

# The Suicide Note That Outed Me

How a Single Summer and a First Love Still Shape a Life



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The first funeral I ever attended was the funeral of the first boy I ever loved, the boy who died by his own hand, the boy whose suicide note, in a paragraph near its end, mentioned — *me*.

Whose suicide note, as it happened, *outed* me.

Losing a boyfriend, even a secret boyfriend, is a lot to bear for a sixteen-year-old kid.

Being *outed* is a lot to bear, at any age.

But when I attended my secret boyfriend's funeral, as I stood before his

coffin in my scratchy shirt and tie, I didn't yet know about the suicide note.

In the South, where we lived, funerals often featured an odd practice: the open casket. Many older people still call the funeral home's family visitation hour a *viewing*.

So—as I passed the casket, in a line with other mourners, I looked straight into Joey's suddenly unfamiliar, cosmetic-caked face, his hair smoothed straighter than I'd ever seen it—I, literature lover even then, paraphrased in my mind John Webster's words (which I encountered by way of an Agatha Christie novel): *Cover his face. Mine eyes dazzle. He died young.*

**“But when you said I scared you, I guess you scared me too...”\***

Joey's story and mine started the summer before that March funeral, the summer I was fifteen. My brother, a year-and-a-half older than me, played baseball in what were called summer elite leagues. He'd played in those leagues for four or five years, and, in one of those earlier summers, I'd met another player's younger brother. Those early summers, while our older brothers played ball, Eric and I, no athletes either of us, would mess around the ballparks, making our own fun, rarely watching the games.

But that summer, the summer I was fifteen, I stayed each game glued to the stands, focused on the field. Not because I'd suddenly developed a love of the game, as my dad vainly hoped I had, but because I'd suddenly developed a crush on a player, my friend's older brother: Joey.

Though Eric, a year younger than me, had been a good friend of mine for several years, I made it my special mission, that summer, to be Eric's

*best* friend, in order to catch more frequent glimpses of Joey. Affable Eric welcomed me right in.

Since Eric was only fourteen and I was fifteen, we couldn't yet drive, but our older brothers could, so I spent as many hours of those long, Texas-hot summer days as I could at Eric's house. I spent as many of those summer nights as I could at the multiplex where Joey worked, ostensibly playing video games in the theater's arcade, actually taking any chance I could find of chatting up, or just ogling, Joey.

Did he know what I was up to, that first besotted week or so? I never asked him. After all, *I* barely knew what I was up to.

I'd never had a boyfriend before, had only ever kissed one boy, and one girl, and both just out of a sort of mutual curiosity. I'd liked kissing the boy more, I had to admit to myself—*a lot* more.

Oh, and, Joey, two years older than me, had a girlfriend; they were the super popular couple in their high school. But a fifteen-year-old boy, enamored of his first crush, doesn't rely much on reason.

Except when reason served me, as it did one night early that summer, as realization struck me like a beautiful bolt from heaven. I lay in my dark room, awake, thinking of Joey, and entertaining myself the way fifteen-year-old boys often do.

*Joey never once*, I realized, blissfully, *seemed annoyed with me, as my own brother often did, had never once looked bored with me or asked me to leave him alone.*

What more evidence did a love-struck gay boy need of assured mutual

affection?

Oh, happy night!

Even happier was the next night I slept over at Eric's house—the night by which all future happy nights would be judged.

By design, I slept over at Eric's *a lot* that summer. Each night there, I sat awake, on a sleeping bag on the floor of my deep-sleeping, heavy-snoring friend's room, waiting to hear Joey, home from closing up the cineplex, ascend the stairs, heavily, oblivious to the possibility of waking his sleeping family.

That first night, my heart beating and my hands trembling, I waited, breathlessly, for a few minutes, giving Joey time to settle in his own room, next door. Stealthily as my growing limbs and trembling body would allow, I got up to go down the short hall, past Joey's room, heading for the bathroom. Or at least the bathroom would be my cover story, if I ended up needing a cover story.

Joey's door was open, his overhead light dazzling my dark-room adjusted eyes. He was sitting at the foot of his bed, shoes and socks and shirt off, staring into a video game on his TV, controller in hand.

He was seventeen to my fifteen, his body a muscular, toned athlete's, mine a skinny reader's. Even at fifteen, I'd already been caught looking too long at guys a few times, been taunted with the words that strike fear into the heart of any gay boy: *what are YOU looking at?*

So I'd taught myself to look without looking too long, mostly.

