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In Heaven, Everything is Fine

Teresa Fahlgren

Matthew died on a Friday. My dad sent me a text, “CALL ME DEAR,” while I was driving to Idaho. When I called, he started by saying, “I just got a sad call . . . a very sad call,” and I turned the car around. The following Monday morning I met our three closest friends to drive home for the funeral.

We hadn’t been together in almost four years. Standing by the car, we regarded each other through a haze of cigarette smoke and searched for a way to break the silence. With careful questions, measured between drags on my cigarette, I managed to dig out some details of their lives. Martin had started working on a lavender farm and sold vegetables at the Farmer’s Market. He paid real rent to live in a real house. I reserved my skepticism. The Martin I’d known had been generally homeless. Paul had a good job as a CNA. His ADD prevented him from offering any details, except that he hated it and couldn’t wait to make it back to his parents’ so he could play his drums.

Growing up together, all of us, including Matthew, had spent every night cruising the web of dirt roads surrounding our hometown, Crested Grass. *As soon as we get into the car*, I thought, *we’ll be fine*. Because in the car, we had the one real thing we had in common—music.

Martin held up fistfuls of CD’s he’d checked out from the library. “Tom Waits! Like, three Tom Waits albums!” They clattered together when he tossed them into the backseat.

“I thought you guys might appreciate this,” I said, and slid in a freshly burnt copy of Modest Mouse’s album *Building Nothing Out of Something*.

Paul cheered and Martin shook his fist and grinned out the window. Jack averted his eyes. He was sitting passenger seat and I, in my naivete, thought maybe I could rely on him for some emotional support. We’d decided to split the driving between the two of us because, I reasoned, it’s *Jack*. We could conquer this together, as a team. We’d been the magnet that brought this whole



group together and, consequently, the reason for its suspension. We had our first date at fifteen and he'd left me for my best friend at twenty. A tiny part of me hoped we could get past old animosity and find some of the old strength in each other.

"I'm the same as I was when I was six years old and oh my God I feel so damn old / I don't really feel anything," we sang.

Every two hours we stopped for a smoke break, and the closer we got to home, the more we took our time. I had a hopeful vision of making such little headway we'd eventually start going backward in time until Matthew was sitting in the back between Martin and Paul where he belonged. We didn't talk about him on the drive, just made dirty jokes and sang the old songs. Jack talked the least. I was hyper-aware of the few words he did say, and slowly it dawned on me that maybe we wouldn't find strength in each other through our mutual loss.

Almost to Crested Grass, with the other two sleeping in the backseat like little brothers, Jack and I listened to one of our old favorite songs on that same Modest Mouse album. *"Whenever I breathe out, you're breathing in / whenever I speak out, you take it all in."*

"It seems this might not be a love song," I said.

He took a minute to reply. "Yeah," he said, "I don't know why I never heard it that way before."

At home I sought the company of my dad. One Memorial Day years ago, he and I took bouquets of silk flowers to our family plot outside the tiny neighboring town where he grew up. Standing amid homemade tombstones of twisted diamond willow branches, in the middle of the windblown prairie, my dad pointed at each of the GALLAGHER headstones and said, "My mom, my dad, my sister, my brother, and my son. My whole family's here."

The day of Matthew's funeral we took a drive out to our family farm and he filled me in on how the cows were doing. We didn't let Matthew's death breach the safety of the cab of the pick-up until we were back home, pulling into the driveway.

"Kim said that it was definitely a suicide," he told me, but didn't say how she knew for sure. I nodded, knowing well enough to keep that to myself.

I walked to the funeral separate from the boys and sat in a pew on the right side of the Lutheran church. During the days beforehand, I'd laughed easily when talking about Matthew. Going from tears to laughter had become a superpower—I was the master of emotion. But sitting there, watching a slide show of him at all ages, was too much.

I felt a smack on my shoulder and turned to see a woman I'd known my whole life brandishing tissues at me. "Frances, here."

I tried to smile in thanks, but she just sat back and stared resolutely ahead. Jack and Paul filed in, followed by three or four other friends of Matthew's. Then a crowd of more than twenty young men surged in—*frat brothers*—followed by a smaller crowd of bleached-blond, tiny-skirted girls—*sorority sisters*.

I avoided looking at the boys, not wanting to make fun of Matthew's lifestyle even with a raised eyebrow, and focused instead on the tiny old woman sitting on my right. I wanted to slip my hand into hers and ask about her grandchildren. Ask for candy out of her tiny beaded bag.

