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Worst Fears Do Come True

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Worst Fears Do Come True

Cover Page Footnote

Margaret is a Spanish teacher at Greely High School, spouse of one, mom of two, sister of five and aunt of many.

Worst Fears Do Come True

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The horror hit, it came out of nowhere. I was dancing, enjoying being with friends, watching the simple sweetness of students being together, out of their homes and their sweatpants, mostly unmasked and living some normalcy, an iconic American culture rite of passage; Prom. I had decided to chaperone after more than a few years of avoiding such a commitment mostly due to the fact that the dancing and music became unrecognizable and frankly whatever was happening on the dance floor made me cringe. I had so enjoyed chaperoning and dancing when Stairway to Heaven was predictably the last song and we could all groove independently to the beats that most resonated with us. But I was excited for this night. It was a chance for me to spend time with colleagues and give this generation, who was robbed of so much by COVID, a night out. COVID had given us all reason to consider meditation, exercise, or even a prescription of Lexipro to stave off the constant threat of panic. This night was free from all that angst. I was in the moment. Not gripping, just enjoying the ease. Nothing tragic, everyone safe, everyone alive. As the night came to a close, most everyone had left to go to the next part of their night, but some kids held onto the last melodies on the dance floor. Then they sweetly made their way to the door. We filled their hands with the leftover treats and they laughed as we escorted them out with our goofy dance moves. Smiles, laughter, light.

I began to gather my things to head home to my family and share with them the night's events, my phone held another reality. I picked it up and saw 17 missed calls and messages from various family members. All directing me to call my sister. My father, I thought to myself, not panicked and still humming the last tune that filled the warm night air. He was 89 and had led a long life. My mom would be sad, but it was time.

We have a big family, 16 grandchildren, 14 great-grandchildren with babies on the way. I have five brothers and sisters who are all a generation plus older than I. I was an adored baby surrounded by love when I was born, but grew up more like an only child for much of my childhood. My siblings have always been good to me. They would invite me on adventures, extended sleep overs, road trips, movies. I got to spend lots of time playing with, and caring for, my nieces and nephews as babies. I learned how to change diapers and manage two year tantrums at a young age. One of my sisters decided to be an extra special good sister when I was born and she has made good on her commitment for 50 years. She has become my life-line. She and I speak daily, often our children confuse our voices because we speak in chorus and have a similar direct, matter of fact way about us.

This sister taught me about how to drive stick, she stuck out the delirium of my first marriage and has made me feel loved and held even in the darkest of moments.

This is the sister to whom I was directed to call that prom night by the multiple voice and text messages from family members. It turned out not to be the inevitable and natural death of my father that we would be mourning. I knew when I heard her voice of desperation in the way she said my name, my father was still alive, but I would soon find out that my nephew was not. "Jonny's dead" she blurted out in a semi-yell as if she knew I would have trouble hearing her. Everything went dark as I collapsed to the ground where I stood in the parking lot. The phone pressed against my ear. People surrounded me trying to keep me from sinking deep below the pavement. "No! No! No!" I repeated, "It can't be," I cried. "Yes" she insisted, forcing us to hear our worst fear "He killed himself." It was a suicide. A brutal one in fact. Gun to the head. Instantaneous. Our 23 year old sweet boy had taken his own life. Next she instructed, "Lucy, you have to get home and tell Lucy".

My nephew was the youngest grandchild for four years until my daughter, his cousin Lucy, came along. She adored him. Our families and their childhoods were intertwined. Her first words and perpetual question were probably "Where's Jonny?" Lucy and I had left the life that I had spent my 20s enduring when she was three months old. I had made a poor choice in a partner and tried to build a life on a crumbling irreparable foundation. My sister took us in and we have spoken nearly everyday since, spent every holiday together and heard every detail of each other's struggles and joys. She is my rock, she has made me a better everything; woman, mother, sister, daughter, wife, friend, teacher. Now I was charged with the terrible task of delivering this shattering news to Lucy and her 12 year old brother while my own sister severed into pieces. Our hearts would forever be broken. Our family would forever be maimed.

When I got home, my children were waiting for me in the driveway. They knew something horrible had happened, but this was not predicted. We fell into each other in the dark on the front lawn as I gave them the news, sobbing in disbelief, gripping each other as our cries and screams rumbled through our bodies and out into the still night air. I felt my heart tear open with theirs. The last of the innocence that my 12 year old was holding onto was ripped away from him. Santa would no longer exist and God would surely be questioned by us all. Our primary objective as parents is to protect our children. The audacity of my ego thinking that I could protect my children from pain is embarrassing. Pain is inevitable, out of anyone's control and it cannot be fixed or avoided. My nephew died from pain and in pain, he is free but that pain is long from healed because now we have the burden of carrying it.

Jonathan Andre Pope was born in Guatemala in 1998. He was a chubby, good natured, cute as pie baby boy who we all instantly fell in love with when he came home at 8 months old. He would sit at the dinner table and squeeze both his arms to show us his muscles which we

donned his “strong man” trick. He was smiley, curly haired and such a welcomed addition to our family. In Guatemala there is a courageous woman, Rigberta Menchu who lost her entire family to the horrible genocide at the hands of the Guatemalan government. She is a human who understands that her struggle is the struggle of so many people throughout the world who are different colors, speak different languages, eat different foods, pray to different gods. She is one whose hope is in the uniting of people and not dividing. She is one who continues to tell her truth even as people reject her perspective and words. Jonathan is of those people. The epigenetics that pass trauma from generation to generation were a part of the fabric of his soul. Jonathan was caught between worlds in which he did not feel he belonged. His pain was fueled by the fact that he could not communicate in Spanish to be able to fully connect with his birth family in Guatemala, nor could he find the words to describe his struggles as a brown person in New England in a way that we, his family, would fully understand. His smile, sense of humor and bear hugs always disarmed any worry I had for him. He was so loved and loving, and kept much of his torment and isolation a secret..

I think of my classroom of students and how they sat beside me just days after we buried Jonny. They knew something had happened, they could tell that my usual ease and humor were missing. I kept the details to myself and said that I had endured a family tragedy. They did not question me. They sat there with their own pains, worries, traumas and fears. I feel useless because I cannot fix it for any of them. School shootings happen all too often, minorities are imprisoned and shot regularly, immigrants are exploited and denied basic human rights, and the poor are continually marginalized and blamed for their circumstances regardless that our world continues to systematically oppress them. I feel helpless to make them feel safe and protected.

What can I do as I stand before a classroom of students who hide their own pains? What can I do as I witness the toll that deep pain is robbing of my own children’s happiness and well-being? What can I do as my own heart is so split open and raw that I find myself questioning the use of my existence? The worst has happened and I couldn’t stop it. I didn’t recognize the deep pain of my nephew. Where was I? Why did I ignore and miss the signs instead of acting and reaching out to him? You may be tempted to tell me that I couldn’t have known, and that I can’t blame myself. If that is the case I am so grateful that you do not know this pain. If on the other hand, you understand what I am saying and are not tempted to tell me that I did everything that I could, I am so sorry for your loss. What can any of us do for people who are suffering? Yes we can clothe, feed and shelter, but when the pain is invisible neither a shirt, nor a sandwich nor a bed will do. I have learned to sit with my sister. I can not take any of her pain away. The waves of sorrow sometimes hit softly and subtly, and other times they come with the fury of a thunderstorm in the middle of a hot humid day. I remind her to be kind to herself as the anguish crashes through. I also remind myself of her inner strength to be able to live through difficult moments. Life is a constant straddling of

joy and pain, and more often than not we just need to be held and loved as we suffer the blows.