

Saying Goodbye

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When I was a kid, I wanted to live forever.

Now, I realize that immortality is a curse, not a gift. If I was immortal, I'd have to watch all of my loved ones die as I live forever. And after another hundred years or so, I'd have to go through that pain all over again.

I never thought I'd have to experience the agony of having someone I love die. Of course, I knew my parents weren't going to live forever, but I always figured that I would know when their time was up and be able to say goodbye.

I didn't get that with Joyce.

I still remember the last time I saw her. We were in the school library, chatting as we ate lunch.

"Come on, tell me who you like," Joyce begged.

"Absolutely not," I responded.

"Please, Tyler. We're best friends—you're supposed to tell me everything."

"Again, no. Could you drop it?"

"Fine. There's no need to get defensive—I was just wondering." She sounded hurt, but I couldn't bring myself to tell her who I liked. Now, I wasn't afraid she was going to tell everyone and embarrass me. I trusted her, and I knew she wouldn't tell a soul. I couldn't tell her because the girl I liked was, well...

Her.

Part of me wanted to tell her right there and then, but the other part of me kept my mouth glued shut. *If you tell her, she'll reject you, and your friendship will be in jeopardy. She'd never like you back. She tells you about her crushes, and the only guys she likes are popular, athletic jocks. And let's face it—you couldn't kick a ball to save your life,* I thought.

We sat in awkward silence. I regretted snapping at her, but I didn't know what to say.

Eventually, I stuttered, “You know... Mary? I like her.” I crossed my fingers and hoped she wouldn’t see right through me.

“Really? Okay,” Joyce responded. *She sounds disappointed*, I thought. *Whatever, I’m probably imagining it. There’s no way she’d be interested in—*

Suddenly, the bell rang. “See you tomorrow?” I asked.

“Yeah. I still can’t believe we only have lunch together. It’s the only time I see you all day,” she complained.

“Sorry. There’s nothing I can do, but I’ll text you tonight,” I responded. Satisfied, she grinned and walked towards her next class.

When I got home from school that day, I texted her, but she didn’t answer. I thought nothing of it because she was always complaining about her workload—after all, we were juniors. It wasn’t until later that night that I found out the true reason she didn’t reply.

“Tyler? Can you come downstairs, please?” my mom shouted. Her voice sounded shaky, almost nervous. *What could she want?* I wondered. Begrudgingly, I stopped working on my homework, stomped downstairs, and looked at my mom, waiting for her to speak.

She slowly opened her mouth and managed to murmur, “Joyce... died.”

“What?” I asked, refusing to believe what I was hearing. *She can’t be dead*, I thought. *I saw her just a few hours ago...*

“She was driving home from school, and she skidded on some ice. Well, you know...”

I stood in shock while trying to process what my mom was saying.

“Tyler, I know this is difficult. Please—let me know you’re going to be okay.”

Without saying another word, I turned on my heel and sprinted back to my room. *She has to be lying! She’s just pulling an April Fool’s prank*, I thought desperately. The fact that it was November didn’t matter to me. I just wanted to believe what my mom said wasn’t true.

Frantically, I dialed Joyce's number again and again. My fingers were shaking so badly I could hardly type. Every time she didn't pick up, my heart sunk more and more. *Why won't she pick up? Please pick up, Joyce. Please...* Tears ran down my face, and I hastily used my sleeve to wipe them away.

After a while, I collapsed onto my bed, defeated. Even though I really wanted my mom to be lying, I knew she wasn't. The genuine sorrow in her voice reflected how I felt—crushed, alone, and most of all, heartbroken.

That night, I couldn't sleep. Every time I closed my eyes, I saw Joyce. I saw the way she moved, the way she talked, the way she laughed—and I couldn't believe I would never see her again.

A few weeks passed, and I found myself sitting in math class, staring out the window, which was how I spent most school days.

"Hey, are you okay?" asked Sam, the boy sitting next to me. I wanted to tell him how I really felt, but I doubted that he wanted to hear anything other than "fine." So, I smiled and nodded, even though I couldn't have felt worse.

Satisfied with my answer, he turned away and continued taking notes. I sighed and started gazing out the window again.

As I stared off into nothingness, I felt myself slip away from reality. *Listen to the teacher*, I begged myself. *Your grades are dropping. You're failing almost all of your classes. Please—just pay attention.*

However, another part of me stopped myself from listening. *Why should you care? The only girl you've ever really liked is gone, and you never told her how you felt. Pay attention to that.*

No! Listen to the teacher.

I don't care about the teacher. I don't care that my grades are dropping. I don't care that I don't have any friends. I. Don't. Care!

