

A Soul.

Or Four Stories on the Various Facets of Life.

Cy Williams

Soul, in religion and philosophy, is the immaterial aspect or essence of a human being, that which confers individuality and humanity, often considered to be synonymous with the mind or the self. In ideology, the soul is further defined as that part of the individual which partakes of divinity and often is considered to survive the death of the body.

NOTE ON CASTING:

This is written as a one-man show BUT (and it's a big but) if you feel the need to break it up with two actors it can be done. One actor plays ACT ONE and ACT TWO Jeramey and the other plays ACT THREE and ACT FOUR Jeramey.

NOTE ON DESIGN:

I give you a few instances of stage directions, but you have the rest of the monologue to run and have fun with. Keep it simple, though, to not completely overwhelm the actor. You are given a door, a table, a chair, and five blocks to build the world. Explore grief in new ways, keep the audience on their toes, and break a leg.

ACT 1: THE MIDDLE TIMES

Room with only a single chair and a table. The blocks are tucked away in a corner. Light filters through dusty, curtained windows. It's dark but hopeful.

Jeramey bolts into the room and hastily drops his things on the table. He's half dressed in a black suit. Rushed. Out of breath. Trying to contain himself from breaking. He grabs his notecards off the table and stands, shaky, ready. The silence is heavy.

Thank you all for coming.

This is especially difficult...

No that's stupid.

Of course this is difficult we're at a fucking funeral.

God damn.

Relax, it's okay. Breathe.

You can do this.

Thank you all for coming.

Colby was... The greatest friend imaginable.

(Laughs)

And...

Jeramey's phone rings. Shocked.

Shit!

He hurriedly digs it out of his pocket and stares at it while it's ringing. Silence. It's quiet for a moment. Maybe too long.

I've been trying to write your eulogy for the past 2 weeks and I have absolutely nothing.

And it's not like I didn't know you very well.

We were best friends.

I just don't know why I can't *talk* about you, Colby.

Jeramey sits at the table.

We were supposed to be honest with each other and how we were always feeling.

And I don't know if that was just an empty promise but...

I guess we both sort of lost that as we grew up.

So in the spirit of that...

In this holy place.

Which you absolutely would've hated anyway.

There are days when the pain hits me so hard that I forget how to breathe and I feel like I'm dying.

Where the entire room is tightening around me and I can't move.

Where I don't get out of bed for days.

And I dream of our teenage years.

When I think we were all last happy.

Which is stupid because I'm alive.

And I know I'm alive but it should be you.

It should be you, not me.

And, you know, there have been days where I've felt perfectly fine.

As if nothing ever happened.

As if you'll be walking through the front door like it was just another day of high school.

But then I force myself to remember that that was so long ago.

That none of it is real.

(Jeramey laughs to himself) That you're gone.

And the pain hits me again.

And I go back to bed to dream.

I thought you were getting better.

You promised me that you would start opening up.

Start talking to me again.

And I've been stuck trying to retrace my steps from years ago.

Stuck trying to come up with an answer as to what I could have done differently.

What we *all* could have done differently.

And then I get hung up on events from high school and I find myself trapped in this never-ending cycle of what-ifs.

Asking myself "WOULD YOU STILL BE HERE?"

(Softly... Almost whispering) Is this how you were feeling?

Jeramey stands and paces.

Trapped in your head with nowhere to go.

No place to escape.

Because I feel like I'm PHYSICALLY dying inside.

Like there is some sick monster trying to burst from my body.

My guts are spilling out all over the floor and I can't shove them back in.

Everyone is watching me like I'm the main attraction.

I can sense the rigor mortis set in and I can no longer move.

I'm stiff and can't cry out for help.

My voice is barely a whisper but my head is screaming. Pounding.

As I'm stuck desperately pleading out for someone to rescue me. Anyone.

Every inch of tissue slowly rots away until nothing is left except for exposed bone.

And my skin just keeps crawling.

And I just want to rip it all off and

Stop feeling!

Jeramey catches his breath.

I don't know what to say out there.

But you...

You would know exactly what to say.

You just... *(lost)* You had a special way with words that just... *(found)* You understood people.

Jeramey sits on the ground.

This is like the third grade all over again.

You had everyone and I was just the weird kid who moved schools in the middle of the year.

And I just...

Jeramey struggles to find his words.

I just...

Was there.

And the whole world was zooming past me and I couldn't move until you picked me up.

I still don't know why you decided to talk to me.

I guess I'll never find out *exactly* why but...

You were surrounded by all of your friends on the playground playing a game of kickball while I was sitting by myself on this bench by the classrooms. Your team must've won or something because the next thing I know, everyone is piling on top of you. You're all laughing and screaming and I was jealous because even at my old school I never had a group of friends like that. I looked down at my feet because I was embarrassed and when I looked up, you were there, standing in front of me, holding out that ball.

And by the end of the day, it was as if we had been friends for years.

I didn't know a single thing about sports but I followed you around as if I did.

Looking back on it now it's so freakin' obvious that you knew I didn't know anything and just went along with it to make me feel more normal.

Because you wanted everyone to like you.

But my mom was so nervous to pick me up from school that day because she thought that I was going to cry that I had been all alone.

And when I told her about you, you instantly became her favorite person in the entire world.

Colby Thewlis.

The boy who made her awkward son *not* so freakish.

