

The Cycle of Tragedy and Hope

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I almost went into cardiac arrest when I awoke to my mother sobbing at my bedside. I've rarely seen her cry and she knows I loathe being woken up in the morning, so I instantly knew that my life was about to change forever. Without giving me time to process my shock, she broke the news to me: my friend Shelley is dead.

Trying to process the words that just tumbled out of her mouth, my mind flashed to countless memories of Shelley. I saw the smile she'd have on her face as she made my favorite smoothie during her shift at the local juice shop. I heard the little chuckle she'd let out whenever she took the lead in the board game we were playing on her dining room table. I got a glimpse of the intense, focused expression she'd have while watching the Super Bowl with our families snuggled up next to us on the couch. How could the words I just heard make any sense? Shelley was not old, or ill, or reckless. So why would she be gone a week before turning twenty-one?

I snapped back into reality as I saw black globs of mascara stream down my mother's face. She explained that Shelley died last night in a car accident. No, she wasn't the driver. Yes, she was wearing a seatbelt. Yet she's still gone. The driver made a reckless choice to go 100 miles per hour on the highway at 3:30 am, possibly after having a couple of drinks. He lost control of the car and spun into some trees, leaving Shelley and two others helpless in the back, lifeless in the back. Did I mention he wasn't wearing a seatbelt and has received numerous speeding tickets in the past? Regardless, he survived the crash. Why did the sweet, responsible Shelley I know and love deserve to die while he lived?

Through heaves and tears, my mom shared a memory from one month prior, when Shelley called her mom frantically to explain that her close friend had died in a crash. The twist: Shelley was supposed to have been in the car. That night, she made a last-minute decision to stay in, which ended up saving her life. But Shelley confidently told her parents that if she had gotten in the car with her friend that night, it would have been alright. She felt that she had lived a great life and had no regrets. This spine-chilling coincidence almost made it seem that in a cruel way this was her destiny. Some things in life remain inexplicable.

Before today became the day my friend died, it had been the day I flew back to college. And although the day's title has officially changed, that didn't change the fact that instead of grieving with my family, I had to go back to school.

I packed my bag and decided to make a stop at her parents' house before heading to the airport. You see, I was always envious of her family. They were always happy, vibrant, and so full of life. But agony instantly hit me the moment I pulled into their driveway. Cars were parked in every direction surrounding their property. People were entering the house with flowers and their melancholy was discernible, even at a distance.

I opened the door and in the dim light, I saw a disjointed group of people. The life and light that usually shone in her parent's faces was entirely drained. I hugged her dad and repeatedly said how sorry I was. I felt his body almost collapse during our embrace, despite him being twice my

size. He felt so small and vulnerable. The guilt filled my body as I realized that he would never be able to hug his own daughter again. Then, I moved onto her mom, who was physically there but mentally in another dimension. I broke down into tears as I hugged her, and the same phenomenon repeated as with the father. I made sure to say I loved her so much, which unintentionally added to her breakdown. I felt helpless and villainous showing up with my own two parents to a home with a now-broken family. The mother continued to cry and screamed about how her baby girl would never come home again.

I scurried to my car feeling flustered and shocked. My heart was shattered and the news was finally processing and solidifying like cement in my brain. The few words I exchanged with my parents in the car felt forced and meaningless, but I couldn't bear to drown in silence either. I sat on the airplane, trying to smile with my friends on my flight, but the pain burned at my core. I was in a daze at dinner, shooting a fake smile whenever my friends looked at me. As usual, I tried to portray the incident and my feelings as insignificant so people wouldn't be able to pry at the truth.

I tossed and turned in bed all night, images and flashbacks of Shelley appearing each time I closed my eyes. The darkness of my shut eyelids blended into the jet-black color of Shelley's beloved Jeep Wrangler. My hand reached to open the passenger's door, as I had many times before, and she of course was smiling in the driver's seat. With all the windows down, we'd blast the most obnoxious song we could find and then we'd laugh and sing until we lost our voices. Sometimes we'd have a destination but other times we wouldn't. Our spot was always Dunkin Donuts, but only if it was ten minutes till their closing time. We knew that this was the secret to getting free donuts because the workers would rather give them away than throw them out. I could still see her hair blowing in the wind, with our adrenaline running high after getting our free dozen.

I always admired Shelley's driving and her car. She was a safe, careful driver but managed to ensure everyone was still having fun. It is eerie to think that I probably spent my best memories with Shelley in the car. I often wonder if she had been the one driving that night whether her fate would've been different. It's hard to cope with her death when the entity she died in was also the same one where I would see her at her happiest.

Likewise, I couldn't shake the memories of when my own grandfather died and her family was there for me. My mom was out of the country taking care of her father before he died, and Shelley's family happily took on some of her responsibilities. Each afternoon, Shelley, her sister, and her mom would pick me up from school with a smile on each of their faces. As her mom drove, Shelley would comfort me in the back and we'd both gush about our days at school while eating a giant Tupperware of mac and cheese. Since she was a year older than me, she would tell me all of the tips and tricks to surviving high school, and as an eighth grader I looked up to her like an older sister. I always looked forward to our chats and would think back to them when I finally got to high school. Unbeknownst to her, she had such a great impact on my life: a simple wave in the hallway from her would lighten my mood and remind me that she'd always have my back. Shelley had that kind of effect on people.

Realizing that after all this time I was still awake, I snapped my eyes open and checked the time on my phone. It was now 3 am, around the same time that Shelley's accident happened. I felt a sharp pain in my stomach knowing that Shelley and her family gave me unwavering support when I needed them, and here I was lying helpless across the country when they needed me the most.

I woke up and went to classes promptly the following day, despite my lack of sleep. I covered the bags under my eyes with makeup and put in eyedrops to conceal my red, unrested eyes. I flashed more fake smiles at people all day and felt disconnected every time peers engaged in conversation with me. All I could think about was the tragedy. I avoided going back to my dorm that day by studying at the library, although I had nothing to study for. Eventually, I had to go home and dreaded having to interact with people and thus pretend to be happy. When I got home, I laid in bed, put in headphones, and opened my laptop to avoid all human interaction.

Suddenly my thoughts were interrupted as screams filled my suite. What on earth could they be shrieking about? I read my texts and my jaw dropped as I read the words on my screen. Classes were canceled. As soon as I read the news I knew it was a sign from the universe. I needed to be home: my mom was a mess and the funeral was the next day. Following the funeral there would be a Jewish Shiva where the family mourned for a week. I was destined to be home with my family, and in a mysterious way the universe was responding.

The Coronavirus may be a tragedy within itself, but it is going to help lead to my personal healing. While others sulk about having to leave, I feel relief knowing I will get to be home with my close ones who desperately need me right now. I was hurting, and unsure of whether my mind could fully commit to school, and the universe responded. Everything happens for a reason and it is important to note that the universe is balanced. One person's tragedy is another person's hope, and the cycle will continue forever.