

Twenty-One Years
10/28/20 - 2/16/22

My best friend died three weeks ago.

It didn't take a while. He wasn't in any great amount of pain.

I should know; I was there when it happened.

I had to recount the story to what felt like a thousand different people. I told it so many times it was as if I was reading a script, and every time I told it again, I was reciting my lines over and over, until I had them down like the Pledge of Allegiance. I recited those same words and phrases in the same order for what had begun to feel like an eternity, until I barely felt the words at all, and it was as if whenever I performed my act again, my mind slipped into some form of sleep, a reverie of nothing, and when I woke up, I had no idea what happened five minutes before.

The cliffs of Glenlough Bay spanned sky to sea, stretching as far on either side as I could tell. I stood on the horizon where land becomes air, where fact becomes figurative, and where reality becomes distorted with whatever truths men suppress within themselves and label as fiction. In one hand I held an empty bottle of RC Cola; in the other, ashes. The air hung heavy from a recent snow, and I stood there, shivering, feeling nothing in everything. It was as if it had been merely an hour since I was last there with him, yet it was the longest, most eternal hour I could remember.

The service took place on a brisk Saturday afternoon in early December, at the local town funeral home. Since he was so young, he hadn't even begun to think about death. I'm sure he would have told his family where he wanted his ceremonies held, if he had a little bit more time to figure it out. He had left the planning and the will and the possessions and the hurt like a burden to bear for his family and friends - except me, it seemed; I felt no burden at all.

There was this one time back when we were eleven or twelve, and I was over at his house, and we pitched a tent in the yard because we wanted to go camping. The sky grew dark, and the stars came out, and he and I climbed up the tree to watch the sun sink lower and lower; to come face-to-face with the stars. It's not often that boys are silent, but that strange moment was an exception. We were wrapped in a restful and permeating reticence - a stillness almost exhaled from the branches of the oak itself.

"Do you ever wonder what's out there?" he asked me.

"Where?"

"Oh, out there a-ways. Wherever the sun went."

"I think the sun went to China," I speculated. "Isn't that where it's supposed to go? It's always around, and it spends some time here, but at night it visits the rest of the world. Like Australia or something."

"I've always wanted to go to Australia," he said. "I want to see the kangaroos."

I thought for a moment, and an idea came to me. "Why does night even have to happen at all?"

"What d'you mean?"

"Why can't we just follow the sun? We spend a whole day traveling the earth, and we get to have the sun forever, because we're going wherever it leads."

A light came on somewhere in his brain. "Hey, yeah! We could see China..."

"...France, and Japan..."

"The kangaroos! And Russia, and D.C..."

My fantastical train of thought came to an abrupt halt. "D.C.?"

“Yeah, D.C.,” he said, looking at me like I was an idiot. “Where that star tower is.”

“The Space Needle?”

“Yeah.”

To two young boys who had barely been out of the state, the difference between Washington State and Washington, D.C. was irrelevant. “....oh, yeah,” I said, remembering. “Let’s do that.”

“I’ve never seen the ocean before,” he continued. “I betcha we’ll be able to see it from the top.”

“Nah, we’ll be too high up for that,” I said, dangling my leg off the side of the branch and beginning to climb down. “Jane said when you’re that high, you can see the stars when it’s *noon*.”

“Eh, I’d rather see the ocean.” He followed me, shifting his bum to the end of the branch and leaping to another, grabbing it as he flew. “We see plenty-a stars from here.”

I shrugged. Personally, I would rather have seen outer space, but I guessed that was just me.

It took a couple of minutes to get to the funeral parlor. By the time we arrived, the sun was already resting on the opposite bank of this little obscure lake I had never seen before. It was surrounded by a couple of weak, skimpy trees, their leaves all but gone for the winter. The building stood squat low to the ground, weighed down by its own nature, maybe even caving inward, as if some fantastically large man had napped on the roof for a while. And the walls were covered with this faded beige color, an old fossil excavated by a couple of ancient archaeologists from the ground of dust, forgetfulness, and the truth we all pass but pretend is never there.

