

Supernova

On losing a friend

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We've dressed for summer weather but it's chilly and damp, a misty rain swelling and receding like a tide. The ancient pines that surround our campsite scent the air and darken the sky. Even on a bright day, it would look like dusk in these woods. Avi begins unpacking the car and methodically preparing the site. He is good at it and it's good for him. A software engineer, his normal habitat is a desk and computer screen, but he loves to work with his hands. Four-year-old Lily is exploring the forest. She flits back to me, her big brown eyes shining.

"Mama, will you build a fairy house with me?" I tell her no; I'd rather help build the actual camp.

Charlie is back in the car reading a book. I'd made him get out when we arrived but he'd climbed right back in after briefly surveying the dampness of the campsite. I start to get annoyed. If he'd only get out and play with Lily, she'd stop pestering me.

I open the car door. "Charlie. Charlie. *Charlie*. It's time to get out."

"But I don't want to get out." At seven, he's perfected the art of whining. "Daddy said I could stay here!"

"How about I set up the hammock and you and Lily could play with that?"

"I want to read my book!"

"We didn't come camping for you to sit in the car all day! It's ridiculous!"

He just looks at me, angry, miserable. "Fine," I half-shout, and I slam the door shut a little too hard. I'm instantly ashamed. My Great-Grandma Button had this saying: Why say no when it doesn't matter? I just want him to be here in the woods with us, to be present, to get out of his head.

But I'm not really here either. One moment I am waving hello to our friends Matt and Lisa, who are camping with us at the neighboring

site. The next I am thinking about how Matt used to date my best friend Jo. I'd always hoped she'd come camping with us one day. She would have found Charlie's car sit-in protest so funny. She always found a reason to laugh. Until one day she didn't, and she walked in front of a train.

I'm hammering a tent stake into the earth and I'm seeing sparks. They hover around me like fireflies, like stars quivering with explosive energy. I'm not here. I'm in my old kitchen the day I got the call that Jo had been found on the tracks, and I'm falling to the grubby linoleum floor, unable to breathe.

Our engagement party was at the apartment Avi and I shared in Queens. I'd put huge tree branches up in the archway between the living room and kitchen, hung little multicolored lanterns from them, hot-glued silk leaves to the tips of every twig. A disco ball spun spots of red onto the living room walls. I wore a flared white skirt and a tight white corset I'd bought at a fetish shop. I was going out to nightclubs a lot in those days, and corsets were kind of my thing. I flitted around barefoot, feeling like sparks were flying from my fingertips.

At the party, Jo and I were chatting with my cousin Ben. Jo was a beauty, tall and blonde with green eyes, and five years younger than me. Ben asked how we met, and she and I looked at each other and just cracked up. This was in 2003, and at the time, it was so hard to explain meeting online to someone who didn't post on message boards; it just sounded creepy and lame. I started to say my usual line—*we met through a mutual friend*—when Avi popped over.

"They like to send each other pictures of dogs in clothing and then giggle about it," he said.

Jo threw back her head and laughed her huge, room-filling belly laugh, and I just about fell over, holding my gut, wiping away tears. What Avi said was true. But it sounded so dirty.

Jo and I met on a nightclub message board. It attracted twenty-something city dwellers, adventurous enough to dance all night,

drinking and popping pills, but nerdy enough to spend the next day chatting about it online while pretending to work. Jo was living in Illinois when we first met, so our friendship was digital at first. Sitting at my desk at my somber insurance company job, my face would turn bright red from suppressed laughter at Jo's latest message. We teamed up for goofy online games. We Photoshopped each others' heads onto hot dog costumes.

Once she moved to New York we got to see each other in person, on the dance floor with our nightclub crew, playing Scrabble, or just making burritos at the apartment Avi and I shared. Jo made great strawberry margaritas.

"Dude," she'd say, "Avi. You have to help us out here. We made a whole pitcher and you're not holding up your end."

Avi would do his best but eventually he'd fall asleep and Jo and I would bring the pitcher and a bag of tortilla chips up to the roof, telling stories and giggling until it was too late for her to go home. She'd sleep on the couch and the next morning I'd make everyone pancakes.

"Dude, Avi," she'd say, "you have to make the coffee because it's totally your fault me and Katie had too much margarita."

When Avi and I moved to Yonkers and had a baby, a lot of our friends stopped coming by so much. But more often than I could believe, Jo would take the subway from Brooklyn and then get on the Metro-North to come see us. Waiting at the train station for her in my car, I'd fiddle impatiently with the radio and then spot her on the platform with her enormous handbag and we'd wave, and I'd think, *Jo*.

She adored our son Charlie, who called her Doe once he could talk. Our apartment complex had a pool and Jo and Charlie loved to swim. Before Charlie, Jo and I had done a lot of beach trips and we both loved floating in the ocean. Now we liked to race through the pool, idiotically, competitively, using those brightly colored noodles as pogo sticks. Once, as we ate lunch before a long-planned swimming day, the sky began to darken, and thunder rumbled. Charlie

started to get upset.

