

Matt

Mike insists on attending church this foggy Sunday morning, and I remain dogged about not letting him come alone. The eyes in the lobby watch us in pitying silence as we slip past and into a pew near the back of the chapel.

I sit stonily as voices rise around me. A few of Mike's friends sit nearby; several of them are faces I remember seeing at the hospital the night before. The opening hymns fade away and the pastor mounts the dais solemnly. Many of the people in the room are still unaware of the events that have taken place, but even so there is an unusual silence hovering in the room. The pastor's quiet voice explains the previous night's accident to an increasingly disbelieving audience. The announcement bounces around in my ears, but it's only more words that I don't comprehend, more explanations that won't clarify anything.

A friend of Mike's slides in next to me, whispering prayers and praises to God while the pastor preaches his sermon. She attempts to comfort me, running her fingers through my hair, rubbing my arm. My body remains rigid, my mind wandering aimlessly around everything but that one solid fact. For now, the tears remain at bay.

At the end of the service, the pastor offers personal prayer time; Mike leaves to join a group of friends up in the front, but not before he squeezes my hand as hard as he can manage. The small band starts playing hymns again, and I watch helplessly as this boy that I love so deeply seeks to find some comfort from his younger brother's sudden death. I want to be strong for him, for all those times in the last three and a half years that he has been my strength. But the music finally penetrates the bubble I had been trying to create, and I lose all control to hyperventilation and hysterical tears.

The door buzzes and I leave the comfort of my parent's arms to be lead into a different part of the hospital. I catch a brief glimpse of Mike but am first intercepted by a chubby lady in a black shirt with something about "Victims" stitched in white or yellow into the breast. Somehow she knows my connection to the family and refuses to let me go anywhere before she gives me a huge hug and whispers meaningless consolations.

Mike appears again and this time we run to each other, embracing, shaking. His mother, Momma T emerges from a room nearby, both her hands wound tightly into her black, braided hair that trails almost to the ground. She drops the braid in exchange for a desperate hug that almost crushes my lungs.

"Do you want to see him?" she asks after telling me how glad she is that I'm here. I freeze; the door is standing open in front of me, and I make the only decision that seems logical at the time: go through.

He's sleeping on a metal table. His lips are parted and his glasses missing. Why won't you wake up? I plead as I stare at his chest, hoping for signs of rising and falling.

His girlfriend Katie sits on the right side of the table, stroking his hand. Beneath her fingers, her last loving legacy to him spells "I love you" in teal fabric paint.

"I wrote that," she whispers when she notices my gaze, and I think she means she had just written it here in this room.

When I return to the lobby—where dozens of people have since shown up—my mom tells me that Katie had written that message on his hand before leaving the school earlier that night. She was picking her sister up from Tech, Mom says, and Matt had to drop off someone before he was going out with Katie for their ten month anniversary. "I should have made him

that pilaf he was always asking for tonight,” Mom says before wrapping me fiercely in her arms and joining the ranks of mourners in their wet vigil.

I’m not sure I know anyone else that would try to light a hockey stick on fire and run around with it like a torch. But Matt’s doing it with a cup of Mountain Dew clutched in his free hand.

I shake my head, having taken several pictures already, and make my way over to where Claire is standing and staring into the flames. She gives me a squeeze, making her usual hybrid meowing/purring noises as she does so.

“I am the flame god!” Mike declares while standing over the bonfire with his arms spread wide, causing Claire and I to crack up. We start dancing and singing along with Queen, oblivious to everyone else for a few minutes until we notice Mike and Matt starting to get rowdy. Claire and I giggle and ready my camera for pictures of the unfolding event.

Matt is the first to drop to the ground in their dance-gone-wrong, laughing and tangling up Mike’s legs. Pretty soon, Mike is on the ground too and they are rolling over and wrestling to pin each other down. Even though Mike is older, Matt is just as tall and lanky as Mike; consequently, limbs are everywhere as they pick themselves up off the ground and continue tussling. Somehow, Mike manages to wrap his arms around his brother from behind and lift him up briefly; I catch a picture that looks like Matt is flying, his long hair everywhere, while Mike laughs behind him.

Their brotherly scuffle ends, leaving both boys tired. Matt goes to lean on Katie, but my vision is blocked when Mike wraps me in a hug. We stand there, swaying back and forth to the music until I decide to go take more pictures with our friends. I jump on Kelly, who stands nearby, and we both make similar stretched-out faces for a picture on my camera. We smile normally for her camera and laugh when we find out that Mike has given Kelly what look like moose antlers with his hands in the background. Kelly dances away to find other people to take pictures with, stopping to sing and take pictures with Brenna. I remember that us four girls—Claire, Kelly, Brenna and I—have yet to take a picture together tonight, but the thought passes quickly. If I don’t remember later tonight, there will be plenty of other opportunities down the road.

Slowly everyone is gravitating towards the music to dance along to another good Queen song. Kelly has made her way over to Matt and started taking silly pictures with him now. Soon Matt’s best friend Ryan joins them and the three of them sing loudly, still taking pictures together.

