



## Running Toward Grief: How One Writer Learned to Confront Loss in College and the Three Things She'd Buried with it

*Author: Kayli Kunkel*

For my dad, every moment had its song. I can remember being three years old and sitting on Dad's shoulders while he danced to "Breakfast at Tiffany's," our favorite. I'd follow his voice and bellow the lyrics. On weekends my sister and brothers and I would pack into Dad's car, cruising around town for hours, jamming to loud, happy tunes. We loved the Beach Boys and Neil Diamond, Johnny Cash and a slew of '70s one-hit wonders. Dad got us bopping to ABBA hits, and sang us to sleep with Pearl Jam lullabies.

I was 19 when Dad died. A massive heart attack took him: sudden, unfair. Afraid the memories would die with him, I worked until sunrise listing every song we loved. I bought the tracks, burned four discs, and tucked one under each sibling's pillow.

But death twists warm memories into painful artifacts. I never played my CD called "Dad's Songs." The silence sat better in my chest. I still ache when I hear John Denver's "Take Me Home, Country Roads" on the radio. I change the station when "Cecilia" by Simon & Garfunkel comes on, because one note can sink me.

A weary part of my heart knows he is gone. Not gone on another long business trip, like I had told myself for weeks. But gone from this world. From this day. And from every day ahead.

Those songs, they stirred up the pain of how real his death was. It's easy to glance at death in the rearview mirror. It's agonizing to face it head-on. So I ignored the music. I quit counseling, which started hurting, too. And my dad's grave—I deemed that impossible. I'd sworn to myself I would never face them. I would dance around grief until it fully wore me out.

But seasons passed. I had sidestepped grief for almost two years. And I hadn't healed. So this season I decided—with a sudden slice of courage—to stop dancing, and to run with it instead.

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It was an April morning, 9:25 a.m., strangely cold. A typical Monday, I shuffled into clothes minutes before class. I ignored the first phone call. I answered when it rang again, and then the floor fell out. He didn't make it. The words were fast, hard, final. I plummeted into a waking nightmare. A week later, I finished exams with fresh memories of funeral lines and dying roses where my study notes had been.

Halfway through college, I learned what a truly awful "all-nighter" feels like. Carrying the weight of death while cramming for midterms—it bites.

College and grief mix poorly, and all too often. It felt harrowing to lose my dad at 19, but I was far from alone. According to the Students of AMF National Support Network, between 35 and 48 percent of college students lost a friend or family member within the last two years—that's 4.5 million students.

Yes, death is crippling, no matter the situation. But college bereavement is different. Because if you're doing it right, the stress of college almost breaks you anyway. Research by Purdue Professor Heather Servaty-Seib shows that a student's GPA significantly decreases during the semester of loss. And according to the AMF National Support Network, 10 to 15 percent of the bereaved face long-term risks for psychological and physical health, like anxiety and depression.



Now one of those statistics, I became a tangled knot of anxiety. Once outgoing, I found myself quiet and apathetic toward my friends. Between classes, I slumped on the floor and cried through stacks of tissues. I dragged grief from each of my limbs on walks across campus, almost collapsing under the pressures of daily life. Bills, grades, friendships. Everything became an endeavor. Almost everyone became an outsider. And outsiders just don't get it. They think grief is temporary sadness, and they shrug it off.

But for us in death's inside circle, we know it's a state of being. Grief is misdirected anger. Grief is paralyzing fear. It's anxiety. It's elation. It's bizarre symptoms that prompt emergency phone calls: "Mom—I just forgot what year it was." "Oh, honey, that's just grief."

Grief is also incredibly morbid. It's the nitty-gritty stuff we'll face in zombie flicks, but never in real life. It's painful questions about who got the organs, and how. It's reliving the ice-coldness of a hand, the silence of a heartbeat. It's struggling to use past tense: "He *was* a great man," and wondering what he is now.

Let me say—it's tough being a statistic in a place where everyone rallies around weeknight drink specials.

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Lean in. Every counselor says it. When pain knocks, I should welcome it with open arms. "Hello, there you are—stay a while!" And after some crippling time with sorrow, I might miraculously push through.

In the months after my dad died, I tried it out. "Therapy"—it's a bundle of complications, stigma included. The stereotypes of therapy deter some, but never bothered me. I decided that, since friends couldn't comfort me in the right way, their judgments didn't matter.

Vicki was my counselor, all curly red hair and big hugs. She was enduringly kind. She still remembers tiny tidbits I told her months ago. Beyond her paycheck—a strange thing to exchange for comfort, I always thought—she cared about me. Therapy was a helpful, temporary vent. My new life was fragile and strange—Vicki gave some sense to the grief by normalizing it. But counseling lifted deep-rooted pains from my back pocket, and waved them in my face. Fears for my mom. Dread for future milestones. The inevitable "next" death. After wrestling with all that, I always dropped into bottomless anxiety.