And you always stayed her favorite person.

Literally forever. You could do no wrong in her eyes.

You know, even when you dropped out and joined the army...

She prayed for you every single day that you would make it back safely.

Because you were just another one of her boys.

Jeramey stands up and brushes off his suit. He goes to the table and picks up his notebook.

(Directed to audience) But this eulogy.

I'm sorry but how the FUCK - *(Jeramey looks up)* Sorry - are you supposed to eulogize someone?

Is that even the right word? Eulogize?

What's the point? They're all sad. Funerals *are* sad.

So how do I make you *not* sad?

How can I possibly *eulogize* the most impactful person in my life without being sad?

Because this is sad. Death. Is. Sad.

(Back to stasis) I Googled how to write a good one because I'm so lost.

First section: Introduction.

Cover some basics blah blah blah.

How I know you and what we meant to each other.

Next.

Middle section:

Your accomplishments.

Your major life events.

The stories of your childhood and life.

(To audience) Now, this is where I get lost because you wouldn't want anybody talking about that.

That's why you ran away.

And finally, the End Section: Finalizing your life.

What you would want us to remember you for.

Jeramey looks lost.

(Laughing) What am I supposed to say out there?

(Accusatory) What would *you* want me to say?

Because you kept most of your life a secret for as long as I could remember.

But the pieces that people do know, you were so ashamed.

Jeramey tears through the notebook.

So I wrote it all down.

Every single detail of your life that you told me over the years.

I've read it all every day trying to make any sense out of it.

To try and connect *this* life with the one you gave to everybody else.

Because it wasn't all the same. And sometimes I even doubt if you told me the complete truth. But here's what I have to share with the world. This is the Colby Thewlis I knew.

ACT 2: THE BEFORE TIMES

Jeramey props up a photo of Colby on the table. His military portrait. He stands at attention.

You were born on April 2, 1983.

Your mom was an art teacher and your dad managed a bank.

And for the longest time that's all I knew about you.

Later down the road in our friendship, I would slowly scrape away the years of protection you had built up for yourself but that's...

That your parents met in high school.

That your mom's parents had been killed in a car accident when she was only three months old.

And that for most of her life she had been shuffled around in foster homes.

So she took the pain she was experiencing and started painting at an early age and discovered she liked art.

She was looking at some fancy art programs in New York hoping to escape the monotony of small-town life.

That your dad's parents were hard on him to become a pro baseball player.

He was good. Real good. Varsity. State champion. Full-ride scholarship to USC.

And that he originally asked your mom out to prom as a joke but they somehow fell in love that night.

Love at first sight if you believe in any of that.

And that when your parents discovered they were pregnant with your older brother Derek during their senior year of high school... all of their life plans changed in an instant.

No special art program for her.

And no college ball for him.

That they would settle down in this small town to grow their new family.

He would go on to work at his dad's ranch while she stayed home to raise the child.

No money or family to help her out if she decided to go back to school.

Four years later they would welcome you into the world.

And just a few years later your younger brother Caleb would be born.

And you were all a very happy, loving, church-going family.

But none of that was true.

As much as you tried to convince all of us that everything was okay in your life.

It wasn't.

(To the audience, direct) I'm sorry if you'll be hearing most of this information for the first time. I realize now that unless you truly knew Colby and his family, which barely anyone did, then this will all be new news. So if at any point you need to excuse yourself, be my guest. I wish I could excuse myself but unfortunately, I'm the keeper of Colby's life. So here we go.

Jeramey takes a deep breath.

Because the truth is that your mom had been abused for most of her life in foster care.

And your dad would spend the rest of his life resenting the fact that he got the weird art girl pregnant only months before starting college.

That his parents left him no choice but to work at the ranch and raise this new family he was now stuck with.

This is when your father started drinking.

And your mom didn't want to be stuck at home but she had no one to help raise your older brother.

And a few years later, you were born.

The second you could stand and hold a bat your dad had you out in the park practicing to become a great baseball player like he was.

Because if he couldn't go pro, you would.

I remember you telling me in middle school that you enjoyed playing baseball at first.

The afternoons out practicing with your dad and brother.

Your mom bringing food and you would all have a huge picnic out in the grass.

Like you really were all a happy family.

But you didn't know that in the third grade your dad's drinking problem had gotten so worse that he was fired from the ranch.

That was the reason he started working at the bank.

And that he started taking his frustrations out on his newly pregnant wife.

In the third grade, we would meet for the first time.

We would find out we only lived a few blocks from each other.

And we instantly became best friends.

At this point, your father's training has become unrelenting.

You're playing both club and school baseball.

You wake up every morning to run drills before class.

And even after club practice, you're out at the park until 10 hoping your dad would be satisfied with your performance and you could finally go home.

But you love it. It's all you know.

And you relish in the small praises your dad will give you over the years. Holding onto every single one like a small gift.

In the fourth grade, your mom started taking night classes to get her teaching degree behind your dad's back. When he eventually discovered the truth, he was furious that she was out finding her passions in life that don't revolve around him. And Derek quits baseball after he breaks his arm at one of your dad's late-night practices. Rumors would swirl that it was your dad's fault- You vehemently denied every single one. But you would later tell me that some nights you could still

hear the snapping of his bone and his screams when you would close your eyes. Now all of your dad's attention lands on you.

In the fifth grade...

Jeramey sets the notebook down. He closes his eyes.

