

Spinning

Ryley Bonferraro



The first thing I feel is disbelief. I almost laugh. There's absolutely no possible way that it's true. None. My brain works overtime trying to make sense of it—and fails. So I shake my head. *No*. Not possible.

It's three o'clock in the morning, and you read it on Facebook, I think to myself, except I meant to say it out loud. But my voice isn't working. No way.

Sierra does laugh. “No, he's not!”

“Yes,” Shawn insists. He's not laughing. “Go look!” He looks at me. “Ryley, *yes*.”

I realize then I've been repeating the word *no* over and over. I pull my phone out and open Facebook. It's the first link that pops up, a *syracuse.com* article shared by three, four, five of my friends already. “*Man dies in*

Camillus crash after motorcycle crosses lanes, hits embankment.” That's all it says. It could be anyone. But it's not. His name is tagged in each post, over and over.

Jared Rogers.

Not possible.

I click the link. The words all blur together and I can't understand them. It's too late; I'm too tired. Too scared. *Lost control*, it says. *18-year-old man rushed to the hospital and not identifying the man until family has been informed*, and for a moment, I think yes, it's a mistake, everyone just thinks it's him but it's not, how could they know? *Where he died*. It says that too. I can finally make sense of that sentence, can read the whole thing. “*The man was rushed to Upstate University Hospital in Syracuse where he died.*”

“How do they know?” I whisper. “It can’t be him.”

Shawn just looks at me. Sierra is still vehemently denying it. As much as I want to keep arguing, it’s slowly starting to sink in. I’m seeing how many of his family members are sharing the link, saying they’ll miss him, saying he’s too young. Saying they hated his motorcycle. Saying it’s not fair. And that’s what I’m thinking too: *It’s not fair. It’s not fair. It’s not fair.*

“Sierra,” I say. “I’m going to bed.”

Shawn takes the hint. “I’m leaving. I just... I can’t believe it. I’m going home.”

He leaves and Sierra closes the door behind him. I haven’t moved since Shawn first said it, first opened Facebook in the break in our conversation and gasped. “Guys... Jared’s dead.” That’s what he said. It sounded like a question, like he wanted us to tell him no. Like he was still unsure. But it also sounded like he knew, like an exclamation, like he was hoping he could just say it and then we’d all move on. Not possible.

I still haven’t moved. I’ve been sitting on my bed in my tiny new dorm room with my high school friends, and suddenly it feels big. Empty. But I feel like I can’t go anywhere else. I’m drained, exhausted. I lie down in my clothes, makeup still on, on top of my blankets. I’m finding it a little hard to breathe. My earrings stab me behind the ears; usually I take them out, but right now I don’t mind—the pain keeps me present. I don’t think I would have fallen asleep if it wasn’t so late, if I wasn’t already so tired. But I think my mind was happy for the escape, for the chance to dream and pretend everything was still okay.

When I was a kid, I played this game with

my brother and cousin where we would stand in the middle of a room and spin around and around in circles until we got so dizzy we couldn’t stand, and then we’d collapse. We thought it was so fun to lay there and stare at the ceiling and watch it twist and spin until the dizziness finally faded. That’s what it feels like when I wake up and realize everything I heard last night wasn’t a dream. It feels like the whole world is spinning, and no matter how long I lie on the ground waiting for it to stop—it won’t.

It feels surreal, just like anything that happens when you’re so tired you can barely think straight, like you’re not even sure it happened. I pick up my phone and open Facebook, because I have to know, to confirm my bad dream, to drill it into my brain. I immediately wish I hadn’t. Post after post, comment after comment, people who barely knew him talking about how great he was, how much they’ll miss him. There’s an angry urge in me to shout back, to write all over their posts. *You didn’t know him! You haven’t talked to him in years! You won’t miss him like I will!* It’s like they want their own sympathy, they want attention. They want people to know that someone they knew died.

But I wish I would never have to tell anyone. I don’t want people to know, don’t want to see the looks on their faces when I tell them that my best friend of nearly fifteen years is gone. I vowed then and there that I wouldn’t share anything online. My grief over losing him is mine and mine alone.

I close Facebook and open my messages. I scroll down to his name and touch it. The last message Jared Rogers ever sent to me said, *“I miss you, we totally have to hang out soon!”* My reply was, *“We definitely do!”* I toss my phone

away. My body feels heavy, like I swallowed a handful of rocks and now they're pinning me down, rendering me immobile. I'm still so dizzy.

I don't go to my first class. I stay in bed in yesterday's clothes, waiting for the spinning to stop. Sierra doesn't bring it up. She didn't know him nearly as long or as well as I did, and she probably doesn't want to upset me more than I already am. When I finally work up the energy to stand up, the spinning gets worse. I lie back down and miss another class. I can't even cry; it's like I'm numb, unfeeling—in shock. It still just *doesn't make sense*.

The tears do come though. Later, when I'm sitting with Sierra on the stone outcrop-

to talk about it, I'm here," she offers. I look over at Sierra, who's only crying because I am, and then back to Nickie, who'll give me space if I ask her to. And then I start talking.