A couple of others were filing into the mouth of this pathetic remnant of the past. Some cast me looks of forced sympathy, some passed over me, realized who I was, and provided a word of consolation, and a few stoically avoided my eye, hoping to forego that awkward exchange of glances that voiced all the feelings we didn't deign appropriate to speak out loud.

Entering the parlor, I saw him, the man of the event, at the end of a little aisleway parted between the seats - a path that transcended space and provided a comforting illusion of a union between the living and the dead. The true words of what this loss actually meant, fractions of phrases, rocketed off the sides of my brain, but none of them really seemed to register. Was *this* the true mark of grief?

"You may be seated," said the reverend from the front of the room. He was an old man, tall and wiry, his skin clinging to his bones, the oppressive hold of the funeral home sucking the breath out of the only living soul who frequented its halls. The attendees floated across the room, clothed in darkness, moving slowly, fragments of a dream, clouds creeping in with a suffocating wind, steadily, bringing with them the consuming shroud of grief.

"You may be seated," echoed a different voice.

I found myself occupying a mahogany church pew, the glossed wood tough against my back, my head up and erect, terrified I'd be caught distracted.

A short and stocky fellow was waiting before the crowd this time, and I saw my mother there, adorned from head to toe in a gentle white, standing at the altar with a strapping man in a black tuxedo. The room was large and bright, the ceilings high, letting in the air of opportunity; those in the room clothed in all sorts of bright and elegant colors, a scrambled rainbow in a world festooned with life. The wind through the open windows stirred the dust in the chapel, not

allowing anything to settle - always moving, always changing, a tangible and terrifying thing, suffocating.

“This suit is entirely too tight.”

I turned, and he was there next to me, tugging at the collar of his white undershirt, scratching at the seat of his pants, shifting restlessly in his leather shoes. “Man, you’ve got to shut up.”

“We are gathered here today to celebrate the marriage of man and woman, the union of God, the beginning of life...” the minister began with a flourish.

He leaned in a bit closer and spoke through gritted teeth. “I’m sorry, I know this is your mother’s big day and all, so I thought I should be comfortable, but what did my mother say? She said, ‘noooo, love, it’s a wedding, you need to be dressed in a straitjacket, you do...’”

I stifled a laugh, elbowing him in the rib. “Seriously. Shut up.”

“...Do you take this man to be your lawfully wedded husband?” asked the minister, in a voice as lighthearted as the wind pretended to be. Yet for me, all I could hear was a tone-deaf chorus of “lawfully-wedded-husband” banging around my brain.

“I do,” said my mother.

“And do you, Mr.-”

“Mr. Cheapskate Imposter Puke Bucket,” I heard him say next to me.

A bit too loudly.

The minister continued his speech as if nothing had happened, but I knew the whole room had heard. The air grew stark and still, the wind stopped, and it seemed as if every single face turned to stare with disdain.

Fire filled my cheeks, and I slumped down low in my seat, lower and lower still, until only the top of my head was visible above the wooden pew.

And him; he just turned his head slowly, carefully, and met my eye from where I was: practically on the floor, at this point. I glared up at him, hoping I could convey my sheer humiliation through the expression of an eye.

“Sorry,” he mouthed.

“I now pronounce you...husband and wife,” concluded the portly minister. “You may kiss the bride.”

From my position on the floor, I couldn’t see the new couple kiss as the organ resumed in the background and everyone stood to applaud. And for that, I was grateful - part of me hoped what I didn’t see would just cease to exist.

“Can I help you up?” he asked, extending his hand.

I conceded, and he pulled me to my feet, my hair disheveled from all the times I had run my hands through it while sitting on the ground, hoping to hide my reddened face.

“Pull a stunt like that again, and we’re through,” I muttered, brushing past him, though I knew he saw a hint of a smirk on my face.

He caught on, grinning and linking his arm with mine. “Well, the man never did that bit about ‘speak now or forever hold your peace,’ so I imagined someone had to stand up for the suffering.”

“And that someone just had to be you,” I said sarcastically, weaving through the crowd to the church doors. “Couldn’t let the sleeping dog lie, could you?”

“Oh, never,” he scoffed. “I warned you. The room was quiet as a funeral; of course it was only a matter of time before I brought some life back into it.”