“Doe, it’s yightning? It’s gonna wain?”

Jo said, “You know what the forecast is, Charlie? Cloudy, with a chance of *ticklestorms*.”

She pounced on him and he squealed. We played board games and ate Cheerios from the box and watched the rain fall.

When our next baby, Lily, came along, Jo was her first baby-sitter. Lily was only four months old, but Avi’s boss was getting married at the Plaza in Manhattan and attendance was a must. We booked a hotel room nearby and set it up with snacks for Jo and pumped breast milk for Lily.

“This stuff smells like ass and hay,” Jo pronounced.

Jo’s other best friend Lacey came to keep her company. Over the years Jo had tried to make the three of us into a little group, but I didn’t have as much in common with Lacey. I think I also just wanted my time with Jo all to myself. That night, I hated to leave little Lily but knew that Jo would take good care of her. When we came back from the wedding Lily was asleep and Jo seemed tired but happy. “She’s just so freaking cute!” she said. Lacey told me years later that Jo had walked Lily up and down the hallway in the stroller forever to get her to sleep. Then after about an hour, Jo woke the baby up so she could play with her.

One Wednesday morning in July, I got an email from Lacey saying that Jo was missing. Lacey said Jo’s mother hadn’t heard from her either. I knew it was bad. I wondered if she’d hooked up with the wrong guy or gotten in an accident. I was supposed to be packing for our move to our new house in Westchester, only two days away. But I spent the day pacing, thinking up scenarios that ended with Jo still alive.

That afternoon Lacey called again. “I’m sorry, but I have really bad news. Jo died yesterday.”

“What?” I kept saying. “What?”

After that, Lacey’s words blurred together. Something about

a train in New Jersey. Something about a lawsuit at her job. Lacey and Sam and Lena came to our apartment in Yonkers, all the way from New Jersey and Queens. Sam was Jo’s ex-boyfriend—they’d remained friends—and Lena was her good friend from college. I huddled with them in my tiny kitchen, trying to keep our voices down so four-year-old Charlie wouldn’t hear.

“I just want to hear that it was an accident,” I said.

“Katie, it wasn’t an accident,” said Sam.

They told me she jumped in front of an Acela express train. I sank to the floor, hands over my face. They said there was a note. They told me not to read the news articles about it, which of course I did. There was a photo of a train with a big dent and red stains on its sleek nose. It took over four hours to recover the parts of her strewn across tracks going in both directions. One part ended up on the platform. (Which one? I wondered. A hand? A foot? Jo always liked to paint her toes orange.) People in the comments section complained about how long their commute had been. One guy said the station reeked of rotting meat for days. I composed responses to these comments but never sent them. *She wasn’t an inconvenience, she was a person*, I thought. I wanted to plaster the train station with pictures of her. I searched obsessively until I found grainy black and white surveillance footage someone captured with their cell phone and posted online. One moment she’s in her black dress on the tracks. Then the screen fills with train and she just disappears. I watched it over and over but it didn’t make her death seem any more real.

Avi stunned into silence, took care of the kids so I could be with Jo’s friends. We sat around, cried a little, mostly just stared. Lacey’s and Lena’s phones rang nonstop as people started to hear. So many people loved her, even people who knew her only a little. Lacey and Lena didn’t give out any details, but everyone knows what it means when a young person dies and no one will say how. They had long discussions about who should be told what and how much, while Sam and I looked at each other like, *does this really fucking matter?*

But we shrugged. This was their way of dealing.

There was a memorial gathering that Friday night in the city. Our move was happening the same day, so we rushed in just toward the end, pushing the kids in strollers. I walked into the packed room and felt like all eyes turned to me at once, with such a surge of sympathy I was drowning in it. I greeted a few people, then tried to hide in a corner. A long hug from someone I didn't know that well, a sweet guy from the old nightclub days, finally got me sobbing. Jo's parents were there from Illinois; it was my first time meeting them. Both of them are ministers. Her mom actually comforted me. Jo's dad had his daughter's eyes; I couldn't bear to look at them.

"You can only grieve those you loved," he said.

I nodded and wept, unable to speak. When it was time to leave, Avi signed the book and started crying. If not for Charlie's stroller to hold on to I would have fallen to the ground. I howled like a wild animal with a broken leg. I began gasping for breath. I was choking. My stomach twisted into a hard knot and I felt like I was going to pass out.

"Be strong, be strong, Katie! Jo would want you to be strong!" A girl named Colleen shouted it, as though from behind a veil. My little Charlie was twisting around in his stroller to look at me, confused and scared.

"Mama? Mama?" he said. I knew I had to stop screaming, so I pulled myself together and we left.

