

Cody

“Oh, hold on, I’m getting a call from my dad, he probably wants to know where I am.”

Where am I? Niwot High School’s auditorium. Why? There is no legitimate reason for me to be here other than to watch my girlfriend, Rachel, rehearse for the Sleeping Beauty ballet. Plus, I didn’t enjoy spending my afternoons at home much these days. I’d been taking solace following Rachel around everywhere she went to avoid the constant noise of barking dogs, arguing family, and bad reality TV that was always happening at my house. That meant I spent many long days watching ballet class through a window in the damp studio she practiced in or at hippie grocery stores that sell their own fresh pressed juice or squished with her on her twin-sized bed watching Jenna Marbles and going back and forth with “I love you”s, and now I was in the dark auditorium, echoing with the sounds of pre-recorded classical music and the thud of pointe shoes striking the ground. I answer the phone, and on the other end is my dad, speaking in measured and calm tones. I don’t remember exactly what he told me. I think he told me that there had been a suicide first. He’s the Dean of Students at my high school, and he usually tells me when something serious happened that day, so I figured he wanted some sort of emotional support from me. He always wants emotional support from me.

“Who was it?”

“Cody.”

Cody, my friend since middle school. Cody, the one who was way smarter than all of us, and so were his sisters. Cody, who I always called semi-stache because of his inability to grow complete facial hair, and who everyone else called Cod-Y. He'd killed himself that morning. I still don't know how he did it, and my dad threatened to tell me one night when he was drunk, but I managed to keep him quiet, I didn't want to know. The man is insufferable when he's had enough Jack Daniels and Mountain Dew, and it cut me deeply to think that my friend's suicide was just something to talk about while in a stupor, just another thing for the administration to deal with.

Rachel asked me what was wrong, as I had started to cry. Everything was wrong. None of my friends were every completely emotionally stable, which of us was going to kill ourselves next? I can't believe I made fun of him, he must have known that I wasn't being serious, he was going to do so well in college, better than all of us! Rachel had no idea what to do, I'm sure. It was a role reversal, she was the one that was supposed to have all the trauma, and I was the one who helped her through her flashbacks. Besides, she was needed in rehearsal. She was Aurora, and practically spends the entire show onstage. For her, there was no time to mourn with me, not now.

Kristin Kingsley is the artistic director of Centennial State Ballet, the ballet company whose rehearsal I was currently interrupting with my breakdown. She sat me down and gave me a mindless task to do: put stickers over an error in the program. I will forever be grateful to her for that, because it helped me to feel like a human being again. It cleared my thoughts for a brief moment and silenced the ringing of "your friend is dead and nothing will ever be the same again". I managed to survive the rest of the rehearsal.

The next day at school was, simply put, just wrong. There were grief counselors in the library for us to talk to (I never went), and other administrators came in to offer support in our

first classes of the day. Why would I ever want to talk to someone who never knew him? I already spend so much time in therapy, taking time that could be spent with my friends that are still here to get psychoanalysed by a grow-your-own-crisis-aversion kit seemed like a massive waste. My friends needed me to be their therapists more, I was certain. The day began, cold, in the almost-spring limbo that Colorado gets until mid May. I was in AP Lang in one of those shitty portable classrooms, every surface caked in muddy remnants of snowfall. Mr. Carpenter, the athletic director and best friend of my dad, came in and spoke to a classroom of empty faces. We were all in our own heads, not taking in any of his words, read from a piece of paper. He offered us support, but he'd barely known Cody either. To my knowledge, he had never done any sports. The room was a vacuum, all of the humanity temporarily sucked out of it. My friends all sat together and held each other. We, along with the teacher, completely abandoned any lesson plans for the day. She'd taught Cody, but it was only her first year here, and it seemed like this had popped her positivity bubble. The room was eerily full of sounds, people talking with no meaning behind it, trying to keep it together. We tried distracting ourselves on our iPads, or blowing our noses just to have them inevitably plug again, and some friends of Cody's and I decided that we needed to take a walk and talk about it all.

I don't even remember what we said. I remember that the air was cold and Colorado thin, and the world outside felt completely gray. We migrated back and forth on the empty football field, trying to distract ourselves, convincing each other it wasn't anyone's fault, just simply holding each other in silence, or kicking pieces of gravel around the pavement with our hands in our pockets. There was us, all of us who were friends with Cody, smart kids who were just trying to make it through high school before we inevitably thrived in college, and then there was everyone else. They looked at our display in horror, I imagine, so grateful that it wasn't them

who had to suffer. We shuffled to the next class, heard the next speech about grief counselors in the library, and tried to have some semblance of a normal day.