Punching him playfully, I broke through the throng to the front of the church, bursting through into the brightness of the outdoors.

But I found that the outdoors wasn't that of the chapel at all, but that of the unfamiliar lake, those lonely trees, and this sodden, colorless home of grieving souls.

Shuffling my papers around in my hands, I waited. I planned to speak next, after his girlfriend. She had written the standard sort of eulogy, the same as everyone else's, with anecdotes and tears that filled the page on their own. The words didn't have to carry emotion; if the page was stained with sadness, that was enough to do.

How many tears this carpet held.

I stared down at the ground, where my leather loafers met the ratty rug, observing the twisted and faded spiral patterns woven in its surface.

I saw past the cleanings, past the occasional vacuum or steam. I saw through the fibers and into the floor, the layers upon layers of other people's tears. Of their losses, and their hurt, in this carpet, in the draperies, in the stiff lace tablecloths and thinly-padded chairs.

The difference between this place and the church where my mother got married was blatant and unsettling, but understandable nonetheless: the wind was gone. It was because of this that the curtains didn't blow, and the dust didn't whirl. And I found a new kind of suffocation.

There's the kind where the wind blows so quickly and vibrantly that I can't catch my breath, and then there's the lack of any air in itself - a state in which I can't breathe; the lack of life.

She finished, sniffing once, and stepped around the podium. His parents had chosen to have him cremated, so his urn was standing at the front of the room, surrounded by flowers of

every season of the year. She took a cornflower out from the front of her dress and placed it with the others, kissing her hand and resting it on the rim. After a moment of this utter silence, when she had returned to her seat, I stood, gathering my papers and shuffling to the front of the room. My shoes couldn't seem to really leave the ground, and as I passed the urn, I tried to tell myself that my best friend was *in* there, but I couldn't make myself feel.

I arrived at the podium and took my place, arranging the eulogy on its wooden base. I didn't even know who I was speaking to. Was this a consolation for his family and friends? A last outgoing message to the world of the dead? Just a couple of words to make myself somehow feel better? Feel anything at all?

The entire assembly was sitting in silence. Many were looking at me with somber eyes, while a few dabbed at their faces with handkerchiefs or shirt collars or sleeves. A snuffle or a cough could be heard now and then. I had a sense they were waiting for me, but also that they weren't anxious or restless.

And still, I felt nothing.

I opened my mouth to speak, took a breath, and faltered. The eulogy I had spent a week writing now seemed unintelligent and daft; just a jumble of words written on a piece of paper. The whole event began to lose its purpose. I was standing here, behind a wooden podium, before a bunch of faces, an ocean of black, a pile of ashes.

In this state of numbness and lack, I studied those ashes.

They were the ashes of a life. Of a heart that beat once. Of a boy that ran once. That loved once. That cried once, and lived once, and died once. I saw him laughing with me, splashing in the old lake we often visited as boys. Running ahead of me across the hills in the twilight, catching fireflies, looking back to me to make sure I was there. Yelling at me when I

had broken his one-of-a-kind model of the *USS Missouri*. Playing video games with me at the hospital when I had fallen from his tree and snapped my leg in three different places. Sitting beside me in silence at the memorial service for my dad, killed while serving his country. And then I saw those exact same scenes, but he was no longer in them. It was only me, on my own. From now on. A piece of my life, erased from the face of this world, as if God had made a simple mistake, and the first half of my existence was just some sort of rough draft. I saw myself a whole different man, a man living half a life. For what was my childhood...what was the future, if the very person who had been my life was reduced to a pile of ashes?

And, just like that, the purpose, and feeling, and meaning, and depth, and harrowing, pulsing, deafening realization burst into my soul.

Thus, slowly, painstakingly, beautifully, the elegy of a best friend who had never loved one person so much in his life wrote itself, in a hue and a passion that I never thought existed before I met him.

It was in Ireland. At Glenlough Bay, in Co. Donegal.

It's a quiet place, right by the sea, surrounded by these jagged cliffsides and vast blue waters. He and I grew up in Plainfield, Indiana, which is pretty inland, not counting the Great Lakes. We had been out to see Lake Michigan a couple of times, but, of course, that was never enough for him - it was always the ocean. That's what he really wanted to see.