The funeral was the following week in Aurora, Illinois. JOSEPHINE AVERY SIMMONS, MEMORIAL SERVICE, a sign read at the church, and seeing it in print like that, it seemed so impossible. *This should be Jo's wedding*, I thought.

People slowly processed through the flower-filled church. A bishop gave the eulogy. He'd known Jo through her parents and from Jo's days working at the church office. He and Jo had shared an interest in sailing.

"She loved heavy weather," he said.

It was true. Jo had always faced adversity with such courage and a grin on her face.

"I never knew she was in so much pain," people over the past week had said. "I guess this is what she wanted."

Fuck that, I thought. I wished people would stop thinking of her as a pitiful, melancholy creature. She was a motherfucking pirate.

She'd had some mild chronic depression but she was not suicidal. She'd had a thriving career as an artists' rep. She loved her family and friends. She'd just rented her first roommate-free apartment and had IKEAed it to the hilt. The only thing somewhat amiss was that over the past few years she'd become obsessed with her job to the expense of other areas in her life. She wasn't really dating and had less time for friends, including me, because nearly everything she had went into her work. I thought of it as a phase and admired her fierce work ethic.

The day before she walked in front of that train, she'd received a legal packet in the mail at her office. Her family has kept the details private, and Jo never called me about it. All I know is that this professional calamity terrified her. I'm guessing she feared she'd lose her job and maybe even her apartment. Independence was everything to her. She had worked so hard to move to New York. But ninety-nine times out of a hundred, Jo would have faced this problem, kicked its ass, and kept on trucking. This time she snapped. But even then, I think she could as easily have ended up getting on a bus to Mexico, or running naked through the park. Just our fucking luck, her temporary insanity ended up being permanent and fatal.

The force of the love for Jo at the funeral was so strong that I didn't want to leave. Then it would be over, and she'd really be gone. Daily life afterward seemed strange and wrong. I'd buy eggs at the store and the clerk would try to make small talk, and I'd think angrily, *I can't chat about the weather with you, you dick. My friend is dead*. I only wanted to talk with Lacey and Lena. But we were all so lost, it was hard to help each other much. A week after the funeral I

helped Lacey and Lena pack up Jo's apartment because her mother couldn't bear to do it. I remember holding an old pair of fuzzy socks in my hand and wondering how it was possible that she wouldn't wear them again.

In those early days of grief, a little kernel of a belief began to take root in me, that there were places where none of it had happened. Those places became tangible, other worlds just out of reach. I read everything I could find about parallel universes. Like Borges' "The Garden of Forking Paths," in which a character conceives of time not as linear, but as a garden with a labyrinth. Every moment happens in parallel, the paths branching into infinite destinations. I spent my days unpacking boxes and caring for the kids, making peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, reading library books, washing faces. At night I paced the labyrinth. I needed to find the path that had turned right instead of left, away from the train instead of toward it. I wished I could go there, just for a few hours, to have one more silly phone chat. Or play Scrabble. Or go to the beach, if that wasn't too greedy.

Path One

Jo had been feeling down for a while. Then at work on Monday, she got the package of legal papers. She was likely to lose the job she loved and maybe never work in this field again and oh god, what about the huge security deposit on the apartment? Something burst in her psyche, like an emotional aneurism. The next morning she called in sick. She did some research online and found a station that's a popular place for suicide because the trains hit speeds of 150 miles per hour, and it's easy to get onto the tracks. So sensible. She rode down there, writing her note on the way. It all seemed right to her at the time. She left her big bag on the platform, waited until she saw the lights of the Acela, climbed down in one smooth motion, and stepped in front of it. She turned her head to the side—you can forgive her this one moment of fear—but she stood her ground. As

the train slammed into her, she realized what she'd done.

"I'm so sorry," she said. She sent this message to me, to her family, to Lacey and Sam and Lena, and we received it. She said it again and again. "I'm so sorry, dude. I didn't mean to."

I told her, "I know. I know."

Path Two

Jo got the package. She was destroyed. She did her research and made her plan. Rode to the station and wrote her note. She sat on a bench at the platform and watched a few trains roar through. She thought about the peace that would come. Then the thing that had burst in her psyche healed a little, the flow of poison abated, the fever broke. She hugged her knees to her chest and started to cry. She called her mom. Her mom told her to call a friend. She called me. I left the kids with a friend and raced down there. I held her and we cried together. I carried her big bag for her and joked about how much stuff she had in there. I brought her to a bright clean hospital in the city. Lacey and Lena came and we all waited with her through various exams, tests, doctors. She slept. Her parents came and I went back to my family.

"Thank God she called," I kept saying to Avi. "Thank God."

I visited her in the hospital. To keep her company, I brought her the fluffy white stuffed bunny she'd given Rosie for her first birthday.

"Ooh, the ears!" she said. "So soft!"