I join the fray and belt “Bohemian Rhapsody” into the chilly night sky, surrounded by friends.

Winter has returned with a vengeance, leaving the world coated once again in white. I’m home for weekends a lot now, to be with Mike and Katie and my friends and family. We use the time we can spend together to try and fill the emptiness we feel in our hearts.

The weather is terrible, and everyone is emotional. The arrival of the month marker brings with it a fresh wave of terrible memories. They are what drive Katie and I to act crazily now; otherwise, I would never be hiking along Red Arrow Highway to reach the site of the crash.

The fresh snow hasn't been cleared from the roads yet, and we are trudging through ankle-deep slush while cars whiz past us. My sense of fear heightens with the knowledge of the anniversary and the distress we would cause everyone if we get hurt.

Regardless, we trudge on, to where the owner of the farm land has cleared a square of snow between the road and the electric fence. Against a post, a white cross bears Matt's name in thick black paint.

Now that we've arrived, all I can think about is the recreated image I have of how it might have happened. His car hits ice and turns sideways, the passenger side traveling into opposing traffic, colliding with an SUV. Matt's body absorbs energy without damage, but he loses consciousness from the adrenaline.

Katie and I have been standing for a few minutes now, thinking our separate thoughts. Looking at each other, we agree mutely that we've had enough and start to make the perilous return journey back to my car.

Wrapped in winter jackets with our nice funereal clothing on underneath, we meander the church parking lot in the melting snow and drizzle. The only reason we are outside in the first place is because we are sick of being surrounded by so many people over the previous several days. Instead, we joke and just enjoy each other's company. Ryan finally manages to push me into a withered snow bank that has survived the recent meltdown. My soaked feet cue us to return inside, out of the biting cold.

Still unwilling to return to the basement where everyone mills around the luncheon in Matt's memory, we huddle in the lobby and continue to talk. The Pastor discovers us and kindly offers to let us into the atrium lobby at the back of the chapel for the privacy we are desperately seeking.

We spend a good half an hour lounging and giggling about silly things that come out of our mouths as a result of exhaustion from the last few days. I write several of the quotes on a napkin and now sit sketching one of the curly decorations imprinted into the napkin. Ryan and Katie continue to talk and giggle, but suddenly the pastor enters the atrium, causing the room to go silent. He walks through into a small kitchen off the side of the room and flicks on a light. Our tired brains find this sudden light miraculous and soon we find ourselves joking about praying to God to turn on lights. But talk about God makes us remember our situation, and in the following silence I wonder if God really had a plan or if everything was just chance.

Deciding it isn't really important at the moment, I chug the remainder of my twelve-ounce bottle of Mountain Dew and make a mental note to never drink it warm again. I haven't had one in years, but today I down it in Matt's honor, warm or not.

The sets for this year's musical, *The Wiz*, are sparse, more like large props than the usual lumbering juggernauts. There is only one large set piece: the front of Dorothy's house. The white-painted siding intensifies the effect of the lights shining from the bars suspended above the stage. The screen for the front door has yet to be attached, and I watch various high schoolers decked in black scurry around and through the opening, busy painting things in black and white.

In contrast, the back of the set bears a patchwork of leftover paint from previous years, recent years when I had been a part of the theater here. What I don't expect, however, are long messages in a rainbow of paint popping up here and there. Curious, I walk closer and realize the paint is recent and the messages addressed to Matt.

Several declare this production to be in his honor: some are dedications to the best techie there ever was, others lamentations about the lack of his presence for the rest of his final year. Quickly wiping my face after reading a few messages, I walk across the stage and into the scene shop. On one of the tables, a box full of fabric paint sits after being used to decorate costumes. I sift through and immediately rule out using the teal, settling on lavender instead.

Walking back to the set, I scope out a space to write the message I want to dedicate. “Is there ice skating in Heaven?” I print carefully. “Keep practicing punk, you’ll get better.”

Oh God, something happened to Mike. He had been visiting me this afternoon and had left to make the hour-long drive back to Mattawan several hours earlier.

“No, nothing happened to Mike,” my dad reassures me, but I can clearly tell there is still something wrong. When I next ask if something happened to Mom or my sister, he brushes those fears away too.

“It’s Matt...” he chokes, and I’m surprised by the emotion I can hear in his usually strong voice. “He was in an accident.”

The next few seconds are consumed by a simultaneous lack and excess of air. My dad has continued to talk, but I haven’t grasped anything. I cut my dad off, managing to splutter, “Matt Tartaglia?” because I don’t believe it. He’s just hurt. Dad’s mistaken. Or it’s another Matt.

“Do you know where Mike is? No one can get a hold of him...”

“No, I don’t... But I need to get home.” In the seat next to me, Brenna throws me a panicked look, one that appears even more wild as a result of the shadows cast by the faint glow of parking lot lights.

“I’ll be home in an hour Dad... we’ll drive carefully.”

When I somehow manage to break the news to the people in the car around me, Brenna’s mom begins to cry and beat on the steering wheel. The spell only last briefly before she toughens up and drives like a madwoman towards the highway. Her driving scares me only in the back of my mind; together, Brenna and I sink into a chasm of disbelief and denial, refusing to shed tears over something that can’t possibly be truth.