In the fifth grade, Caleb would die of cancer.

It would happen all very suddenly. Stage 4. Only lasted a few months after diagnosis.

Your dad drinks harder.

And your mom shuts the entire family out.

He opens his eyes.

Your heart broke when he died.

I remember trying as hard as I could to fix whatever part of you was broken but... I don't think it ever fully healed. Is this when we started losing you? I ask myself that a lot now. When did you start to slip away?

Your dad beat you for the first time in the sixth grade. *(To audience)* Sorry. *(Back to stasis)* You told me in secret that you became frustrated with him one night and threw your bat down on the ground. He dragged you inside your house and beat you with his belt. Your entire family heard it but did nothing to help you. You would show me the bruises on your body one day after school. I can still see them today when I close my eyes. Why didn't we try to help you sooner? We could've

done so much more but... You didn't want anyone to know. And I just went along with it because I wanted to make you happy.

Jeramey takes 4 of the blocks and stacks them 2x2 during this section.

In the seventh grade, your dad loses his job at the bank. You guys have to sell your house and move across town. This doesn't mean we see each other less. If anything, we make it a point to now hang out every day after school. Me. You. Our best friend Tyler. His girlfriend. My friends. Your friends. We all secretly formed our own trusted circle. And life was as good as it could be for a 12-year-old because we all had each other to lean on. Your dad begins selling life insurance and this makes him even angrier. Your practices became more brutal. But you were good. You were great. You could go pro. But you wouldn't know that this is when Derek started drinking. Or that your mom had tried committing suicide. You just thought she was sick after spending a few days in the hospital. She had to get better... all moms do.

Jeramey lies on top of the 4 blocks. He takes a deep breath. He's ready.

And it was this year that I discovered I had a crush on my best friend. *(Deep breath)* I was scared because I had spent so many years trying to impress you but now, at any point, I could lose you if you ever found out. Remember that time we asked Derek if he could get us some weed? We hid out on my roof while my parents were gone and lit up this shitty rolled joint. None of us had ever smoked before and we ended up coughing more than actually smoking. We had tears streaming down our faces from a combination of coughing and laughing. And then out of nowhere you just leaned over and kissed me. You froze and climbed back in my window and went right home. Didn't

even say goodbye. You would tell me later that you hated yourself for a while. That you didn't like it. But what if I had said something then? Would you have stayed? Because I feel like this is one of our last happy moments as friends. Just being on that roof staring up at the sky. No thoughts or worries about whatever was going on in our lives. Just the two of us together. And I loved the kiss.

Because in the ninth grade you went away to some important baseball tournament with your dad for the weekend. I remember you going on for weeks about how big of a game this was.

You couldn't sit still in class. Mrs. Inman had to physically restrain you down in your seat just so she could get you to pay attention for even a second. And at the tournament, you were hit up by some potential scouts who were impressed with your game. And your dad smiled at you, genuinely smiled, for the first time in your life. And you loved it. But when you would get home to tell your mom the good news...

Jeramey stops.

You would find her body in the bathroom.

Your dad wouldn't hold a funeral. Her body was cremated and stored away on the top shelf of the hall closet. And that was it. You would never talk about her again to anyone. You said you were fine and we all moved on.

Jeramey looks at the audience.

I read somewhere recently that our brain has a weird way of just recording shit it finds important. It can literally be anything. Whether or not you asked your brain for permission to do this... it's just one of those things. It's a form of trauma response or something... So something you've never seen before... You'll always see it when you don't wanna see it now. So like I close my eyes now and I see your dead body. (*Jeramey forces a laugh. The joke didn't land. It's awkward*) So is that what it was? He would be forced to remember his mother that way for the rest of his life? And he didn't even ask for it.

Jeramey is back to stasis.

Why were we so stupid? Of course you weren't fine. I can't believe we just left you there. But you didn't show any sign of emotions. You just kept on playing and getting better at baseball.

Because the tenth grade was your party year. You made Varsity and would party all weekend. Cheap vodka, stolen kegs, weed, and cocaine. Your special recipe for happiness. And baseball. Of course baseball. That was your whole life.

But there was one day that all changed. You would never tell me why but you suddenly stopped eating. Stopped showering. Your grades dropped. You stopped coming to school. And your dad just kept on training with you. None of the counselors or teachers or anybody tried helping you because they were afraid to deal with your dad. So they just passed you along as if everything was fine. But Tyler and I couldn't let you go. We used your spare house key to wake you up every morning. We helped you shower. Helped you get dressed. We would take you to school. Make you eat. We were the only people trying to keep you alive. My mom tried getting the police involved but no one

paid much attention. All they saw was another delinquent son. Tyler's parents offered to let you move in with them but you refused to leave. And it only got worse when Derek would leave the family. You would never see or hear from your brother again. Now all you had was your dad and baseball.

Jeramey makes a bed out of the blocks.

It's now our Junior Year and we hang out every single night after your dad's mandatory "train until midnight" practices. You're stressed because scouts are starting to watch more closely. This only hurts you more. We've been dating for a little more than a year now. No one knows and we like it that way. It had all happened naturally. One day we're friends. The next day you kiss me. And then the next day we're even closer. You climb in through my open window and we just lay in bed together almost every single night. Not even doing anything but just the idea that our best friend was right next to us eased our minds just a little bit more. You regularly use cocaine and weed to make it throughout the day. We've talked for hours on end about speaking to someone but the only person you'll end up talking to is me. There comes a day when the practices become too much for you and you slink in through my window high off your ass. I hold onto you for hours trying to ease your pain. And you begin to talk. It starts with you telling stories about your mom. That transitions into the abuse by your dad. And that transitions into your love for me.