So, for his twenty-first birthday, I got us two tickets to visit Ireland. That's where his family is from, but his mom became pretty distant from her relatives, so he had never been to Ireland to see them, or to see where his heritage lay. It was the week of Thanksgiving. We would

be up there for five days, and fly back just in time for the holiday, which he would spend with his family in Plainfield.

Of course, that was the plan, but plans don't usually stick to the agendas people set for them. I expected a few changes in our itinerary.

What I did not expect was my best friend collapsing of sudden cardiac arrest on the completely deserted and utterly isolated cliffs of Glenlough Bay.

I drove the little Volkswagen hatchback rental car up as far as we were allowed, and we piled out of the thing to walk up to the very top of the rock, where we could take in the Irish vista, and he could see the ocean in person for the very first time.

Once we were out of the car, he stopped suddenly, grasping my arm.

"Bec - wait."

"What?" I asked, smiling, tugging away from him.

"Listen."

I stopped, straining my ears to hear this mysterious sound he was pointing out to me.

Waves. The ocean waves.

I hadn't registered the sound - it had simply been a faraway murmur until he had said something.

We stood in silence for a moment.

"Aren't they majestic?" he asked, breathless, staring out at the rock with a wide-eyed wonder.

"Yeah, they are. You done? Want to get back in the car?" I teased, making as if to turn around.

“I mean, honestly, that enough would fill a day.” He laughed along with me, and we began our ascent to the top of the cliff.

As I was walking, I began to notice other little details. The scent of salt in the air, the feeling of my feet on the rock, and the heat of the sun mingled with a light breeze from some distant spring. A beauty was being revealed to me, and one by one, each object in my field of view seemed to turn into color. It was black-and-white before, but now, the earth was color.

And then, we were there.

Before I even looked out at the sea, I turned to watch his face.

His eyes grew so large I didn’t think his head could hold them. The shadow of the cliffs seemed to give way to a celestial glow that warmed his countenance, and a smile as big and real as life itself dawned on his face.

Turning, his smile infectious, I saw the ocean for myself.

It was incredible.

There are absolutely no words to describe the majesty of the world, and the authentic realness of the feelings I felt, and the sights I saw. Every sense was tangible, every abstract concept magnified in my heart to form an elation that could only be described as euphoria.

This was *euphoria*.

And I saw him there, on the precipice of his life, about to turn twenty-one, in the land of his heritage, living out the dream he had cherished since he was only a boy in Plainfield, Indiana. Watching him standing there, I thought to myself, and a voice inside of me said, almost audibly: This is life.

“It’s strange, isn’t it.”

He broke his gaze from the sea to look at me, and continued: “Everyone always tells me to live in the present. To savor each moment. I could never really understand it before, but now...I get it. I finally get it.”

I looked at him, silent. The cliffs, the sea, the sky spoke for themselves. I didn’t need to say a word.

“It’s true,” he said. “My mother always told me that one day I’ll turn around and realize that a man rich in life - and poor in hours - might pay any amount to simply turn back time. Isn’t that the strangest thing?”

It was then that I saw him - right in that instant. Past his eyes, and his body. I saw his soul, and his spirit - the core of a man. The *life* that inhabits what would otherwise be a worthless shell. And I believe he could see the same in me.

I turned to watch the ocean. It was great, and boundless, and infinite. The horizon did not mark its end - it was just what the eye believed to be the end. In reality, it was only the beginning.

And, just like that, he fell.

A great and utter silence collapsed upon the cliffs; raptured the sea. The wind no longer blew, and the leaves hushed their rustle. The entire earth seemed to hold its breath - waiting. Waiting.

I can’t remember what I said. What words came out of my mouth as I pulled out my phone and realized it had no reception. As I looked around me and saw no one. As I understood, with a slow burning rising into my stomach, how fully and truly alone I had become. I can’t remember what I told God as I knelt beside him and prayed. As I pressed down on his chest, over and over. As I tried to give him any life, even mine, but how that wasn’t enough. How nothing I

could do was enough to save the person who meant more to me than the world; who I was more indebted to than anyone I could think of. Who had absolutely no reason or right to die.