"He used to steal my brownies," I blurt out with a hysterical giggle. Nickie smiles and makes an *aww* sound. "In elementary school, he loved those little Cosmic brownies, with the sprinkles. He'd always try to trade me for them. He'd trade his whole lunch for that brownie if I asked him to." I sniff and smile at myself.

"The only time I ever got in trouble in school was his fault. We were in second grade, and he was talking to me when we were supposed to be quiet. Our teacher

I'm babbling now but it's helping; I couldn't hold it in even if I wanted to.

ping in front of the building where my last class of the day is, she says, "I can't believe it," and then I can't hold them back anymore. She hugs me while I sob in the middle of campus, and I think: *This is the worst I've ever felt. What a way to end my first week in college.*

• • •

"I'm so sorry." I don't doubt Nickie's sincerity, despite the fact that she's my newest friend.

But there's nothing I can say back. Not just because "it's okay" isn't true or because I don't appreciate her sentiment, but because I can't speak.

Poor Nickie. I've known her for exactly one week, and she already has to deal with my emotional breakdown. She comes over and gives me a hug. "If you decide you want

wrote both our names on the board." Now that I've started, I can't stop. Someone has hit play on the tape that holds these thoughts, and I can't find the pause button by myself.

"Sometimes he'd just show up at my house in his rollerblades, and it would take him five whole minutes to get up the porch stairs to ring the doorbell while he was wearing those things. And my mom would open the door and he'd say, 'Can Ryley come play?' But I didn't have rollerblades so instead she'd invite him in, and we'd play hide and seek with my siblings. He always lost because he was so tall, and every time my mom heard him say 'crap' she'd tell him to watch the language in front of Kabrey." I wonder if my words are even coherent through my tears, but either way, I didn't stop. "We'd

always have mac and cheese or ramen for lunch. He taught my sister how to hold a noodle between your fingers and swallow, and then pull it back out and say “doesn’t it feel cool?” It drove my mom crazy, but my brother and I thought it was hilarious. His grandparents lived around the corner from me, so whenever he was there, he’d roller-blade over to me, or I’d walk to him, and we would play all day.”

“How old were you guys?” Nickie asks gently.

“I don’t know, maybe fourth grade? Sixth? Possibly all the way through both. It’s hard to say because he was just always around.” *Keep talking about the memories, I tell myself. It helps ignore reality.* “In middle school, we did these skits for our Spanish class where two of my friends and I gave ourselves Hispanic boy names and Jared named himself ‘Juanita.’ For one of the skits, he was in a coma, and we woke him up with peanut butter; in another, we were all in the mafia, and we got to bring nerf guns to school that we shot each other with. Not sure how our teacher let us do that, but we got the best Spanish grades of the year. In high school, he went to a different school than I did, so I didn’t see him as much, but he always talked to me. *I’m talking so fast I don’t think I’m breathing.*

“He’d tell me how happy it made him to talk to me, how he loved making me smile, how he had a crush on me when we were little and implied that he still did. He’d send me texts with hearts and say he’s so glad we’re best friends—that he missed me so much. He never ever missed one of my birthdays, and I never missed his. They were exactly a month apart; mine on the last day of April, his on

the last day of May. We had so much in common!” I’m babbling now but it’s helping; I couldn’t hold it in even if I wanted to. The memories keep filling up my brain, and to empty them, I push them out through my lips: “We loved listening to thunderstorms, and we loved cotton candy ice cream. We hated pointless conversations, and we hated history class. But we both loved math. He wanted to be an engineer.” *Now he never will be.* I take a deep breath. “We were always on the same page—alike in so many ways.” *He was my soul mate.* I almost say that out loud, but I can’t because I think I might choke on the words. If I say it out loud that makes it true, and I can’t bear to make that real—it already hurts enough to breathe. “We’d talk so late into the night. About everything. He promised,” I say suddenly, and it’s getting too hard to talk through the tears, my throat is closing up around my vocal cords, and the pain is squeezing my lungs. “He promised he’d always be here for me, but he’s not. He promised me always.”

Uncontrollable sobs overtake me now. Nickie gives me another hug; Sierra slips out of the room. She, for one, is over my breakdown. “He’s still with you, Ryley,” Nickie tells me. “As long as you keep remembering those things, he is.”

• • •

One, two, three, four. One, two. One, two, three. I count every single one, every single photo I see myself in. One, two. There’s a photo board propped up on a stand every ten feet or so. They distract me as we wait in line to see him. One. From kindergarten birthday parties, through eighth grade graduation—at least fifty different pictures of the two of us. One, two, three. Pumpkin pick-

ing in sixth grade. School play in fifth. After-school dances in seventh. The time he was the one friend I invited to my family-only birthday party. One, two. Everywhere. I'm everywhere. I wonder why his parents never gave some of these pictures to mine. One, two, three, four. They make me smile.