The casket was closed and the images I'd Googled of the wreck flashed through my mind: Matthew's big SUV, the one I knew so well, wrapped around a tree. He'd gone off a cliff at eighty miles an hour. How could I expect the casket to be open? I'll never know what became of the cufflinks I gave him, the ones I'd asked he be buried in.

My tears subsided once the pastor started spewing Bible verses that Matthew would have declared bullshit, and I kept my eyes trained on a wreath of red roses until they wandered to the backs of the sorority sisters' heads. Some of them looked as if they'd been crying, and others looked unsure of how they'd gotten there. The brothers seemed like children in too-large suits. Which were his best friends? Any of them? Matthew had only gone to school in Bozeman for two semesters. I'd known him for six years.

I scanned the rest of the crowd and realized our row of about eight were the only local people our age. I saw almost every parent I knew, but felt instinctively that they were only there because a young man they'd seen around got killed in an accident—plus



there's nothing else to do in town and they'd look like jerks if they didn't come.

Matthew's mother stared stiffly ahead throughout the ceremony. At the end, as they walked out in procession to Johnny Cash, I realized with a start that the sandy-haired man locking arms with her must have been his dad.

"Wanna see a picture of my dad?" Matthew asked me when he was seventeen, having just learned his dad's name and driven across the state to meet him. "And look, I have a sister, too!" The photos he clutched were wallet-sized and worn. He gazed at them long after I'd handed them back, his grin wide, eyes glued to their matte surface.

After the funeral we all stood on the sidewalk, blinking and awkward in the bright sunlight. I found Matthew's cousin, a girl I'd gone to school with. I hugged her and told her, "I'm so sorry," and she said, "I'm sorry for you, too," and cried harder. "I never don't cry," she said, and laughed.

My dad held me tight for a long time, my face buried in his lapel. He was wearing a bolo tie, but had left his cowboy hat behind out of respect. I knew without looking he'd be wearing his good boots.

"I got mascara on your shirt," I said and looked at him. I hadn't expected his eyes to be filled with tears.

The family held an after party, and Jack led us directly to the open bar. He claimed a stool and I stood with a drink in my hand, wondering if I was expected to have fun. No one was crying anymore, just chatting as if at a church potluck. I spotted the man with the sandy hair sitting alone at the end of the bar and, without a plan, approached him.

"Are you Matthew's dad?"

"Yep." His voice was so tired. He took a deep breath and sized me up.

"He was so excited to finally get to meet you. I'm Frances. I went to high school with him. We were good friends." I hugged

him.

“Thanks. Thank you. It’s good to meet you.”

“You look just like him.”

“I know.”

“He was so happy when he got to meet you.”

“I know.”

Later when the boys and I were smoking, he came outside and slipped his own pack out of his suit pocket. I didn’t give him time to distance himself from us before I introduced him to the rest of the group. Swarming around us were nicely dressed strangers and packs of them wandered by to say small words of reassurance to him. After one strange couple in particular, he muttered, “The frat thing is a little weird.”

“Yeah, we’re the ones who knew Matthew before all that. We’re pre-frat Matthew.”

He nodded in approval, despite our visible tattoos and piercings. Even if we weren’t around much in the end. That fact is for us to live with. We all hugged him goodbye and he muttered something without looking at me about how he’d be glad to see me on the streets of Missoula, he goes there a lot, he’d be sure to recognize me.

“If you live long enough, your stories get to change,” I heard a woman say on NPR. “And that’s a good thing.” I don’t know who she was or what she was referring to, but as time passed my stories were able to change—only I couldn’t let them. I was haunted by the bored faces of the fraternity boys, and I was the traitor who hadn’t been there for him.

Back at school I spent my time with people who didn’t know what happened so I wouldn’t get asked how I was doing. I was sick of lying and I was sick of being honest. For a long time, all food tasted terrible and my nightmares were unbearable. I started dating someone because he helped me forget, but in the middle of the night I tended to cry and tell him about the friend I’d abandoned, the boy I couldn’t save.

Martin and Paul found their way back into my life after that trip home, though not in a big way. For the rest of the Farmer’s



Market season I'd go visit Paul at his booth, buy some squash and we'd smoke a cigarette. Paul turned twenty-one a few days after Matthew would have, but I missed the party.

I'd hoped that such a tragedy could stitch back together broken friendships and bring the forgotten good parts of people out into the open again. But, like that old Bob Wills song my dad likes to remind me of, *time changes everything*.