

Red Light, Green Light

PERSONAL ESSAY & MEMOIR

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His favorite punctuation was a semicolon.

We were lying on the roof of the local movie theater, enjoying the warmer weather. It was early spring, and the cherry blossom trees were heavy with pink and white flowers. It was a rare quiet moment in our lives where a group of us could meet, without school, work, and life getting in the way. The roof was his favorite spot, and the building was changing owners; it was one of the last times we could access it.

“My sister’s favorite punctuation is a semicolon, too,” I added. She likes how they look in a winky emoji. For him, it was the idea that an author chose not to end a sentence, even if they could. We could see the whole town, the train station, the park, and all the shops. Crocus and tulips were peeking from the ground, and the budding trees had cardinals flitting between them. My dad says that cardinals are the beginning of spring, a new cycle. The effort grown-ups put into keeping our town beautiful—fertilizing flower beds and mulching around trees—was evident to us from the top of the world.

We lay there for hours, talking about anything and everything. It was a good day.

By the time we knew, it was four hours too late. We huddled together in a tight corner outside our school; our tears fell uncontrolled. We couldn’t see the beauty around us: the tulips were a blur, and the cherry blossoms were nothing but a reminder of what was. The spring wind blew on our bodies; the air of new life only served as passing irony. Everything felt cold. A man was looking at us, probably concerned, in the distance. He turned

around and walked away.

Everything was hazy after. I called my dad. He was at work and was heading over as soon as possible. Someone picked us up and drove us home. I broke the news to our friends - one call, two calls, texts, how many more needed to know? Soon the quiet became a wave of noise as friends told friends, and everyone heard the news. Other kids from our school came over in singles and doubles, walking or bicycling, red-eyed and quiet. My dad arrived home.

Parents arrived to sit with us. Consoling, bringing food and sweets. These same people spend hours nurturing plant beds in our town so flowers can grow and shine brightly. They lost a flower today.

We sat in silence for a long time. Too long? How do you measure time when grieving? How much time is considered too much when you’re missing someone? Someone you thought was a constant, someone too young to lose? I played the piano, his favorite songs. Some of us cried. Others just stared at the wall, waiting for someone to drop the punchline to a drawn-out, cruel prank.

At some point, we came down for pizza. Was anyone truly hungry? Someone cracked a joke. Grateful for the distraction, our wan smiles and giggles spread around the room. I quickly stifled mine. It felt awful to still be able to smile.

I went to my room first, looking around for something he had left behind, any imprint he still was there with us. I opened my backpack and reached for my notebook and pencil case, which contained a pink gel pen. I opened the notebook and held the pen gingerly; I could still see him writing with that very same pink pen.

Earlier that very morning, he walked with me to Spanish class. We talked about our hatred of the new teacher.

He made a suicide joke.

I ignored it.

That day was note-taking, and yet again, he forgot a pencil. I handed him my hot pink pen; pink was his favorite color. Instead of taking notes, he added doodles to mine, reaching over my arm to conspicuously draw messy little pink smiley faces, hearts, and semicolons. I heard him giggle. He really did love semicolons.

A security guard walked into the room, asking him to come with her. The class stared as he nervously stood up. She later came to pick up his stuff and snapped a rude answer when we asked her if everything was okay.

I texted him.

uh she came and took ur stuff. whatever happened, ily <3 - Read: 9:10 AM.

He messaged a group chat the next period saying that the school sent him home due to potential suicidal ideation. Someone reported that he had access to a gun. He said it was a joke. We believed him.

At 9:26 AM EST, I received the last text anyone got from him. He shot himself two hours later.

One thing everyone told me, from counselors to therapists to my parents, was that grief comes in waves. I couldn't understand what that meant. I was already drowning; what would another wave do?

Over time, though, the tide receded, and I am now only waist-deep in water. It's the end of summer. The cherry blossoms are gone, grown into bright

green leaves that will soon fall and die; the movie theater roof is entirely inaccessible.

Some days, it hits me hard that he's gone, and I don't want to get out of bed or function. I recently met someone at my sleepaway camp who reminded me of him. They both had the same smile, the same friendliness, and the same easygoing personality. I met this kid on my friend's four-month death anniversary. That night, instead of practicing, I went to bed early and cried. It was like a giant wave knocked me over again, and I got dragged away from the shore, submerged in a sea of grief.

On other days, I forget he's gone. In the middle of a normal conversation, I'll open my phone to call him, and my heart skips a beat when it comes back to me. Sometimes, I'll see something that reminds me of him, a semicolon or his pink pen, and it'll hit me all over again. These small waves hit over and over again, lapping at my stomach and chest.

Each time, it hits less, as the tide is still receding. The waves are becoming smaller and smaller. While I look forward to the new challenges that will come my way with the school year, I'm looking forward to spring the most. I'll be able to see the cherry blossoms again.

My life is like a semicolon; it stopped for a moment but now continues on. ■