

Grilled Cheese in Michigan

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Please note, this work includes content related to suicide.

The five stages of grief are bullshit. *Denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance.* As someone who lives my life by a schedule, who wakes up and starts every day with two pieces of toast, an over-easy egg, and coffee that tastes predictable, I love the idea of a nice, tidy five steps to a universal human experience. I believed grief was as easy as following a recipe, a recipe you only had to memorize once. I held these beliefs until my first real experience with grief, the loss of my grandfather during the 2020 pandemic. I thought I would know how to handle it when it came. It was expected and a long time coming. *I'll deny it, be angry at the world, try to understand, be sad, and then I'll be fine.* The stages of grief did not come in that orderly fashion, nor did I have all of the stages. I did not deny his death; I was not angry with him or the world. I knew this was the cycle of life and he had finished his. Although this grief journey was incredibly difficult, it was one I thought I handled relatively well. *I am a grief expert. I am prepared for it next time. Grief is something I can overcome.*

Nothing in the world could've prepared me for my next loss. Two years following the death of my grandfather, my sixteen-year-old cousin committed suicide. There was no rationalizing, explanations, or comfort. There were only questions that had no answers. I had no recipe, steps, or reasoning to come from such a horrific and traumatic loss. The five stages of grief were no longer helpful because

there was nothing that could describe the rotation of complex emotions I was experiencing. So instead of living by these bullshit five stages, I made my own.

New and improved stages of grief: dissociation, emptiness, confusion, blame, and rage.

Dissociation

There is no sound. I'm living in a Charlie Brown movie where the adults speak muffled gibberish. With crinkles on my forehead, I am trying to find the meaning of the music I am listening to but there is none. There is no meaning anymore. There is no sunshine. Although the sun is out, I can't feel its warmth on me. The grass is green, but my world has turned to black and white. I stare at myself in the mirror, waiting to see my reflection. Instead, I see a version of myself I do not recognize. I can't taste the chocolaty goodness in the pancakes my mother offered to make me the next morning or in the grilled cheese at a crowded restaurant in Michigan. There is a world but it is different from the one I'm living in. In that other world, children are laughing, people are going about their busy days, and there are happy families. In the world I'm in, there is me, watching this alternate world, looking for her.

Emptiness

My cousin wasn't related by blood. She was my step-cousin, but to me, she was as good as blood-related. She planted a seed in my garden

and sunflowers sprouted, kissing the sky. She was an only child, but she was my little sister. She planted sunflowers and then ripped them out. I am searching, digging with my hands scooping the dirt as grass stains my knees. All that is left of me is my skeleton, waiting to decompose into the Earth with her. The grass has died, with empty potholes and wilting leaves. I have felt the depression of the original stages of grief, but the plot in my garden hurts the most.

Confusion

Suicide is a puzzle and there is no reference image. I am jamming pieces together that have faint pictures of her life; they aren't connecting. I am cutting corners to fit other pieces and create a hazy outline I still don't understand. I think to myself, *this is it! This is why she must've done it!* I turn my head and squint my eyes trying to see a complete image, but there isn't one. I am kneeling at her grave, yelling and cursing at her headstone, asking for a solution. I am asking her why she was so selfish. Why didn't you realize how bright you made the world? Why didn't you think of the people who loved you? Why didn't you think about *me*?

She doesn't answer me.

Blame

When she sighed the last time you saw her, you should've said something. She slept the whole time. How did you not know? Blame is the most unique experience of a suicide loss. I saw her three days before she died. I begged her to come to grab ice cream with me but she fell asleep on the couch instead. I replay the entire night. I see her every time I look at that couch cushion where her head lay. I blame her father and the alcohol that laced his breath. I blame her friends who hurt her feelings. I blame myself for not shaking her awake and telling her I loved how she laughed at my jokes even though they weren't funny. I blame myself for not telling her she was the

best cousin a girl could have. I blame myself for not asking what was wrong, even knowing now that she would lie.

I blame her.

Rage

Rage is the secret ingredient to suicide loss. I shattered a framed picture of her, crying out *What the fuck? You're so selfish. Why didn't you think about me? I hate you!* Anger just was a disguise for the unspeakable pain and confusion. I yell at anyone who can't seem to understand my constantly changing emotions. I began to develop grudges against people who didn't text me after her death or against the Starbucks worker who didn't smile back. I scream at the higher power that made me feel this agony. I plead with God to give me a reprieve from the pain and allow me to wake up from this nightmare. I yell at her for making me live without her.

The five stages of grief are bullshit.

They say the fifth stage is acceptance. But how can you have acceptance in losing someone to suicide? How can you accept that the world is cruel enough to push a sixteen-year-old to take her own life? How can you accept that someone willingly left everybody that loved them? The five original stages of grief can shine through in a suicide loss. There are moments of denial that try to silence my grieving mind: *Maybe she faked her death. They buried the wrong girl. That can't be her.* But I have moments of acceptance as well, that her soul carries on. She is in the field of sunflowers and in the butterflies that flutter around them. She is in the rays of sunshine that peeks through on cloudy days. She is in my laughter and my tears.

She lives in me, forever.

*In loving memory of Zada Dot Mizell
June 12th, 2005 - May 11th, 2022*