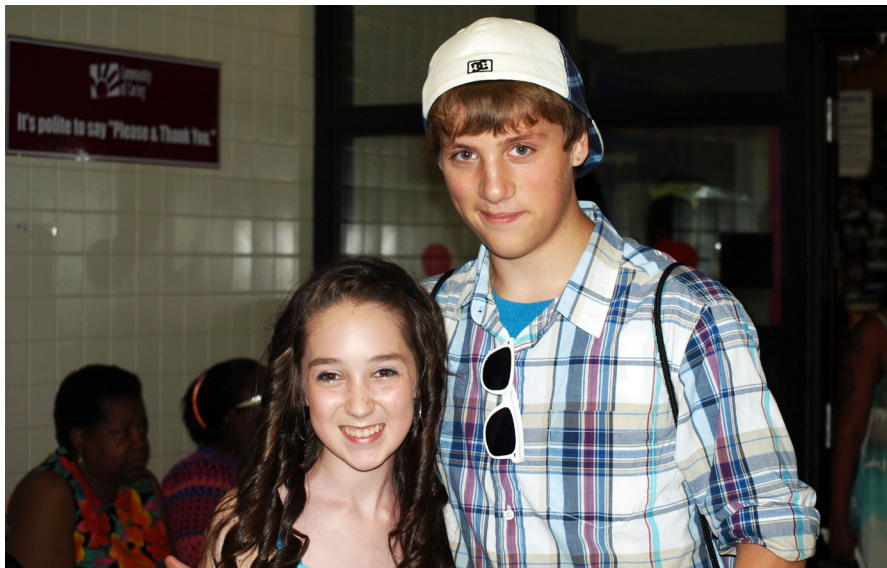
Sierra came with my parents and me. I don't think she realized until this moment how much and how long I had been in his life. Not always at the center of it, but always close, always constant. He was my best friend when I was young. My crush—as I was his—as we grew up. Almost—but not quite—a couple in high school. Someone to count on, *always*.

His family is waiting for everyone at the front of the line, right next to him. The girl he'd been dating stands with them—I can't help but resent her. If anyone has the right to that spot, to claim that piece of his heart,

it's me. She's known him for less than a year, but she gets to accept the most sympathy for his death, and I hate it. *I'm* the one he called in moments of need, and *I'm* the one he confided in. But “girlfriend” means more to everyone than “best friend,” as if those labels signify the depth of a relationship. People automatically hold the former above the latter. No one knows that I'm in so much more pain than she ever will be.

Although, maybe his family can tell. They know. His grandmother sees me first, wraps me in a hug. “Oh, Ryley,” she says, and my tears are encouraged by hers. His dad asks if I saw all the pictures, if I remember taking them. I nod yes. His mom can only give me a small smile as she hugs me. Everything else I've been feeling is replaced abruptly by awful, unbearable grief.

And then suddenly I've changed my mind—I don't want to see him lying there,



can't bear to be in the room another minute. Part of me runs out the door, refusing to believe what it knows it will see. The part of me left behind is still spinning.

Maybe it's the spinning that blurs my vision. Maybe it's the tears. Either way, my eyes have trouble focusing on him. *Not possible*. He looks the same, but he's not there, never will be again. *It's not fair. It's not fair. It's not fair*. This is just *not possible*.

I can't stand there long. On the way out, his parents have a little table set up with paper and different colored pens on it, and a family member tells us it's so that everyone can leave a memory of Jared with them.

"I have to," I say to no one in particular as I lean over the table. I pick up the purple pen and then freeze, realizing I have no idea how to start. What to say. How do you sum up fifteen years of friendship in one piece of paper?

You don't.

But as soon as my pen touches the page, the words come.

•••

It gets easier over time. Sometimes I see a motorcycle on the road and have the urge to burst into tears, but I've gotten better at holding them back. Sometimes I still find myself taking out my phone to text him, only to slide it back in my pocket with slightly blurred vision or shaky hands. Sometimes I wake up thinking about him, thinking how horrible it is when you lose someone so soon, so unexpectedly. I'll cry myself to sleep and think about all the things I never said to him, things that now I never can. Sometimes I wonder what would have happened if either of us had acted on how we really felt about each other, if maybe, just maybe, everything could have been different.

I'll never know now. And sometimes I still notice that part of me that's always spinning, always getting too dizzy to stand. Sometimes I collapse with it. Other times I remember that I can slow it down.

One, two, three.

Sometimes it's too hard to dwell on the memories. Other times I feel like it's necessary, like if I think about them enough, they'll be ingrained in my mind and I'll never forget a word he said, nor a moment we spent together. The more recent ones are easier to recall; like the time I told him I was sad, and he told me to blast Taylor Swift and dance around my room until I felt better, or the time he snuck up on me and my brother at the New York State Fair and spent the rest of the day with us. I remember my brother and him getting their black belts in karate together. Other memories are harder, they come in bits and pieces. I remember going pumpkin picking, and I can't bring back any of the words he said, but I do recall how our parents noticed that he kept picking up the pumpkins for me, trying to show off. Even they thought we'd end up together someday. We went back to that pumpkin patch for the first time this year.

Sometimes I go back and read through our old text messages, so I can remember how it felt to talk to him. But most importantly, I remember him being there, every single time I needed him. We loved each other, even if we never said so. I'll always miss him.

And I'm allowed to miss him; I'm allowed to be sad that he's gone. Because I've finally shouted it at my brain enough times that it understands. He *is* gone.

But he'll always be my best friend.