Everything after that eternal second passed in a haze.

The wind blew again, and the ocean roared below me, but I couldn't register it. To me it was an offense - a transgression against him - that the world would simply return to how it used to be, as if nothing had ever happened.

As if that's all he was - just a moment, for which the earth had stopped a fraction of an instant. Just a man. The world had thousands. Millions. Billions. More born every second. And that was it.

His breath was now the wind that filled the trees, and the pull that stirred the ocean, and the waves that beat against the cliffs of Glenlough Bay.

That's all.

I stood in front of the funeral attendees in the sorry little beige building, staring down at my eulogy. When I looked at the ink on the page, when I really studied the fine lines of my pen, I didn't see any meaning. It was just paper. The words on that page didn't have any power - their sentence structure, phraseage...none of it mattered. My mind was in some other world of abstract, but at the same time, in a fierce war with logic. Sky and land, space and earth, unseen and visible, shadow and darkness, smoke and mirrors.

When my dad died, I felt similar. It was a sort of crushing emptiness that left me at a loss for words. My dad had always been a guide to me - a lighthouse to follow and look up to. When he was killed, everything afterward - the phone calls, the will, the memorial service - passed in a fog-laden mist. The only thing I distinctly remember about that time was my best friend reaching

through that fog and pulling me onward. Even though at times the only thing I could see clearly was his hand in mine, with everything else encased in shadow, he was always there. And now, standing before this crowd of people who meant nothing to me, I groped in the dark, searching for his hand, for anything to pull me out of the agony drowning me, but all I grasped was empty, purposeless nothing. Reason was lost, and my senseless words to the mourners were the product of endlessly falling through the dark, of not knowing what I had until he was gone.

My purpose was now the wind that filled the trees, and the pull that stirred the ocean, and the waves that beat against the cliffs of Glenlough Bay.

That's all.

"I met my best friend when he knocked on my door and asked me for a bottled RC Cola," I began, my words monotonous and thick in my throat. "His family was moving in next door, and he was thirsty. I told him we didn't have bottled RC Colas - I didn't even know what they were, and my guess is that they stopped selling RC Colas in the bottle long before he came rapping at my door on July 14th, 2009. He seemed satisfied by this response, and promptly left my house. I can remember going to the dining room picture window and watching him cross the yard back to the other house and bounce in place on the gravel front stoop. They loaded box after box, and with each new crate, he would bounce anew, following his dad or uncle and asking what was in it, if he could see, if he could help. And that's kind of always the way he was. He would continuously come over and knock, asking for that same cola. We never had it, and eventually he got the message, but he never did stop coming. Before I knew it, I was his friend, and we did boyish things together. Sneaking around the yard as military men with sticks for guns, chasing the dogs (or our sisters) around the street, climbing trees, staying awake for hours at sleepovers we had at least every other week. We were always moving, and with every step I

took, he was right beside me. We were what my mom called ‘two faces with one mind.’ I really didn’t know what friendship was until he slapped me on the arm and told me I was making a huge mistake when I was planning to ask out Jane Ridley in seventh grade. I didn’t know what laughter was until we got our pants stuck trying to climb over the neighbor’s chain link fence. I didn’t know what sacrifice was until he left his play on opening night because he heard that my dad had just been killed in action. I didn’t really even know what life was until he opened my eyes and showed me the beauty that lies within a moment, and how to really listen and appreciate the opportunity of each and every day.

“With him, things were always changing. Change used to be a difficult concept for me to grasp, as I’ve had to experience so much change in my life that it’s like I’m drowning in the ocean, unable to catch a breath, each new and unpredictable wave crashing over my head just as I’m able to take a gasp of air. When he came into my life, he took that change, that rage-tossed sea, and showed me how to tame it. He was there for me, in every rise and fall. With him, change became a good thing. It was a refreshing break from normal, and instead of stressing over tomorrow, I found myself enjoying the simple beauty of today. He always wanted to see the ocean, and it’s really no wonder, because the ocean is always moving and changing, but it’s still magnificent, in whatever form it takes. Isn’t it interesting, then, that the moment he died was the moment he was standing still?”

