rare moment, she smiled back at me without dropping her gaze or diverting the conversation.

When Catherine returned to her room an hour or so later, I caught Elizabeth gazing at me; she seemed to still be groping for words. I prodded her on with my expression.

“How did you know what to say?”

I peered at Elizabeth, understanding something beneath her words. Had I somehow implied that I would drop everything to sit with her for hours whenever she needed it?

I woke up to a text from Catherine early Sunday morning, five days after the car accident. Only fragments have stayed with me. *Will you come with me to see my mom...they said she looked peaceful...smile on her face...need someone there with me.* Red flags blurred my vision, as I envisioned myself being suffocated like a tree by the vines of her grief. My thumbs trembled as they hovered over my phone's keyboard. Hadn't I told her that I'd be there for her, no matter what, only hours before? Yet my hands quivered and my heart pounded against my ribs as I tried to figure out how to say no—how to break my promise.

In the weeks that followed, Catherine resorted to taking walks across campus at 4 am, first spending hours in her room, and then standing in the center of our hallway where she had a vantage point on each entrance and the doors to individual rooms so she could track everyone as they came and went. With her mom gone, she assumed the role, even more vehemently, of floor mom, and tried to manage everything even more than before to get her mind off her own grief.

Part of me resented the feeling of being under constant surveillance. Part of me knew she had to assert control over something in her life. Still, the pacing and the unsettled energy that emanated from her when she tried to do homework with us gnawed at me. I'd cringe whenever someone mentioned their mom around her, and I had to force myself to breathe normally whenever Catherine made a callous joke about death.

I found myself choosing between staying on top of my own work and being a supportive friend. Exams, papers, and other deadlines hadn't slowed in the wake of her mom's death, and, would come to find out that, after Catherine's own death, our own deadlines wouldn't relent to tragedy either. The demands of school deferred to nothing. Something I found comfort in, where others found misery.

“I feel like I'm a burden to everyone,” Catherine told me in my room one day. As midterms were fast approaching, the Common Room grew more crowded each day with people searching for a study environment.

“You aren't a burden,” I told her quietly, as one would speak to a cornered, injured animal. “But,” My tongue halted as she met my gaze.

“You do have to understand that people want to be there for you, but they also have to focus on their exams and other assignments.” I think my words sounded as bad as they had felt to me when I said them. I hadn't been able to convey the truth in a gentler way, but she didn't shrink away from it.

“I know. I know people are busy, and I don’t want to distract them.” She rose from her chair and left before I could rephrase what I’d said.

After that exchange, she started spending less time in the Common Room. When I did see her, I’d ask her to join us, but then she’d toss me a ghost-like smile before disappearing into her room for the night.

Our estrangement took on a new shade as we entered our sophomore year. Alex, Munachi, Rachel and I moved to an apartment at one corner of campus, and Halee, Elena, Andrew and Catherine moved to the opposite corner. Time spent together as a larger group became rare, as each subgroup settled into its own routine. Since my roommates and I lived a half a mile from main campus, we often declined offers to meet up with the others for dinner or various campus events, which sowed tension in our friendship that hadn’t existed in our freshmen year. We kept drifting farther apart, until our tethers to Catherine wrenched us back together, making all tension of past year meaningless.

On the day Catherine died, September 30th, Halee was in her room doing homework, Andrew was hanging out with some friends off campus, Elena was seeing an on-campus play, Alex and Munachi were grabbing dinner together, I was going out to eat with my family, and Catherine was alone.

The “what if” questions have become my obsession—a compulsion that is constantly looking backwards. What if I had offered to share my family for the evening? What if Elena had texted Catherine about their Fall Break trip in two weeks? What if Halee had invited Catherine to do homework with her? What if Andrew had spent the evening with Catherine as was typical for them? What if I had suggested catching up over coffee every week, the way we did on the day I took the picture of her cradling a black pug in her arms, her face glowing mid-laugh—the photo used across campus to promote various celebrations of her life? Every time I see that photo, I can almost hear her laugh and echoes of our conversation about her post-graduation plans. What if? What if? What if? Those questions have not stopped, and I’m afraid they never will.

Over 400 people attended the candlelight vigil on Wyatt Lawn two days after Catherine died. We only know the number because we’d purchased that many candles. We thought we’d over-estimated the possible interest at the time, and then realized how wrong we were when we ran out within ten minutes. Students, professors, high school teachers, administrators, Deans, Faculty Heads of House, RAs, freshmen, sophomore, juniors, and seniors all gathered under a clear sky dotted with stars. A semi-circle had formed around my friends and me as we held one another. The silence was beautiful. The candles cast warm shadows across the faces, many of them tear-stained. I felt love radiating in all directions as people I’d never seen before touched me and my friends’ arms, or wrapped us in hugs as we passed.

I hadn’t been able to cry since we’d learned about Catherine’s death. Even while the grief counselors held us prisoner in the residential office that night, and my friends melted into tears around me, I had remained stoic. I’ve never been able to cry easily, a well-known fact among my

friends. My reactions are steady and tempered, almost existing above the daily deluge of disappointments or exhilarations.