But eventually I learned a lesson with difficulty: life doesn't stop for death. I couldn't pause my responsibilities. So I paused my pain instead. After a few sessions, I avoided Vicki for an entire year as my grief wallowed beneath the surface. That's why, one month ago, I shook as I parked at a coffee shop, the clock ticking toward a long overdue appointment. I gripped the steering wheel and breathed heavily. Step one, counseling.

As I pulled open the shop door, Vicki was ready with a wide grin. We spent an hour hashing out the past year. Still feeling anxious? Yep. Isolated? Of course. She pulled out a notepad and jotted down tips like a doctor's prescription. I gripped my tea mug like an anchor.

Vicki asked, how often do I cry? With hesitance and guilt, I answered: never. It felt good to admit I had tucked grief away. I left the coffee shop feeling light. But I woke up the next morning, and the world throttled me in that familiar way. My breath became shallow. I shuffled through the morning miserably. Makeup, a vain attempt, washed into black waterfalls. I zigzagged through traumatic thoughts, grasping for something consoling. I called in sick to a meeting, and almost missed work.

I thought time would make this easier. I hoped a year would change the inevitable post-therapy dip. But I knew I was wrong immediately. The actual counseling—that was nothing. It's what flawlessly follows: a sudden, sharp bout of depression.

But time, at least, has shown me this: You can't shove grief into a tidy, 30-minute session, then tuck it away for later. You can't pencil in an appointment with pain. The painful truth is, grief weaves through each day. Arises when it's called. Hurts when it's necessary.

That's why therapy failed. Grief isn't an extracurricular anymore—it's my life. And as for "lean in": I hate it, but they're right.

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Since Dad died, I've dreamt of gravity. In nightmares, a strange magnetism pulls me to an unknown edge. It's an edge I can't see, but I intensely dread. The force drags me easily. No guardrails, no friction to slow me down, and I have no choice—I fall.

Today it's real.

As I drive to the Key West Cemetery, I feel the pull toward the unknown. I lean back into my seat. I push my heels into imaginary brakes. They don't work.

I reach a place I'd only been once, for the memorial service: my life's rock bottom, placing flowers on a casket I'd never see again. The car rolls up next to the cemetery. I see the stone etched "Kunkel," and for a while my breath stops. My eyes don't blink. It's like staring at a unicorn, a spaceship—something that simply can't be.

My ears ring with a poem I wrote months ago—"When someone you love is under the ground, the earth shudders with every step you take./Threatens to swallow everything above, and sink it down below."

I take three steps toward the grave, and each rumbles the earth. Trinkets that say "In God's Arms" and "Gone Too Soon" are chiming in the wind like an eerie soundtrack. On the fourth step I break down in sobs.

No one reaches over to touch me: The moment belongs to me. Only I could face this intense reality. I brace, then take the last step, the hardest step, onto the plot. I vaguely realize what rests below, but I shush the thought immediately.

I shush it with an image of my living, smiling Dad—the man taking breaths big enough to belt out our favorite songs, filling his chest with so much excitement for life that it resonates in his goofy, dancing feet.

I found my dad's smile a few weeks earlier, by accident.

I was on a jog around the block—a weekly thing, nothing special. But this one was different. It's the only reason I'd made it to the tombstone.

A few weeks ago, I trembled as I downloaded 40 nostalgic songs to my iPod. I knew the power those tiny files held over me. I swallowed hard, shoved my earphones in, and ran out the door. It was another gut-wrenching decision: step two, face the music.

I ran mile after mile in a panic. The first songs stuck to my skin, icy cold in the warm air. But as the pavement passed, something fresh appeared: my dad's face. His wide smile, his eyes sparkling, laughing and dancing, exuding contagious joy. I saw him in perfect clarity, for the first time since he died. By the time Madness sang "Our House," I was ecstatic. I pumped my fists to the trumpet beats. I danced at the stoplight while concerned drivers stared.

The bouncy song "Popcorn" began. I was struck by a crisp memory of my brother, when we were both young. He bopped to the beat, grinning from ear-to-ear, pleading between giggles that my dad play it again.

And then I became furious. That life tore this innocence from him. That it stole an untainted joy, swiftly and carelessly, with a death no one deserved.

I slumped onto a curb, buried my head, held myself tight. I wailed as cars passed. “Goodbye, my friend. It’s hard to die....when all the birds are singing in the sky,” sang the tune in my ears, oblivious to my heaving chest.

But the pain felt new. The way I cried, I felt a release. I brushed a casing off myself, and revealed something sensitive. It was the most genuine breakdown I’d had in almost two years.

The grave, the counseling—I thought they would be the worst bits of facing grief. But really, they were about my dad’s death: a single, tragic moment that punctuated a whole life of happiness. The most powerful thing, and the most difficult, is to face and remember my dad’s life.

I realized something shocking on that curb. The songs I held so dear—Pearl Jam’s “Last Kiss,” Paper Lace’s “The Night Chicago Died,” Elvis’s “Last Farewell”—they had a common thread: death. The lyrics spun pain—the same kind I ran from—into something beautiful.

But while some songs built to a grand finale—“Ba da BAAA!”—others, quite simply, stopped. Even the best melodies can fade away suddenly, with no meaning, and no warning.