You finally leave your house after your dad hits you in the face with a baseball bat. He ripped a gash in your face that will never truly heal; a long scar that starts at the top of your cheek down to your chin. He was mad that you didn't hit a ball the correct way. So he grabbed the bat out of your hand and beat you until you were begging on the dirt for him to stop. Your dad is arrested and

charged with child abuse and you finally move in with Tyler's family. His mom immediately begins to care for you the way you should have been cared for, for years. To her, you were just another son that had finally come home. And now everyone knows what your dad's been doing to you; you start to shut down once more. But you never talk about your dad ever again. You pushed him to the back of your mind for the rest of your life like a bad dream. And your new life with Tyler was easy. You even quit baseball because you finally concluded that you hated it all along. After all, it reminded you too much of your father. It was like you were back again. You would smile and laugh and party all weekend long. And I held onto you even tighter just so you would know I was there with you.

But there came a time when I knew that I was losing you for sure.

And as much as I tried, there would be no bringing you back this time. You were too far gone already. Your mind is already made up. And you were so idiotically stubborn. When your attention became fixed on something, there wasn't a thing or a person who could deviate you from the pathway already constructed. So when I knew that you would be leaving, I began building up my walls to protect myself from the inevitable.

I don't even know that if you were here you would even remember this but there was a night I knew for certain that the Colby I once knew was gone. You climbed in my window after practice like usual. You and Tyler must've drank a lot that night because you reeked of booze and weed. And the entire time you were over you didn't say a single thing. Just in through the window. Clothes off. And into bed. And I held on so tight to you that night, trying to wake you up to see that your life was right in front of you. That I was right in front of you. Whispering for you to

come back. “Don’t leave me, Colby. Please don’t go.” And there was nothing. No response. Just empty silence. And when my alarm woke me up in the morning you had already left. It was like you were never even there.

Jeramey arranges blocks into desks.

I truly didn’t expect to see you at school that day. In my mind, you had already packed your bags and vanished but there you were, standing by my locker. And I was happy. You smiled that stupid smile. Your dumb stupid grin and I lost it. Maybe there was hope that you were still with us. You were just lost trying to find your way back. And this is a day I will never forget for the rest of my life. It’s a day so imprinted onto my soul that every single vivid detail is forever etched into my body like a tattoo. Our first class rolled on as usual. Nothing out of the ordinary. I was counting down the minutes until I would see you in Trig. Only 20 more minutes. Only 19 more. 15. 10. 5. 4. 3. 2.1. And there you were with that smile. And life was great.

Not even 5 minutes into class was when it all changed. An announcement comes over the speakers for all teachers to turn on the TVs in every single classroom. We’re looking at the dusty small screen trying to quickly piece together why it was so urgent we had to be watching the news right now. It’s a Tuesday in New York. And then we see it. All of the smoke covering the sky. The North Tower of the World Trade Center is on fire. No one knows exactly what’s going on. They’re saying that a plane crashed into it? How does that even happen? And then the unimaginable. The silence that filled the room still gives me chills. And I can still hear the screams of the reporters.

We watch as another plane flies straight into the South Tower.

We watch as people jump out of the buildings.

We watch the destruction at the Pentagon.

We watch them evacuate the White House.

We watch the South Tower collapse.

We watch reports of another plane crashing into a field.

We watch the North Tower collapse.

And then we go home.

Our entire world was changed in less than an hour and a half. On any ordinary Tuesday.

Jeramey builds the blocks into a bed. He leaves 1 block off to the side of the stage - strangely.

Almost as if he left it there by accident.

A week later we watched as the President announced we were going to war. And then a week later you were gone. You packed your bags, dropped out, and joined the army. And the shitty thing is...

Is that I can't blame you for it. None of it. And as much I've tried to, and believe me, I've tried, what you did makes perfect sense. You had no family here. Your dreams of going pro were done for. You had no real life without any of those things. But what's shitty is that you never said goodbye. Because I thought you had me. You just left me a note on my desk that I saw when I came home from school.

Jer - I'm leaving. I'm sorry. I love you.

Colby

That's it? 9 words? That's all I get? Some note you scribbled in less than 30 seconds that you could've given to anybody? That you could've told me on any other day?

And what's crazy is that you'll never know what that note did to me. How it got into my head. Because I barely even remember the next month or two of my life. None of it feels real. How can you be gone? You can't be. We just talked to each other. We made plans.

I don't speak.

I don't sleep.

It's like I'm just there.

But I'm not.

I couldn't eat.

Everything tasted like dirt.

I collapse one day and wake up in the hospital.

My friends stop to check on me but I don't say anything.

I don't have the words.

Your friends stop by and hug me and cry and I just sit there.

I don't have any more left to give.

I'm admitted for a few days while they pump me with liquids but I still feel hollow.

My parents try to talk to me but I don't hear anything.

The world is empty without you.

I look towards the door but you never walk through it.

I have nightmares.

That you're fighting in some battle far away and you're either shot or blown up.