It wasn't until the night of the vigil, when I saw Andrew bathed in the garish light coming from Wyatt and the creamy light coming from the candles, that I couldn't stop myself from crying. Seeing Andrew, Catherine's declared best friend, standing alone was the equivalent, for me, of seeing someone without his lifelong partner at his side. My friends, wholly unprepared, went through the motions of hugging, offering tissues, whispering comforting words, but I had withdrawn into an unreachable place. With Wyatt looming over me, Peabody Esplanade spilling before me, and the people who defined my time at Vanderbilt surrounding me, my world finally seemed to topple, too.

I didn't want to be a part of this tragedy, but it was mine anyway. My friends and I didn't know how to cope, but somehow each other's constant presence, whether real or felt, was enough. Several months had passed since we had spent as much time together as we did as freshmen. I wondered all the time: why must loss illuminate love? Why couldn't love illuminate love?

That night, I cried for the first time, and after that, I only allowed the tears to come in the shower, where the water that ran down my face could disguise them. I felt I hadn't earned the ability to let them fall anywhere else. Besides, classes were marching on and assignments were piling up.

A few weeks later I sat in the conference room at my old TA job. I had stopped working at the program after my fourth semester at Vanderbilt, but I had stayed in contact with my old bosses, Amanda, Angela, and Greta. After Catherine's mom died, I had become the liaison between them and Catherine, which meant I had to report on her well-being and relay information about how she was coping to assuage their concerns for her.

As I sat across from them, readying myself to detail the events of the night of her suicide, I couldn't help but think of all those past, glancing conversations, all the missteps and the euphemisms I'd constructed. The truth had been harder to bear, harder to describe. The reassuring stories had so easily slid off my tongue, but now they weighed on me, condensing the air. I struggled to breathe.

Amanda, her soft eyes the size of a bush baby's and her maternal tendencies present even in the way she ruminated, asked me a simple question.

"Were you surprised?" Her voice was calm. I didn't hear judgment lurking in her words.

She wasn't cornering me. I had cornered myself. I owed them an honest answer. I owed myself an honest answer. I had tried to cover up the fractures in Catherine's facade, explaining them away with trite stories of how she kept busy and how she feigned happiness. I'd assumed the therapy sessions and the self-medication on the weekends were working—that the old wounds were healing.

I wanted to believe that she was going to be okay, that she had the power to be okay. I wanted to believe that her mental health was improving, even though I detected she was still broken under the image of perfection she tried to exude. Whenever someone asked how she was doing, she'd respond, "I'm fine." The phrase became Catherine's signature response, something I accepted as truth because I knew I could no longer handle what hid under the surface in the depths of her mind. I had known about that insidious sadness that never lost its grip on Catherine, but I never shared my true concerns with my bosses, who had asked earnestly about Catherine's wellbeing in the months after her mom's death.

I raised my eyes from the glass of water in front of me. My heart thumped in my fingers—the same ones that had traced the outlines of the plaque over the Common Room that we had dedicated to Catherine, the place she had forged into her home, and where she'd forged us into her family. I couldn't dance around the answers to that question as I had before, and all the excuses melted on my tongue. They were meaningless. Empty words. Empty promises. In the past few weeks I'd grown used to an emptiness so hollow that my body ached with every unsteady breath.

I looked at Amanda. "No," I said. Then silently, *I'm so sorry*.

When tragedy strikes, the rehearsed mantra that everyone seems to know, without even knowing how they know it, is "it's not your fault." The rational part of me knows that in the end, Catherine made the final decision. Of course, I know this. The rational part of me also knows that relinquishing all responsibility would be more hurtful than insulting. To say I had nothing to do with what happened to Catherine would diminish every laugh, hug, conversation, and memory. It's why I cling onto her last words to us, a simple request: *take care of each other*.

She remains a phantom limb in my life, and I find myself searching for her face in every crowd. Whenever I think I spot her, reality hits me harder than the last time. I don't think I can ever love the way she could, or embrace as many people as she did. I'm not that good a person. I never will be. Now, as I try to hold onto her, I know I'm forgetting pieces of her. I feel unworthy even to try to grasp at them as I do. Then I remember how it felt to discover that she had scrawled my name among the others on the list of the people she loved—her final affirmation of our friendship.

The semester after Catherine died, I went abroad to Denmark for the semester. The escape from campus felt necessary, and the distance comforting. One day in late April, I decided to go for a walk when the piercing cold relented enough to make being outside refreshing rather than punishing. I trekked through the woods on a trail that wound its way through barren birches. Everything, from the trees to the brush to the grass, appeared dead. But then, among the grey and brown tones, my eyes fell upon a dash of color.

I drew closer to the patch and saw a few purple buds poking through the ground. I knelt before them, unable to stop the sudden onset of my reverie. Purple was Catherine's favorite color. Purple was the color of a silly birthday hat my bosses had made for her when she turned sixteen. Purple was the color Catherine asked everyone to wear to her mom's funeral. Purple was the color of the lantern we lit for her at the vigil. For me, purple is Catherine.

I cleared away some of the dead leaves so the bud was unobstructed. "I'm so sorry," I whispered, tears choking my words. "I hope you know I loved you too." The wind carried my apology into the ether. Another truth finally uttered aloud. Another confession she would never hear. Another stitch in my heart.

The following day, as I was leaving for class, I stepped out of the door and halted. Along the sidewalk, small patches of the purple flower I had seen the day before had bloomed overnight. They quivered in the wind, vibrant and alive. The wind rustled the trees, as if carrying Catherine's response back to me: *of course I know*.