I took a pause. The assembly was watching me, captivated in a story, enraveled in a past, just as I was. I ached to step back two or three weeks, to when everything was okay, and everything was right. With him, time had been a boundless and abstract concept, an adventure waiting to be revealed. Now, it was real, and it crushed the life out of me, sucking the air out of

the room. Time had taken off its mask - revealed its true nature - and once I realized I couldn't control it, I felt betrayed. Deprived. Almost traumatized.

"His last words....." I began, stumbling midsentence. In an instant, I was back in that eternal second, when the silence cursed the world, and he fell. The stillness of the room turned into the reticence of the cliffs, and I was there, holding his body in my arms. How was it just? My soul seemed to scream inside of me, but the silence was strangling, and I couldn't say a word. It didn't make sense that his heart - the very source of his life, and his goodness, and love, and purity, would simply give up on him, at the point in time when his entire existence was just beginning.

My mind halted mid-thought as the long-suppressed ghosts of my father's death awakened in my stomach in a jagged haunt.

His *heart* gave up on him?

It wasn't his heart. It was me. *I* gave up on him.

They say everyone "moves on" from death eventually, and that phrase has always bothered me. The thing about history, and the rule of time, is its permanence. Every moment builds upon another, and the present is only in existence because of the past. My friend was dead because of the years, months, hours, and innumerable minutes that had led to his standing there, at the ocean in Glenlough Bay. And I couldn't help but feel like if I hadn't been there, or if I had kept trying to revive him for a moment longer, he might still be with me. How could I "move on" from my own failure?

My dad used to tell me I could do anything. I could attain whatever I wanted in life, if I tried hard enough and gave my all. Now, at the funeral for my best friend, I found it kind of stupid that I could do "anything," but the one thing I couldn't do, no matter how hard I tried, was

the thing I wanted the very most: to save the person who meant more to me than anyone ever had, and likely ever would.

I failed him.

“You didn’t fail him, Bec.”

I couldn’t see anything, couldn’t hear anything but my own heartbeat clashing with the tempo of my shattered breaths, alone in the military memorial chapel, alone with my thoughts, alone with myself and my own inadequacy.

They’d taken my dad’s ashes about an hour ago. Everyone had left the room. It was vacant and empty and so utterly vast, and I was trapped. Trapped in my own mind and this massive empty space where my dad would have been if I had truly been able to do *anything*. If I was powerful enough to have saved him. My dad had never been wrong about anything, until he made me feel like I could hold time in my hands and carry the ones who mattered most. The day I realized he was wrong was the day I realized he was gone.

“Bec.”

My best friend’s voice echoed through the silence. He served as a constant reminder that I wasn’t actually alone...he would say something, and I would, for a moment, remember the reality behind the black curtain enveloping my mind, but then I’d forget, and he’d have to remind me again.

“You didn’t fail him.” His hand was on my shoulder as I knelt on the ragged wooden floors, the smell of antiquity and the sense of home sending jolts of cruel irony through my chest. Everyone was gone. His ashes were gone. My father was gone.

“He told me I could do anything.” My voice echoed dimly in the chapel. “I should have been there.”

“Look at me.”

I couldn’t bring my head up. It was like someone was holding my face downward, because the darkness was easier, and part of me hoped what I didn’t see would just cease to exist.

“Please.”

I took a sharp breath inward, hesitated, and broke my mind away from itself. His face was hazy through my tears, but it was all I could see. He watched me in heartbroken silence for a moment, then began. “Bec, your dad lived.”

“I know he lived,” I muttered, exasperated. “I was there.”

“No, I mean...he *lived*. Your dad *lived* a full life, and he died doing what he was made to do.”

“How could you possibly know he’d lived a full life?”

“Think about it,” he told me. “He woke up every morning. He saw his son, and his daughter, and his wife. He went to a job that demanded the world of him, but he knew in his heart it was one of the reasons he was alive. Every second of his life changed the entire course of the universe. Your dad was living the complete human experience. People like to slap a label on what life is supposed to be, but our ambition and our fear, our not getting around to what we feel like we should, our hapless dreams of the biggest things in life...I’d argue *that’s* what living is all about. Your dad lived a full life because he was human, and when he died, he was changing the entire trace of *time*. I can’t explain every reason behind it, or what necessarily lies on the other side. But when I think of your dad and the life he lived, one word comes to mind: Everything.”