Eventually, the apathetic side of me won, and I spent the rest of class sitting with my thoughts swirling around my head—thoughts of disappointment, regret, and anger.

As I watched a single snowflake fall from the cloudy sky, I realized how alone I felt. I also realized how far I was falling, with no way to get back up...

A week later, I was walking in my neighborhood after school to clear my head. It was a chilly day—everything was covered in a blanket of fresh, white snow, and as I walked, I could hear the snow crunching under my feet. The cold, crisp air stung my cheeks and made my eyes water, but I hardly noticed and kept on walking.

I found myself standing in front of Joyce's house. I didn't know why, but I wanted to look at it. Perhaps I thought that it would bring me to a time when Joyce was alive, when there was a chance I could tell her how I felt. My heart twisted and ached as I wondered if there was a chance that, when she was alive, she liked me back. Suddenly, I couldn't stand to be there anymore, so I turned away and started to head home.

I was interrupted when I heard my name.

"Tyler?" I turned around and saw Joyce's mom standing in her doorway. "What are you doing here?" she asked.

"Nothing," I replied. "I was just on a walk."

"Would you like to come in? I have hot chocolate," she offered. I was tempted to say yes, but the sun was starting to sink below the horizon, causing everything to have a pinkish hue.

"N-no thanks. I really should get home." She nodded, and I started walking away again.

"Wait," she called out. "I want to show you something." I turned back around and stared at her as she waved me in. Intrigued, I walked up her driveway and followed her into her house.

When we reached her living room, my jaw dropped. The room was filled with Joyce's old stuff. Some of it was packed into boxes, but most of it was strewn into huge, haphazard piles. Joyce's mom took a book out of a pile and handed it to me.

"I think you'll want to read the last entry," she mumbled. Confused, I thumbed through the book, found the final entry, and started to read.

Dear Diary,

Today was... regular. Tyler and I didn't see each other because he had to take a test during lunch, but it's fine. It gave me some alone time to think.

I thought about telling him how I feel. However, I couldn't help but imagine what would happen if he didn't like me back. So telling him is on hold for now.

On a related note, I have a feeling he knows I like him. I've always gushed to him about other guys to mislead him, but I feel like he can tell. I don't know what to do.

I'll keep you updated.

Joyce

By the time I was done reading, my mouth was wide open. My heart started to have a sinking feeling, the same feeling I had when I found out Joyce died. My mind was clouded with questions—*When did she start liking me? Did anyone else know?* And one question I really didn't want to know the answer to: *if I'd told her about my feelings, would she have told me about hers?*

I noticed that my vision was getting cloudy. I furiously blinked back my tears, not wanting Joyce's mom to see me cry. But no matter how hard I tried, a couple of tears still crept down my cheek.

"I know this is hard, but I think she'd have wanted you to know," Joyce's mom said reassuringly.

"I-I know. It's just... shocking," I replied.

"I understand," she answered softly. There was a moment of silence. "Could you help me pack this stuff? I know it's not exactly fun, but it would help me so much. This is all really hard for me, as you probably know."

I nodded. Normally, I wouldn't have said yes, but I thought packing Joyce's possessions would be a good way for me to get closure. You'd think moving on would be the last thing on my mind, but that day was a wake-up call. If Joyce's mom, who loved her unconditionally her entire life, could try to move on, then so could I.

We started working, and a comfortable silence fell over us. I was surprised at how much stuff Joyce had—we were packing for over an hour.

Eventually, we finished, and I started to head home again. As the snow crunched under my feet, I realized that I didn't feel better. I thought I had taken the first step to move on, but I still felt like I had a huge weight on my shoulders.

That night, I was haunted by so many what-if questions. *What if I'd told her how I felt? What if she had told me she liked me back? What if we had told each other about our feelings, and we became... something more than friends?* Thinking about it was heartbreaking for me, but I kept doing it. It was as if I was punishing myself for not being honest with Joyce when she was alive. After hours of tossing and turning, I slipped away into a restless slumber.

The next day, I got home from school and checked the mail. Among the stack of newspapers, magazines, and bank statements was an envelope addressed to me.

Confused, I ripped it open and found an invitation to Joyce's funeral. I couldn't believe it—I'd focused so much on the fact that she was gone that I had forgotten that she hadn't had a proper memorial. It made me sad—Joyce had always said that when she died, she wanted everyone at her funeral to talk about her life accomplishments. Instead, they were going to talk about how much she would've accomplished.

Within the invitation was another piece of paper. I read it, and my jaw dropped. Joyce's mom was asking me if I could speak at the funeral. I didn't know what to do—I didn't want to speak in front of so many people, but I knew it would mean a lot to Joyce's parents.