I'm stuck staring at your body and it's all I can see for every single second of every single waking moment.

I leave the window open every night hoping that just maybe it was all a bad dream and you'll come crawling back in.

And I learned to blame myself.

That maybe there was something more I could've done to help you.

That maybe I really was just a bad friend for all those years.

It finally gets so bad that I'm put on a suicide watch.

Which is crazy because you're not even truly gone yet.

You're off saving the world.

And from the little we've all heard from you... You're good.

Of course you excel in basic training because you've been doing that all your life.

And you ship out to Afghanistan a few months later.

Tyler one day forces me out of the house. He drags me into his car and we just drive for hours.

Not even talking. I don't even know where we're going. But then he stops in front of this

backwood area. He forces me out of the car and we begin walking in complete silence. We hike for a bit until we get to this little outcropping. And there it is. (*Jeramey stands in front of the 1 block*)

A makeshift tombstone you made for your mom 2 years ago with Tyler's help. And it hits me. I understand everything now. I understand you. I go home and cry for what feels like hours. And I feel free. I look in the mirror for the first time in months and see the figure of a lost ghost staring back at me. I've lost about thirty pounds. All of my clothes are baggy. And I don't know who I am anymore.

There comes a day when I wake up. Shower. Get dressed. And go to school like nothing ever happened. I stop by your locker and then move on to mine. I grab my books and go to class. I study for tests and do all my homework. I go to work. I see my friends. I see yours. I graduate. And then move on to college. I start dating someone new who knows nothing about us. I graduate with Honors and move away to New York to start my life. And in those 5 years, everything was easy without you. I learned to move on from the heartbreak. And I taught myself how to be a human again.

This entire section is delivered directly to the audience. Have some fun with it... as much as you reasonably can.

This is where I'm going to selfishly talk about myself because I feel so compelled to do so.

I have always been surrounded by loss since before I can remember. And I have this philosophy that the world can be divided up into two groups of people: Those Who Have and Those Who Haven't.

In this case, tonight, we have... Those who know Loss and Those who don't. Now Those who don't are extremely lucky because loss, at an early age, ruins your life forever and you can never get it back. I lost all of my grandparents before the 5th grade and it's the ever-crushing feeling that at any moment you could lose another person you care about that steals your innocence. Because when you're a child, the world feels... never-ending, conquerable... Free. Anything is possible when you're little because you're given anything you could ever need to keep you alive.

But loss takes that from you. You are confronted with the reality that the world has an end date. And that it's... You feel cheated. None of it seems fair. Loss isn't an easy concept to grapple with because, even though you try and wrap your mind around it, there is an inner conflict between the mind and the soul. Your mind logically tries to make sense of losing a person while your soul still clings to the possibility that at one point in time you will be reunited once again. And you don't just grieve the person but of the life that no longer exists.

Colby and I easily connected over our shared bonds of loss. The loss of a family member. The loss of childhood innocence.

Because my father drank. Colby was the only other person who knew that about my dad because on the outside, my family seemed perfect. We *sometimes* went to church. I got good grades. I wasn't a troublemaker. I just did what I was told and that was it. But most of my memories revolve around his clinical use of vodka as a substitute for receiving any actual legit form of medical relief. Empty bottles hidden in back cupboards he believed me and my mom would never find. Every single day secretly heading out to the store only to carry in plastic bags clinking with his new dose of medication. He was a drunk. He still is but he would deny he has a problem until the day he dies.

My father made it a strict point to never resort to any form of physical violence - that was beneath him. Only bad people physically abuse others. Not him. But he had no problem screaming at us. At slamming doors and cabinets. At throwing things around the room. At getting rid of possessions any one of us found joy in. His anger was never physical but the energy in the house at all times

was like a held breath waiting to exhale. For one day he would finally snap and hit one of us as we'd all been anticipating.

And it's going to sound sick and I know it's sick but there were so many times growing up that I wish he had hit me. Maybe then I could connect with Colby on a more physical level. I so desperately craved the tangible evidence of the years-long abuse we had all endured. I needed to show people the bruises I had been holding in for so long.

Jeramey sits on top of the table next to Colby's picture.

But then one day you call out of the blue. It's another Tuesday. Something must be cursed about those days. You confirm what most of us had thought to be true for a few years now. That you were kicked out of the military two years ago. And that you had been bouncing around rehabs trying to get better. You're in a facility out in Long Island and were hoping I would be able to stop by so we could talk. I promised that I would make it up that weekend and I could hear the excitement in your voice.

I don't want to go into much detail because I know I won't be able to control myself so here's what you need to know.

He told me a few stories from his time in the military and what I did hear was that he had found his purpose in life. That he was great at his work and enjoyed it. Felt like he was actually doing some good for a change. And then three years later he would be kicked out of the military. A

court-martial would hand him an “Other than Honorable” Discharge. And his entire country abandoned him. Just like everyone else did in his childhood.

He could no longer receive any form of government assistance. No education benefits. No VA health benefits. He could never be buried in a national cemetery. All because he was gay. That this landmark act for “gay civil rights” that was passed in ‘93 completely destroyed his life. Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell. Keep it all hidden for everyone’s benefit. No one ever needs to know. And he was ashamed. He felt betrayed. All he had achieved in the military, in his life, was now worthless. A disgrace to his country. A country that he had fought for. He had no family to run to. He was too embarrassed to ask Tyler’s family if he could live with them again. He struggled to find a job because no employer wanted to hire a gay ex-veteran. So he turned to the one thing he knew could bring him an ounce of peace.

