

"Forever, Without a Goodbye"

Everything that lives eventually dies. I learned that when I was eight years old and my kitten darted in front of a neighbor's car. "Death," my father whispered in comfort, "is simply a part of life." A part I didn't like, but learned to accept with each passing pet. It wasn't until my friend from graduate school died that I realized my dad was wrong. Death was not a part of life—for Jody, it was the end of one. Hers.

After graduation from school in Atlanta, Jody moved New York City to write for a prestigious advertising agency. She landed the job we all wanted, but didn't get. Over the following few months, all twenty-five of us tightly-knit graduates dispersed. A handful jetted to the West Coast. Others opted to go East. And I, well, I trekked to Pittsburgh, PA. Home to the second oldest population in the country. Fried food and fatties. BFF's from first grade. Fifty days of sunshine a year. And marathon winters that stretched a miserable nine months. Needless to say, this wasn't my ideal place to live, especially for this native twenty-six year old Texan who thrived on vitamin D, exercising outside and girly get-togethers.

But there was a job there. And I really needed a job. After five years in college, two years in Grad school and forty thousand dollars of student loan debt, I grabbed the first solid job offer that came my way. Three weeks in, I wanted out. But I had no money, no experience, and no idea where I truly wanted to go. So I stayed. Renewed my Blockbuster membership, bought a VCR and lost myself in fictional follies.

But days soon turned into weeks. Weeks turned into months. And before I knew it I had been in Pittsburgh for half a year. It was six months of doing uncreative creative at an old, stodgy Ad Agency. Six months of failing to find friends. Six months of living vicariously through colleagues residing in more exciting cities. At half past twenty-six years old, my life was so far from mirroring those dreams I dreamt just a short while ago. I was a bit past miserable and so desperately wanted a different life. I knew I had leave Pittsburgh but I was scared. Really, really scared. Everywhere I turned, I looked and listened for a sign. Come on God, talk to me. Shout from the heavens like in the Old Testament. Send an angel. Send a stranger. Send a bus ticket anonymously in the mail. I prayed and prayed that someone, somewhere, somehow would tell me what I should do, where I should go, and how to live happily ever after. I wanted a sign. And on Tuesday, June 30, 1998, I got it.

It was an ordinary Pittsburgh afternoon—humid, gloomy and not at all hot by my southern standards. I was hiding out in my 13th floor office, so discouraged with reality that I couldn't do much of anything except stare out the window into nothingness and dream about a job I didn't have, and friends I used to. Then my computer dinged with incoming mail. 1998 was near the beginning of the Internet era and email was a hot, new thing. I loved email. It kept me connected. It kept me sane. It kept me close to friends that were now so very far away. And on that idle Tuesday afternoon, I really needed a friendly hello.

Ironically, the email played out as a goodbye. An obituary of a friend. It was a mass email sent to dozens of our Grad school buddies from a classmate living in New York City. It read something like: "Jody Sack was dead. That so and so, told so and so, Jody fell down some

stairs in New York City and died." The words were cold. Not out of intention, but out of urgency to spread the news. At that moment, no one knew exactly what had happened to Jody, but the fact that something bad did happen was news enough to spread. At first I thought the email was bogus. Then I didn't know what to think. So I called up a friend from school who then called the director of our Grad program. The rumor was confirmed. It wasn't a sick joke or exaggerated gossip. It was real. Jody was gone—forever, without a goodbye.

After the initial shock subsided, I began searching for the "why." Why her? Why now? Why so tragic? Why did Jody die now, instead of eight years ago in that horrible car wreck that almost killed her—but didn't? I don't know why God let Jody live then, yet called her home now. I don't know why He cradled her fall so many times before, yet this time let her slip down a fire escape while leaving a rooftop BBQ in Manhattan. I don't know why it happened that way, but it did. It simply did. One moment Jody was alive. The next, she wasn't. In one split second, all her hopes and dreams and fears vanished. In one, stupid, split second.