I didn't quite know what exactly "everything" meant. I couldn't put it into words, but somewhere in my heart, it felt right, and I broke.

"C'mere," he told me, and instead of the darkness of the floor and of my head, it was the darkness of a shoulder to rest on. Such an outpouring of emotion overflowed from my heart, and there are no words that could really do it justice, but in a way, I felt like in that moment, I was living, too.

He was silent for enough time that I lost track, but then a thought seemed to come to him. "You said earlier...you said, 'I know he lived. I was there.' But if you really think about it, you weren't just there *while* he lived. You were there...and you are here...*because* he lived."

It was at that moment, standing by the pulpit at the funeral for my best friend - someone I still couldn't comprehend having lost - when I was questioning everything I ever knew, when I found myself trapped in an instant, the instant he fell, while my body was here and my mind was there....it was in this moment that I felt a strange peace, a resilience, and a faith without knowing the future. It was as if my friend had extended his hand out of the mist towards my drowning soul and was leading me down another trail of time - until, like a towel warm from the dryer, I was wrapped in nothing but a memory. My body was standing before the mourners, but my mind and my soul were someplace else entirely. I didn't understand, and I didn't know anything, but a voice rose out of my chest, and I spoke.

"Finn's last words were: 'One day I'll turn around and realize that a man rich in life - and poor in hours - might pay any amount to simply turn back time.' He has no idea....he would have no idea how much I wish to turn back time right now. I'm barely a man. I don't have much. I haven't lived many years. I'm a twenty-one-year-old senior in college, born and raised in

Plainfield, Indiana. The one thing I am, though I may be young, is rich in life. And the only reason I consider myself rich in life is because of what Finn taught me. I'm rich because he gave me the world. I don't walk through a day in shades of gray anymore. Because of him, I see in color. I can smell, and taste, and feel, and hear. He opened up the future for me. And everything inside of me tells me there is no possible way I could move on from this moment. I didn't see my tomorrow as worth waking up for if he wouldn't be in it with me. And yet now, somehow, I understand. The gift Finn gave to me *is* life. Throughout his twenty-one years, he taught me how to live. I understand that the only way I could possibly reconcile his death within myself is by putting everything I can into my life. I'm not "moving on" from his soul, because his life meant everything to me. I'm taking the life he poured into me and spilling it out into the brilliant earth he loved with his entire soul. What a privilege it is to have a friend who makes this world worth living in, and who leaves in his wake a force even stronger than grief - hope."

Walking out of the funeral home that day in early December was quite different from stepping off the porch to play with him on the street, exiting the church with him on my mother's wedding day, or getting out of the Volkswagen hatchback with him to see the oceans of Glenlough Bay. For once in my life, my very best friend wasn't with me. At that moment, it was hard to see where I would go from there. The path before me was completely open, but in a way, it felt closed and empty.

We traveled back to Ireland to spread his ashes in the bay, as we all agreed that was where he had been at the highest point of his life, and where he would want his body to be. And as I let go of what was left of my friend, a large part of me still felt that nag, that longing, to turn back time. But that was something I could not do, and something I would never be able to do. I

knew that the only thing left ahead of me was to simply take a step forward, because I still had a life ahead of me, and if Finn taught me anything, it's to savor a moment, because the sunset moves quickly, and before I know it, that golden moment is gone.

Stepping back from the cliff, I looked out at the ocean, and the trees, and the clouds, and the shore. I made an effort to hear the waves out in front of me, and to feel the wind and the sun beating upon my chest. And I looked out at the horizon line, where the boundless sky meets the infinite sea. I remembered that day, three weeks previous. The day when I was there, with the only brother I had ever known, and when I felt as if I was truly encountering *life* for the very first time. I closed my eyes, then, and imagined him there, standing next to me.

I couldn't tell you for sure he wasn't right beside me in that moment; my eyes were shut, and I can't disprove what I didn't see.

The horizon does not mark the end of the ocean - it is just what the eye believes to be the end.

In reality, it is only the beginning.

Isn't that the strangest thing?