Seeing Joey, on the edge of his bed in just his khaki shorts, though, I couldn't look away.

And he saw me looking.

And I saw that he saw, and our eyes locked, and at that moment I knew what I had only barely hoped to be true actually was.

Joey didn't say *what are YOU looking at?*

He said: "Come on in." He said: "Close the door."

And I did.

Every moment of the next couple of hours imprinted so heavily on my brain they might as well have been a genetic inheritance, those moments, those hours.

Toward the end of those charmed couple of hours — as he held me, and I continually and with awe and fascination poked the almost mythical mass of his biceps, making him laugh as he flexed them for me — I asked him to tell me his whole name. He told me, and his middle name was Joseph, which I hadn't known before.

"I'm going to call you Joey," I said. "Nobody else calls you that, and I want to call you something nobody else does."

Concrete Blonde's "Joey" was on the radio a lot that summer. It played on the radio as we lay there, together, which made me giggle.

"See," I said. "It's fate. Even the band likes my name for you."

He nibbled my jawline, a sensation so foreign to any of my previous experiences and so incomparably wonderful, I sighed, moaned even, loudly and without shame or reserve.

He laughed, too. “I think you’re going to be trouble, Kiddo,” he said, which thrilled me.

I’d never been *anyone’s* trouble before.

**“But if I seemed to be confused, I didn’t mean to be. With you.”**

As I think back on that summer, all these years later, I’m struck by how *innocent* we all were. “Summer has its own rules,” Benjamin Alire Sáenz wrote in his lyrical young-adult novel *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*. The Summer of Joey certainly had rules of its own.

Our romance, and it came quickly to be that, was both hidden and in plain sight. Joey’s parents both worked a lot, mine were busy, his brother and my siblings had lots of activities of their own.

Nobody thought it was weird that I spent so much time, so many nights, at Joey’s, because, as far as anyone would even have thought about it at all, I was at Eric’s. Which, technically, I was. Even often on nights when Eric slept over at other friends’ houses, I was at “Eric’s” house.

Nobody thought it was weird, either, that I rode so often in Joey’s car, because in Texas suburbia, all older-siblings-with-licenses drive around their kid brothers and their kid brothers’ friends.

So on afternoons before Joey went in to work, he and I would drive to the lake and park, or drive to the park and hike. We were out in the open

*and* deep in the closet, at once. I was just a kid, after all; he, a star athlete with a girlfriend.

If nobody thought it was weird how often Joey and I were together, for my part I didn't, at least at first, and for a while, think it weird he had a girlfriend.

A girlfriend, Jennifer, *and* me. A girlfriend he went on dates with, a girlfriend he went to parties with, a girlfriend who was sometimes at his house when I was there playing video games or whatever with Eric.

One night, as Joey and I lay in his bed, the blasting AC barely cooling the room we'd, together, overheated, I looked up at him, from where I was nestled against his sweaty shoulder.

The thought had only that moment, strangely, occurred to me. "Do you, I mean, do you, you know, have sex with Jennifer? In this bed?"

He looked at me, concern in his eyes. I could see his eyes clearly because, as usual, the overhead light was blaring.

His chest raised and lowered. A sigh. "What do you think, Kiddo?" he asked me.

*Kiddo*. One of his nicknames for me. The other was *Little Prince*.

I didn't know what to think, so I didn't answer.

Joey had a beautiful dusting of new-growth hair across his firm chest. I loved running my fingers across his fuzzy chest, resting my cheek against it.

I rested my chin there, this time, and looked at him. “I think I’m gay,” I said, the first time I’d said those words, to anybody.

Joey chuckled. There was no meanness in the chuckle, but neither was there much mirth.

“Yeah, Kiddo. I think *we* are.”

**“Joey, honey, I’ve got the money...”**

Late one night, as that summer-of-its-own rules was drawing to a close, Joey and I had the house to ourselves. Eric was sleeping over somewhere else, and their parents, who had a struggling marriage, were trying to save it by having a weekend getaway.

I got up to go to the bathroom; when I got back, Joey, under that bright light of his bedroom ceiling, was crouched on the floor, next to the clothes I’d quickly wriggled out of and dropped there earlier in the evening. He had pulled my wallet from my shorts pocket.

“You always have so much cash,” he said, wonderingly. He smiled at me. “You’re like a secret pole dancer or something, aren’t you? A high-priced gigolo.”

I snatched the wallet from him. “You wish,” I said, lecherously, wiggling my hips more comically than seductively.