Someone has shoveled a path through the deep snow from the roadside to the grave. The temporary iron plaque with Matt’s name and lifespan has been dug out, too, and surrounded by fake flowers and various knick-knacks: Mountain Dew, cards, crosses, angels, penguins, all things that he loved.

Ryan and I stand in the snow shivering, staring. I lean my head on his shoulder and he puts his arm around me, rubbing my sleeve.

Suddenly, though, the silence is broken by ringing. I turn and look around, running my palms across my face. “Did someone lose a cell phone in the snow?”

Ryan shrugs, and we start to circle the area, looking in the snow that hasn’t been packed down by visiting feet. We give up after a minute and return to our silent vigil. But several minutes later, we hear the ringing for a second time. Laughing and determined to find the phone, we start wading into the undisturbed snow.

“I think it’s coming from across the street,” Ryan says after a few minutes of futile searching. He points across the road to a small used car lot. We stare across the street, waiting to hear the ringing once more. Laughing when we hear it, I realize we are being silly and paranoid for no particular reason.

Perhaps we are going crazy from grief; but all the same, it's nice to laugh. I feel positive that Matt would want us to.

The quiet is suffocating. Up in the front of the limo, Papa T watches out the windows as people scuttle from the church through the drizzle towards their cars and attach flags to the fronts, marking their inclusion in the procession. In the middle seat, Momma T and her parents sit vacantly.

Our long line proceeds slowly across town, cutting off traffic. Wedged between Mike and Katie in the back of the limo, I can hear Mike mumble "Jerk... Jerk..." as a few brave cars zip past us.

Arriving at the cemetery, we sit in the limo for several long minutes, waiting for the processional to pull in and everyone to gather beneath the white canopy over the gravesite. The pall-bearers group behind the vehicle carrying Matt, and we climb out of the limo. Immediately, the crisp air steals all warmth from my body, forcing me to pull my jacket tighter around my body. I look up at Mike and wish I could hug him, steal his warmth, console him, but this is one time where touching seems inappropriate. Instead, I move behind the pall-bearers with the family towards the gravesite, grateful to the weather for ceasing to drizzle for time being.

The prayer is brief. Katie's mother provides the women of his family, including Katie and I, with a single rose each, which we all lay on top of the coffin positioned over the yawning hole in the ground. We never see it lowered into the ground; instead, we simply climb back into the limo and make another silent journey across town to have lunch in celebration of Matt's life.

He still looks like he's sleeping, except that his lips are noticeably glued together. Every time I venture to his side of the room, I fight the urge to scream at him to wake up. If he isn't asleep and dreaming, I hope that I will be the one to wake up and realize everything has been a terrible nightmare.

The room contains twice as many people now than it did for the visitation earlier this morning. Most of them crowd at the end of the room where Matt is laid out in his suit and his favorite striped brown scarf. He'd been wearing it at the time of the accident; laid out I can hardly tell it had been shorn in half. A bright red, plastic fork peeks out of his breast pocket, a memory from our high school band trip to Disney World.

All morning, I had avoided getting too close to him, only walking near his casket a few times. I finally get the chance to see him up close, but I'm unsure of what to do. Uncomfortable, I scuffle away and occupy myself by talking to some of his family members.

However, it isn't much longer until I find myself standing in front of his casket again. This time I feel compelled to reach out and stroke the soft hair against his head. I immediately regret touching any part of him at all and know that I won't venture to touch him again, no matter how life-like he looks.

When the general public clears out, it leaves only close friends and family crying and bidding their final goodbyes. Some reach out and stroke his face or hands; others simply blow him a kiss and let only their tears touch him. Even though I know this is our last chance to see him, I don't feel the need to walk past him again. It doesn't feel like goodbye anyway; it feels more like Matt is a presence that will watch over all of us.

Letting myself glide, I rotate my left hand to get a full-body shot of Matt. My camera beeps and shows me the preview, and I laugh at the image of him captured forever with white

powder covering the top of his dark grey beret, his dark grey fleece sweater and scarf, and the front of his brown pants.

Katie skates, talking to Mike, joined randomly by me or Claire or my sister's friend Kasey. I catch up to the four of them, passing by and flipping to skate backwards. They are unprepared and I catch all of them in the middle of awkward postures. I laugh as they organize together in a pod for a better picture and push the button again. In the meantime, Matt makes his way over and runs into Katie, using her for support as I shoot another picture of the five of them.

We break up again, skating in the ovular design of the rink, with Matt in the center trying to keep upright. Deciding to take a video, I change my camera mode and hold it face-level, catching Kasey and Claire skating past and flashing grins. I focus on Matt, giggling as he makes his way to where Katie is sitting on the stone ledge surrounding the rink.

"Hi Katie," I say as she laughs and stands up, looking straight into the lens of my camera for a second before turning away with an embarrassed giggle. Matt glides in on the other side of her and sits awkwardly down on the ledge. I watch on my camera screen as Katie leans in for a quick kiss and Matt's beret slips over his eyes.