She was really embarrassed. I told her not to be. We laughed about the crappy TV at the hospital, the gowns, the food. I snuck her in a burrito. She got better. I made more time for her. A year later, we went to Mexico with Lacey and Lena for a girls' weekend.

"I'm so glad you're here," I told her.

She said, "Yeah, me too."

Path Three

The package came, the twenty-four-hour brain flu seized hold. The train collided with her and scattered her parts like a toddler with a too-fragile doll. But though her poor body stayed behind, her spirit zipped skyward like a hummingbird. She went somewhere bright, colorful, musical. She loved it. Soon she stopped missing us so much. She even stopped feeling so bad about what she'd done, because she could see everything so clearly now and had compassion for everyone and everything, including herself.

Meanwhile, the rest of us lived our earth-lives. Years passed. I lived to be ninety and died with Avi and one of my kids at my side, and a couple grandkids nearby. I was ready to go. I breathed in, breathed out in a long sigh, and began to float.

I was greeted by relatives, some of whom rushed to say hello and some of whom, like my grandma, just gave a wink and a wave and allowed me space to get settled. And then I saw her, honey-blond hair past her shoulders like it was when we first met, green eyes sparkling, a wry-half-smile on her lips.

"Hey dude!" she said, and wrapped me up in a big hug. It had been over fifty years, but I remembered the feel of it, the warm Jo smell of vanilla and spice.

We started catching up. We had a coffee and a pastry. I started telling her about my life, my family, and she just laughed and says she knew. But then she let me tell it anyway, every detail. I started right where we left off, with a story about Lily at two getting into pirates and walking around going *arrrrrr!* She told me how it had been for her here, what she saw of her own family and friends still on earth. We had all the time in the world. She showed me a door I hadn't noticed in the brick wall at our coffee shop. We walked through it into a long black hallway which opened up to a huge nightclub. A statuesque drag queen strutted over and took us each by the hand. He wore a feathered Amazon headdress and a loincloth and his dark skin glittered with a pattern of glued-on sequins. He

led us to the center of the dance floor, offered a long-lashed wink, and melted back into the crowd. The bass thumped in my chest and the air was steamy with sweat and cigarette smoke and I smacked Jo's ass and we fell over laughing. I went looking for the bar and stumbled into my grandmother's kitchen in Montana. She looked up from rolling out a pie crust and waved me over. She was wearing one of her terrycloth housecoats and drinking a Diet Coke. She handed me my own kid-sized rolling pin and I got to work. After we got the pie in the oven I went upstairs, where I found Charlie's little yellow nursery room from the Yonkers apartment. He'd just woken up from a nap and was standing up holding on to the crib bars. I ducked down, then sprang up.

"Peekaboo!" He squealed with laughter and plopped down on his plump diaper bottom. I scooped him up and raspberried his tum-my so I could hear that laugh again. I set him up with some board books and went back downstairs. Avi was waiting in snorkel gear on a little crescent beach and together we slid into clear blue water.

That part of the labyrinth is hard to find. I'm not much of a churchgoer. But I can see it blurrily sometimes, the outlines maybe. A flash of a scene before I lose it. I like it there. For the first time, I wish I had some certainty in the fact of it. I wonder if it becomes more clear the more people you lose, or if you just ache for it more. A few years after Jo died I lost my dad to a sudden illness. At his deathbed my sweet Aunt Patty hugged me and said my dad was looking down on me from heaven now. I could see she believed it. I just felt that same ache, the wanting to believe. It's not the same thing.

Path Four

Jo rode down to the station, scribbling her note, her mind ablaze. She found the right platform, left her bag, adjusted her hair and dress. She avoided catching anyone's gaze, afraid they'd figure out what she was up to if they saw her eyes, her trembling hands. She

heard the roar of the approaching engine, felt the rush of wind, and jumped smoothly to the track. She was dimly aware of a gasp behind her from a woman on the platform, and then her scream reached Jo's ears but the fever burned it away, like water droplets on a cast iron wood stove. She stepped forward to the center of the track, and turned to her chosen killer. The train's nose touched her, just a kiss really, and in a blinding burst of light she was suddenly everywhere. A supernova. Droplets of Jo-light were instantly transported around the universe. Everyone got some, including me. I didn't know it yet because I didn't find out about her death until the next day, but the little sparks were already there inside me, making themselves at home.

I feel them blaze up when I need courage, when I need to remember to laugh instead of taking things too seriously. We're camping in the woods, and my son is still sulking in the car. Jo would have laughed so hard at that. The man who used to be her boyfriend is here with me. He's with someone else now. Avi is setting up the camp. I'm hammering in the stakes to our tent and there are sparks all around. They remind me to ask for help when I feel crushed and hopeless. I tell them not to worry, that I'm doing okay.

And the sparks say, "I know, I know."