Jeramey builds the blocks into a bed. He lays down on it.

He called me every single night after that visit just to talk about anything and everything. You told me stories about your mom I had never heard before. And you promised me you were trying this time to get better. That you wanted to change. I finally thought I was getting you back after all these years. And just three weeks later your calls stopped and I knew that you were truly gone this time. But I got a call from Tyler instead. That you had relapsed. And that you had died on November 4, 2006. That they had ruled your death an accidental overdose.

You were only 23.

And that was your life. I'll add your name to my ever-growing list of losses.

ACT 3: THE AFTER TIMES

Jeramey arranges the door center so it cuts off stage left from stage right.

So I made the journey back home for the first time in a long time. I had been back a handful of times and every time I stepped into that little quiet corner of America it became more and more painful because you were never there. My parents lived in the same house I grew up in. My bedroom hadn't been touched since the last time I was there. The same posters and trash littered the space. And it was weird being back this time. There was this weird sensation that nothing had changed at all. Yet I was a completely different person than the man who once used to live here.

The night of your viewing I put on my old back suit from high school. I'm surprised it even still fit, and when I looked in the mirror I was back. It was 2000 and we were all getting ready for junior prom. The past 6 years never happened, like it was all just a bad dream. We deliberately chose matching suits and everyone just thought it was an accident. We would laugh about that for hours. Our little inside joke. I stared back at my reflection for what felt like hours just flicking through memory after memory of me in this suit with you next to me. But with all my dreams, I eventually woke up and made my way to the funeral home. All of your old teammates and friends from high school were there. My friends even made it. It was like a weird high school reunion under the worst of circumstances. A few of them were probably even shocked you had continued to survive for as long as you did. But the big difference was that most of them hadn't escaped town as I had. A lot of them were still even dating their boyfriends and girlfriends from school. You would have

laughed and called them all idiots for never growing up and experimenting with other people. The night was as if nothing had changed at all.

Jeramey arranges the blocks into a makeshift fire pit with 4 seats around it.

Everyone greeted me like it was just another night in Tyler Bailey's backyard. He had the firepit lit up and everyone was drinking cheap liquor out of those stupid red solo cups. All bundled up in sweaters, huddling together for warmth. Tyler's parents always let him throw the after parties at their house just as their parents had let them. It was the tradition in our town. You smile at me as I walk through the gate into the backyard and offer me a cup of some sick concoction you had brewed to get me as wasted as quickly as humanly possible. I take it and we start drinking. But, that was so long ago. And now, instead of a smile, I am greeted by the blank stare in your coffin.

Jeramey walks inside the funeral home.

You look as if you're just sleeping. Passed out in your bed after one of your parties. All of the old memories come rushing back to me at once. Because of your stupid fucking smile. I don't know if I'll be able to handle this. But Tyler comes up behind me and pats me on my back. I haven't seen him in person since our graduation and he mentions how good it is to see me after all these years. I never came back to visit anyone since leaving for college. I would only come home to see my parents and then quickly leave right after. He tries to apologize for him being the one to have to call me with the bad news but I hastily stop him and exit out to the hallway. And that's pretty much how the rest of the viewing goes. People come up and offer me condolences as if I was a real member of your family. We were once best friends but hadn't spoken in years. I don't know how to

tell them the truth of our relationship but nothing ever changes in this town so I don't blame them for not knowing. They all probably thought we'd kept in touch all these years.

Tyler's mom invites me over for a little get-together at their house. She was crying throughout the entire viewing. The boy she adopted to protect from all harm is gone. At one point Tyler even had to escort her out of the room. Shouldn't I be feeling this way? You're gone now, for real this time, but I don't feel anything. I don't feel comfortable going back to the house Colby called home before leaving but I don't want to hurt her feelings.

Jeramey walks out the door and he's at the party.

I thought it was going to be a small little thing but it was just another one of their epic Friday night parties. Cars litter the entire block and the backyard is filled with all the same familiar faces. Except yours. Nothing ever changes. I walk through the gate and Tyler is there to offer me a cup instead of you. It shocks me to my core and I begin hyperventilating. I knew this was a mistake but I couldn't back out now because everyone was watching me. (*Jeramey walks through the door and enters the house*) I grabbed the cup out of his hand and rushed into the protection of the house. Their kitchen was the same as the last time I had seen it. All of Tyler's school pictures hung up on the fridge with a few engagement pictures sprinkled in. But there was a new one I had never seen before. Your military portrait. (*Jeramey picks up the photo off the table*) You are stone-faced in your pristine dark blue uniform. Your hair buzzed short. The scar that'll never fade.

I made a quick right turn up the stairs so I wouldn't have to look at you any longer. I knew exactly what room I was heading to and was praying that it wouldn't look the same as the last

time I had seen you. From the last time I had seen you while you were still mentally with us. I quickly opened the bedroom door and was surprised to see that it was empty. All of your stuff was gone. There was nothing left of you except for those stupid glow-in-the-dark stars you made me help you put up when you moved in. A few had fallen off over the years but most were still there, holding on for dear life. I hate those stars.