Throughout my entire life I have always found comfort in believing that all things happen for a reason. Maybe not for my reasons, but for God's. Perhaps, I thought, life's detours were the only way for His divine puzzle of life to fit together. I hope that one day I will understand why things happen the way they do. But I don't know if I'll ever understand why things happened the way they did that stale summer evening in June at a festive get-together in New York City. I hear people say everyday that life is short, but until someone I knew died, that string of words was an empty expression.

I thought that the law of the land was that everyone grew up, worked hard, made money, fell in love, and had a family—then, in the dusk of their days, passed on lessons learned to generations that followed. I thought that somewhere in the cycle of life you were supposed to get the chance to live. I thought that death happened to other people's friends, not mine. Not when they're twenty-seven. And in those moments of sorrow, I had an epiphany—as quickly and as easily as death happened to Jody, it could happen to me. And I'm not ready to die.

In my script, I die old. Very, very old. When my hair fades gray and my skin gracefully prunes. In my script, I will have done great things with my life. Made a name for myself. Made a contribution to society. Made a difference. I will have had a husband. And children. And grandchildren. In my script, I ride off into the sunset when I say so. Not when someone else does. Even if that someone else is supposedly God. My story is a romantic comedy. Not a tragedy. Definitely, not a tragedy. And Jody's wasn't supposed to be a tragedy either. She was a pretty girl. A smart girl. A funny girl. She made me laugh. She made herself laugh. And when I met her just a few short years prior, I believed she was at the beginning of her life. Not edging towards the end of it. She just spent two grueling years preparing herself for a career in one of the most cut-throat businesses out there. She was 27. Not 72. TWENTY-SEVEN!!!! It wasn't her time. At least I didn't think so. And I'm sure in that moment of panic, she didn't think so either.

After learning the news of Jody's death, I just sat there. Thinking. Crying. Trying to make sense out of the senseless. Staring out the window into nothingness. Dreaming about a job I didn't have, and a friend I used to. A friend named Jody who died way too young.

Up until that day I was searching for words of advice. That someone, somewhere, would tell me something that would somehow change my life for the better. I had no idea that the advice I was searching for would be communicated through silence. It was Jody's death—not her life—that inspired me to quit fantasizing about tomorrow and start living in the moment. Over the following few months that trailed Jody's death, I thought long and hard about the true desires of my heart. I wanted to like where I lived. I wanted to fall in love. I wanted to get married and have kids. I wanted a house with a yard, and a great big Golden Retriever named Scout. I wanted it now. Not ten years from now. Now! I wanted a life. Not merely a job. But a life. A rich and fulfilling life. One that I knew wouldn't unfold in Pittsburgh, PA. That city just wasn't me.

I knew I had to leave, but how? I was getting paid pennies and barely had a savings. I had an apartment full of stuff that I couldn't afford to move. I had a twelve-month lease that I couldn't afford to break. I had a Jr. copywriter job that I couldn't afford to quit. And I had the biggest knot in my stomach from trying to figure out what I should do next.

So when September rolled around, I did the only thing I could. I quit my job, sold everything that wouldn't fit into my Honda Accord and drove west. I wasn't exactly sure where in California I would end up, or what I would be doing once I arrived, but one thing was for sure, I knew I wasn't going to waste one more day living by default. One thing Jody's death did, that her life couldn't do, was slap me with the cold reality that we only have so many tomorrows. I'm nowhere near ready to say my farewells, and I guarantee you, Jody wasn't either.

So if there's anything I learned from my pit stop in Pittsburgh it's this: go dance in the rain and sing like a fool intoxicated with love. Share your honest heart with those you admire. Live your dreams and do what others dare not. Do it today. Right here. Right now. Because you want to. Because you can. Because life is short. Very, very short. Because you're not always the author of the script called life. Live without regrets. Live without fear. Live each day as it is your last. Because one day, it will be.

Goodbye Jody. For now, anyway. I'm sorry you died young. But I know you died happy. Maybe not in the moment. But at that time in your life. And thank you, my dear friend, for your silent advice.