He grabbed me by my bare middle and pulled me down to him. “I *don’t* wish, Little Prince,” he said, calling me that for the first time. “No way I could afford your prices, Kiddo.”

He kissed me, where he knew I liked it most, all along my jaw line.



Completely powerless under his spell, and glad to be so, I gave him the cash. “Buy yourself something nice,” I told him, though I knew, even then, why he wanted the money.

To buy booze, pills. Like a lot of his athlete buddies did here in suburbia. Just one of the guys. But Joey bought those dulling substances, I knew, because in one super-secret way he *wasn't* just one of those guys. He was gay. And being gay scared the crap out of my strong, sweet athlete.

Joey was always happy around me, but he wasn't always happy. Not even close.

**“But if it's love you're lookin' for, then I can give a little more...”**

I asked my parents if I could quit my private school and transfer to public when the new school year started in a couple of weeks.

The thought of seeing Joey less when the school year started made me panic. I wanted to go to *his* school, where he'd be a senior. We wouldn't be *together* together at school, even besotted me knew that, but I could see him every day, even if just passing in the halls.

But my parents said no.

I found Joey at the cineplex that night to tell him, to tell him I'd asked to go to his school, to tell him my parents said I had to stay where I was.

I didn't mean to, but I started to cry. Right there in the huge, neon-tacky lobby of the cineplex.

Joey hugged me. He took me into a dark screening room where no movie was playing.

“When school starts,” I said, sobbing into his work T-shirt, “You’ll forget all about me.”

Joey’s name tag pierced through my own T-shirt, scratching me, but I didn’t care. Though Joey was two years older than me, was an athlete and much stronger than me, we were almost the same height. I was just over 5’9 and growing; he was 5’10 and had pretty much stopped.

He put his hands on my shoulders and sort of pressed downward. “By next summer, Kiddo, you’re going to be so much taller than me you’re going to be looking for another tall dude, and you’ll both be looking down on me. And be honest: you just *know* how you like to look down on people.”

I smiled. I couldn’t help it. Joey loved calling me a brat, teasing me for saying things like, when we were out getting food or whatever, “I have some cash but let’s use my credit card so we don’t actually have to pay for anything.”

I looked Joey in his dark eyes in the dark theater. He wiped my cheeks below my eyes with his thumb.

“I won’t” he said, and his voice was husky. “I won’t forget about you, Little Prince. We’ll both have classes, and I’ll have football and work, and you’ll have your nerd clubs, but we’ll find time. As much as we can.”

“Promise?” I asked, hopeful, sniffing.

He nodded, solemn. “I promise. I promise the new school year won’t separate us. And I promise that next summer, whether you’re looking for some new tall dude or not, I’ll still be coming around, looking for

you.”

I believed him. I felt better.

He kept only the first part of his promise.

**“Oh, Joey, if you’re hurtin’ so am I...”**

In late October, I sat with Eric and some of his friends in the stands of their high-school football stadium at halftime, watching the Texas spectacle of the presentation of the Homecoming Football Court.

Joey was crowned Homecoming King; Jennifer his Queen.

She was wearing a prom-type gown with her rhinestone tiara. Joey was playing in the game, so he wore a velveteen robe one of his courtiers had slung over his sweaty uniform and football-pad clad shoulders.

He was smiling. He looked happy. I think he *was* happy. Weirdly, watching him out there in his element, I was happy too. Maybe because, though still in secret, Joey had kept his promise. We were still spending time together. So when Joey tipped his party-store crown in my direction, I smiled and waved back.

But things were not all Homecoming-spectacle-smiles that autumn.

Joey and Eric’s parents’ marriage had been struggling for a long time. It was finally falling apart. His dad had moved out. Together, his parents didn’t have a lot of money. Apart, they were really starting to struggle. His mom was looking to sell their house, to get into a smaller one.

Joey was also starting to worry about college. One cold November night,

as we snuggled together in his warm bed, I was reassuring him that he was a good enough athlete in *three* sports to get a scholarship in at least *one* of them.

“Coach thinks so too,” he said. To which of his seemingly several dozen coaches he referred, I had no idea, but I was grateful to this unspecified Coach.

“Anyway,” he said, “Now that my family’s finally broke, I just hope my snobby little private school boyfriend will still want to be with me.”

I poked him in the side. I clambered on top of him. “You’re in luck,” I said, kissing his eyelids, which he hated. “Your boyfriend thinks slumming is *s-e-x-y*. But let’s just hope your mom doesn’t, you know, go *overboard* with this house downsizing business. If she makes you share a bedroom with Eric, our, um, extracurriculars will be significantly curtailed, babe.”