Tyler's dad quietly knocks on the door to let me know he was there. "It looks different." He tells me they moved all of your stuff out once Tyler graduated high school. It was now all packed away in a storage unit that you would never visit. He then jumps into a story about the both of us from when we were kids. About some party you helped Tyler throw when his parents were out of town. All anyone does is talk about these stupid parties and I'm tired of it. I try my best to sound interested but my mind is wandering off. I'm honestly thinking about our last conversation. Maybe there was more I should have done. I should have recognized the signs that you had relapsed. Or were planning on relapsing. I could have done more.

The buzz of my phone cuts him off and wakes me up from my nightmare. It's my girlfriend. She's calling to check on me. She asked if she could come to support me but I brushed her off and told her not to. That it would be a waste of her time. I hadn't even talked to you in years so there wouldn't be much to learn about you. I also didn't want her to know who I was in high school. And who you were. So I ignore the call and go back to Tyler's dad. And the rest of the night follows suit to this interaction.

Jeramey walks back outside to the party.

Everyone is drunk in the backyard telling old Colby stories. The time you broke the school's stolen bases record. The time you jumped off the roof, drunk, and into the swimming pool. The time you stole the rival school's mascot and paraded it around homecoming. All stupid shit that didn't amount to anything. My girlfriend calls again and I let it go to voicemail. I'm going to have a hard time explaining this to her. I pledge to push it off for as long as I can. At one point I look up and everyone is staring at me, obviously waiting for me to answer. "I'm sorry, what? I wasn't listening." "He was always so close to you. You were like brothers." This is a sentiment we heard dozens of times over the years. I can tell everyone is still waiting for me to answer so I silently nod and shoot back the rest of whatever's in my cup. But the one topic of conversation no one dares touch upon is your time in the military. Or, more importantly, why it got cut short. Because it would've been a whole lot better for these people if you had *actually* been killed overseas in some heroic shootout with a terrorist. But no. You were kicked out because you enjoyed kissing other dudes. And you died a loser drug addict who could never get his shit together. No one seems to remember this part of you. They only remember you for who you were in high school before you left.

I'm too tired for all of this. I think back to our first high school party. It was right after your first game and you were so pumped that you had won. We went to some senior's house and were greeted by what seemed like hundreds of people who were all waiting for you. Your smile lit up and you disappeared into the crowd, never to be seen again for the rest of the night. Because that's exactly who you were; a crowd pleaser. An impulsive prick who never thought about the consequences. (*He walks back inside the house*) So I excuse myself and head back to my car but go through the house this time to avoid all the eyes that have been on me all night. I stop at the front door and say goodbye to Tyler's mom. She's sitting on the couch, holding her bible. It's unopened

but I can tell she's been forcing herself to read. I don't understand how she can be reading that book at a time like this. She knows you were never religious. If anything, you actively pushed against any topic relating to God. Because if there was some almighty being up there watching everything and everyone at the same time, how could they let your dad treat you that way for all those years? What moral lesson is there to be learned in any of this? But then it hits me that she might not be reading the book for herself... but for you. Where do you end up now that you've committed suicide? Where does Colby Thewlis' soul go after death? An even darker one than the life you've already lived through? I push that intrusive thought away before spiraling down a deeper hole. There are some things that should never be imagined about you. She looks up at me with the most pained expression in her eyes and gives a slight nod of recognition. She knows how hard this is for me. And why I left in the first place.

Jeramey moves the door and builds his bed.

The entire car ride home is in silence except for the sound of the falling snow through my open windows. It's cold out but I'm torturing myself for coming back. It's the punishment I deserve. My parents want to talk when I get back but I ignore all of their pleas and climb the stairs to my room. The same room I tried to never return to. I strip down to absolutely nothing and open my window. I'm trying to feel something and yet it's not working. I can't sleep. When I close my eyes I see you. Watching my best friend from the bleachers line up for his pitch. He looks at the pitcher dead in the eyes and then looks toward me for reassurance. I give my signal that he'll be okay. He's ready to play. He winks and then I open my eyes. It's too cold. I'm feeling something. I start screaming. My mom rushes into my room. I begin crying; soft tears that transform into full-on loud sobs. She grabs a hold of me and tries cradling me for comfort which only makes it worse. My father waltzes

his way over and sits on my bed watching me. This is the first time we've had a connection as a family since I left. I don't like it.

The next time I wake up it's 8 am and the sun is shining through the now closed window. I would have never done that. I check my phone and see 12 missed calls from my girlfriend. I did just leave without telling her goodbye but why won't she just leave me alone? Stop calling me, please. All I want is to be left alone so I can bury my best friend. Is that too much to ask for? I am wearing pajama pants. Someone must've dressed me while I was passed out. That's embarrassing. Having to dress your grown adult son who was having another mental breakdown. I don't want to thank them for it but I know that at some point I am going to have to. I just don't know how. I hide out in my room until it's too late to get ready, just staring endlessly up at my starless glow-in-the-dark ceiling. Why did you love those stars so much? I quickly shower and dress in the funeral suit my girlfriend bought for me. She thought if she'd done one nice thing for me before I left I might feel better. She was wrong. I didn't thank her. I rush downstairs to avoid interaction with my parents. My girlfriend calls me again but I send it to voicemail. They'll be going in their car. I won't have to talk to them. Thank God.

Jeramey arranges the blocks into a casket.