I thought about it later that night and came to a firm decision: I was going to do it. I was on the fence at first, but as I pondered it more, I figured that there was no better way for me to start moving on, which I desperately wanted to do. I wanted to be myself again.

The day of the funeral came, and I was tense and anxious. I had written a speech; however, it was hard for me to write, so most of it was stumbly and awkward. Part of me wanted to crumple it up and throw it away, but the other part of me knew that if I tried to do the speech on the spot, I would embarrass myself.

“How are you?” Startled, I turned around and found myself face-to-face with Joyce’s parents.

“Fine,” I lied. “Sorry for your loss.”

“Please,” Joyce’s dad replied. “I’m sure you feel the loss just as much as we do.” I relaxed and started chatting with them.

Talking to them was like a breath of fresh air—they understood how I felt more than anyone else did. They understood how much I wanted to move on, and how hard it was to do so. I felt like I could’ve talked to them for hours.

Eventually, I was called to give my speech. I stood up, wiped my sweaty palms on my pants, and shuffled to the front of the room. I could feel everyone’s eyes on me, piercing into me and watching my every move. I reached into my pocket with my shaking hand and pulled out my speech.

As I opened the speech and gave it one last glance, I realized that what I had written was me trying to convince other people that I had moved on, that I was okay. That’s why it didn’t sound real or heartfelt: it was all a lie.

I crumpled up the speech in my hand and thought about what to say. I couldn’t use my speech—I knew it wasn’t genuine. On a whim, I decided to speak about how I’d been dealing with Joyce’s death. Perhaps it was because I wanted to be more open and relatable, but in the moment, that was the only thing I could think of to talk about.

“Hi,” I whispered shakily. “I’m Tyler, Joyce’s best friend. Well, I used to be. I just want to talk about... grief. And moving on.”

I spoke for several minutes about my experiences the past few months, starting with when I found out about Joyce’s death. At times, I didn’t even know what I was saying, but I kept rambling until I ran out of things to talk about.

“Now, I’m standing here at Joyce’s funeral. I don’t know how to feel. Of course, I feel sad and regretful and heartbroken. However, I think Joyce would have wanted me to get on with my life. So what do I do?”

I paused and tried to think of what to say next. Suddenly, I had an idea—an idea that seemed so obvious I was surprised I hadn’t thought of it before.

“Now, I’m realizing that I can miss her and still move on. I can remember her and still have closure. I can cherish her memory and still be myself. I’m not quite there yet, but I’m very hopeful. Thank you,” I concluded.

There was a pause. I bit my lip and tried to read everyone’s faces. *Why is no one doing anything?* I thought.

Then, everyone started to clap—respectfully, of course—and I was able to breathe again. My heart slowed down and my hands stopped shaking. I stopped feeling everyone’s eyes piercing into me. I felt as if the weight that had been on my shoulders was starting to lift.

I had started to move on.

It was a relief. Of course, Joyce would always be in my heart, but now I could spend a night without pondering over the what-ifs. Now I could go to school and have a clear mind. Now I could finally be at peace.

Flash-forward a couple of months, and I was able to do all of those things. My grades were on a steady incline, and I was making new friends. I started to feel happy—truly, genuinely happy. I felt like I belonged in a world that I had once given up hope on.

Five Years Later

“Congratulations to the Class of 2018,” stated the dean proudly.

Suddenly, thousands of blue hats were flying in the air, including mine. *I can’t believe it—I graduated college,* I thought. I stood in shock as everyone around me started cheering and hugging each other.

Suddenly, there was a tap on my shoulder. I turned around and saw my friend, Emily, standing there with a grin on her face.

“Can you believe it?” she yelled, trying to make herself audible over the shouts of the people around us.

I smiled and shook my head in disbelief. After multiple attempts to yell over the noise of the crowd, I gave up. Taking her arm, I lead her to a quieter place where we could talk.

“So, do you want to go celebrate? Evan and Claire want to go to Olive Garden, so I came to ask you,” she offered.

“Sure,” I replied, but I felt a bit disappointed. I had planned to ask Emily if we could go someplace by ourselves, just us. I had wanted to ask her for a while, but I figured that after graduation was a perfect time. *Oh well*, I thought, *I guess I’ll ask her sometime later*.

Suddenly, a past experience flashed before my eyes—one filled with pain, regret, and sorrow. I had pushed that memory to the back of my mind, where I would never think about it. Not because it wasn’t important, but because it was too heartbreaking. I didn’t want to go through that agony again.

Immediately, I opened my mouth to speak.

“Before we go, I need to tell you something.”