Eventually, we just started to wander, to find others who needed companionship and people who we could cry with. Some of us walked up to visit Mrs. Giammo, our chemistry teacher. She had been close to Cody, he was very scientifically gifted. She broke when she saw us, and I could tell that she blamed herself as much as we blamed ourselves. That's what we did for the whole day, wandering souls looking for solace, unaware whether we should cry things out or try to pack up and move on with life. And everyone else, looking in on our bubble with morbid curiosity and posting to their snapchat stories about the one time they ever interacted with Cody and how he would be greatly missed.

I can only ever picture him smiling, really. He exists in short snippets, card games and Mario Kart, pool parties and AP classes. He was always in the background of memories when I'd hang out with my friends, being geeky. I do think they liked him more than me, at least the boys did, and I'm sure they all knew him better than I did. I really have only one strong memory of him. In 7th grade, we had a project in English where we were each assigned a holiday to do a report on. I had traded my way to the LGBT Day of Silence, and decided that in the ultimate act of performance art, I would tape my mouth shut and have someone else present my written work. The someone else was Cody, randomly selected, and he was uncomfortable saying things like "sexual orientation" so I had to budge him a little bit to read the paper. What a nerd. Why was it that I was cut so deeply by the death of a person I hadn't known that much? A background character in my life's novel? I thought that I should have been able to save him.

My middle school boyfriend was suicidal. I was the only thing keeping him alive, apparently, which got very difficult when I started to want out of the relationship. I had to talk him down on many sleepless nights, to defend him from bullying (he was a middle-eastern kid

and generally weird, so he got a lot of shit), and to help him feel loved while his parents were getting divorced. That's a lot to put on a twelve-year-old. But he never killed himself, we eventually were able to go our separate ways, and life went on. I'd see him, and ignore him, in the lunch line all throughout high school, but he was still there. I had succeeded. But with Cody, I'd failed. Maybe if I'd dated him or paid more attention to him he would have been okay.

Dealing with Cody's death has really been a formative experience for me. I still get hit with the sudden intrusive thought of "you have a dead friend", and every time I mention him my eyes get glossy, but it's helped me realize a fundamental truth about myself. He exists in my dreams, happy and still doing dumb banter with me. So do other people that have died, like my grandparents. I get to see them in that world, the hybrid between reality and the subconscious, and they aren't really gone. That's what I want when I die, to be able to watch the world move on around me, and to speak to my loved ones in their dreams. It's also helped me to hold on to existence even when it gets difficult. Knowing the sheer amount of impact that a suicide makes on a community has helped me talk myself down many times.

The earth shattered that day and left behind a colder and harder shell in its place. This is the earth I live on, where people must be watched vigilantly for signs of suicidal ideation and I must fight to keep pushing even when the payoff doesn't seem worth it at all. The earth where I can't even think about watching *13 Reasons Why*, and the earth where the word Cody makes my heart jump. The earth where that group of high school friends are now permanently bonded to me because of that day we spent trying to make each other feel like we really existed and we hadn't just killed our friend. None of them have followed me to Chicago, which is both a blessing and a curse. Even their faces remind me of him in some twisted way, and to live free from those reminders allows me to be more productive, but now that I'm alone I have nobody to share this

deep hurt with. Nobody who had known him, and his silly looking half-mustache, and had gotten frustrated playing Egyptian Mau with him. But, I suppose, that's part of growing up.

I was cleaning my room before a date, mid November, when I got a phone call from my dad. Why is he calling? Why is he calling? What's happened? Who is it? Who do I need to talk to? How do I start forming my world again when it's still so fragile from last time?

"Erich Riedel."

My relationship with Erich was very complicated. In 5th grade, I developed an infatuation with him, and made him a dozen chocolate roses by hand. He rejected me. In 7th grade, we briefly began dating, and eventually I rejected him. In 10th grade, he asked me to buy him a dildo and help him smuggle it home in his trombone case. I, now an out lesbian, accepted. He was also always hanging around with me, although things got weird quite often in person because of our odd relationship dynamic. We confided in each other about our confusing sexual feelings. I was satisfied because I felt like "one of the guys" and I'm sure he got off to talking about masturbation with a girl (at the time). Our friendship is most simply explained like this: in middle school, he shaved his head and I called him "bowling ball" relentlessly. When I shaved my head, he, of course, did the same to me.

I am so grateful that I can say that he did not die that day. Some people said he fell off a parking garage. Others said he jumped. He told me it was a climbing accident, but I don't know if I believe him. He broke his neck, back, and pelvis, and somehow had the power to chastise me for never leaving my dorm only a few days later over text. But I was ready to do it all over again.

If you're reading this, don't kill yourself.