Your funeral is a blur. I don't remember much. People who barely knew you are sobbing. It's all annoying. They act like this is all a show. And old friends and teammates give eulogies. I'm supposed to go up next. I have my notecards with me. The speech I prepared and practiced for is all ready to go. And this is where I have to stop because I'm sorry but I lied.

ACT 4: THE END TIMES

I lied.

I lied. I didn't give you a eulogy. I can't just give you a eulogy because you were so much more than just a few paragraphs hastily summarizing who you are and what you meant. So no. None of this happened. None of this is real. Because the truth is that when I saw you lying in your casket... I ran. I ran. Because it's not fair. None of this is fair. It should be me who's dead. Not you. Because you... You deserved so much better than what you got. You know, you always used to say that life was a prison and I really didn't understand what you meant until right now. I feel trapped without you here in this world.

But I do go to your funeral. I sit in the back row where no one will see me. And I watch Tyler's mom the entire time. She never does anything that memorable. Simply staring at your coffin. Never moving an inch. It's as if she's dead too. Waiting for her coffin to take her away with you. And when they lower your coffin into the ground, that's when I feel it. This weird tugging sensation inside of me trying to escape. But I don't let it. I excuse myself and run to my car.

(Jeramey arranges the blocks to be the inside of his car) I lock myself in and begin pounding on the steering wheel. I parked far enough away where no one would hear the horn going off. If only we had gotten out together like we said we would our junior year, you wouldn't be lying in the ground right now.

Jeramey lets out a guttural scream. The audience should be scared.

I scream as loud as I can. I scream until I can't scream anymore and I have nothing left in me to give. And I look up and the parking lot is almost empty. How long have I been in here? My parents have been calling me. I should probably call them back. My girlfriend has also been calling and texting me. I should probably call her back. I try to shake myself out of this daze I've forced myself into. I lean back in my chair and blast the heater. There's a knock on the passenger door and for a second I expect to see you there. I'm thrown back into high school when I would pick you up in the morning. We'd always be running late and your hair would always be dripping when you jumped in the car. I'd look over and smile before driving off. You'd always punch my arm to reinstate dominance. I wish I could go back. And I'm even more thrown off when I look over and realize it's Tyler.

I unlock the door and he climbs into the car with me.

We actually hear Tyler's pre-recorded voice.

"God it's so cold out there."

I nod to be polite.

"Look. I'm going to make this quick because I know how much you hate this. I've been watching you the entire time."

I've always been easy to read.

“He left this for you.”

He hands me our Senior Year yearbook. The one he never received because he dropped out. I just stare at the cover. I’m too afraid to make eye contact with him.

“He asked for it a few years ago when he was in Afghanistan. I would’ve told you sooner but I didn’t know why he wanted it. The center he was in sent it with all of his other stuff. But this one he addressed to you.”

Oh, God. This can’t be happening. We sit in silence.

“I just don’t know why he thought he had to kill himself. We all loved him. We would’ve taken him back without asking any questions. And you know... We all knew... And none of us cared because you made him happy. And that’s all you could’ve done in his life. To make the hell he was living in just a tiny bit better. And we all loved you for it.”

Tyler stares at me, like really stares at me before I see the tears forming in his eyes. He quickly looks away and looks out the windshield trying to force the tears back into the deep space within.

“I love you too. I need you to know that. We all love you.”

I look over at him and say the two words I promised myself I would never say.

“Thank you.”

He's really forcing the tears back and if he doesn't get out now the dam will break. He quickly darts out of my car and runs back to his own where his wife is waiting for him with open arms. High school crushes that survived the trials of life. And it's their physical touch that reminds me of my girlfriend who's waiting back home for me. That I need to talk to her. That I need to tell her about you. The real you. Something I had never done in my life.

Jeremey stands.

And the scariest thing about ALL OF THIS is that after all of these years of running away from you. From the town. From my entire past. I still don't know who I am. I don't even know if I like the person I've become in the past five years. Death isn't scary because you're gone... You can't do anything more with your life. The people you leave behind are the ones who have to pick up all of the missing pieces and continue living. What's truly haunting about death is knowing that if you're the one who is still alive, you have to change yourself for the better. You don't want to have to be the one who leaves your family and friends with a lot of missing pieces.

I close my eyes and am thrown back into a final memory with you. It was at another one of your parties. We were drunk. Too drunk. We had snuck away and locked ourselves into your bedroom upstairs. (*Jeramey lays on the floor*) We stripped naked and you dragged me onto the floor but we didn't do anything. We just stared up at the ceiling. At those stupid glow-in-the-dark stars you loved so much. And you told me you thought you loved me for the first time. No one had ever told me that before and I got so happy. I looked over at you and you laughed. Your stupid laugh. God, I wish I could go back to that. To you. I miss you.

Jeramey faces the audience.

But now I look over at Madison, the girl who I just religiously confessed everything to, and she's trying her best to smile for me. And I try my best to smile for her. And his yearbook is sitting on my coffee table. Waiting for someone to open it up and read whatever he had left inside. We lay on the living room floor for what feels like hours. Just like he is lying in his coffin right now. And as I watched him being lowered into the ground it was as if I was looking at myself. And I didn't like the reflection staring back at me. She reaches out and grabs my hand. I hold onto hers for dear life. And pray that the next chapter of my life will be good. Something I hadn't done in a long time.

And I know now that wherever you are, Colby, you'll be okay.

END.