He laughed at that. Laughed loud. Not so loud, though, that it would have drawn the attention of his mom, in her bedroom downstairs.

But something did. Because, opening the door, there she stood.

Joey and Eric’s mom *never* came upstairs, ever. She even always left their clean laundry at the foot of the stairs. As a result of no mom or maid attention, Joey and Eric’s bachelor-pad second floor, just their two bedrooms and a bath, existed permanently in a state of slightly smelly, musty messiness.

I never asked what brought Joey’s mom upstairs so late that night, made her open the door of her older son’s brightly lit bedroom.

I do know what she saw, though. She saw her son and me, undressed, laughing, me on top of him.

She stood there just a moment. She didn't say a word. She closed the door.

Joey didn't get up. He wrapped his arms around me, tight. But when I looked in his eyes I saw worry there. I saw *panic*.

I didn't get up, either. Not right away. After a little while, I crept away from Joey's embrace and, as usual, back into Eric's room, taking up my post on the sleeping bag.

I didn't think I'd sleep, but I did. When Eric's video game woke me up the next morning, I went downstairs to find Joey at the kitchen table. His mom was at church, as she usually was on Sunday mornings.

He poured a glass of orange juice for me, as I rubbed the sleep from my eyes. I sat across from him.

"She doesn't want me to tell anyone, Kiddo. Not my dad, or my coaches, anybody. She thinks it'll hurt my scholarship chances if word gets out. She's right, it would."

I felt half asleep still. "Okay," I said, all I could think to say.

His tense face relaxed a little. He pushed back his chair, patted his legs. I jumped up, crossed over to him, and sat on his lap. He wrapped his strong arms around me.

"But I think I'll tell Eric," he said. "My brother needs to know, and he

won't say anything. You okay with that?"

I felt whirly-headed and throat-parched, but I nodded. "Now?" I heard my voice squeak.

"Yeah. You sure it's okay, Kiddo?"

I nodded again. He was about to come out to Eric. *I* was about to come out to Eric. I had never come out to anybody, except Joey. My two best friends, Adam and Susan, *suspected*, I was pretty sure, but they'd never directly asked, nobody had, and I hadn't told. The nineties were that dim era of don't ask, don't tell.

Joey shouted for his brother, and after about three shouts, Eric finally came downstairs. I was still sitting on Joey's lap, and blushing like crazy, as we both, together, came out to somebody who wasn't *us*.

"So, you're, like, *together*?" Eric asked, incredulous.

I'd wondered plenty of times over those last few months that summer and fall if Eric knew about Joey and me. He slept in the very next room, after all. But Eric's reaction, his face, told me he'd had no clue all along.

"In secret, for now, bro," Joey said. "But, yeah. I'm hoping next year, when I'm in college and have my scholarship, and Brian has his license, God help us, he'll drive up to visit me in college. *Really* visit. Like, *boyfriend* visit. Dudes do that in college, right? Have boyfriends visit them? That is, you know, if our Little Prince can bear to be seen on the campus of what's likely going to be, for me, a second-tier state university."

He laughed at his own joke, and Eric laughed, too. And I laughed, not at the joke, but out of relief and also delight that two brothers like Joey and Eric were close enough that a coming-out bombshell could be taken in stride, could be taken as *good* news, even in the don't-ask-don't-tell nineties.

**“I just stand by and watch you fight your secret war...”**

That beautiful laughter came to an end soon enough.

In January, a month before my sixteenth birthday, Joey was at a seniors-only party. Kids were drinking, a lot, Joey included. He had an argument with Jennifer. I didn't know until months later that the argument was about me.

Kids were doing crazy things at that party on the edge of a lake. Joey fell off a car, or out of a car, or got hit by a car—I never did get clear on exactly what happened.

Eric called me the next day, a Saturday, to tell me Joey was in the hospital, was going to have surgery on his leg, which was all busted up.

I didn't see Joey for a few days, not until he was home, propped up in bed with a big cast up past his knee. His mom took me to his room. She didn't really say anything to me, hadn't said much to me since that night she found me with her son. But when she showed me into Joey's room, she patted me on the shoulder.

“You're getting so tall, Brian,” was all she said. She closed the door behind her.

“No scholarship for me, Kiddo,” Joey said, patting the place on the bed

beside him.

I sat down as gently as I could, so I didn't cause his leg to hurt more.

“That's not all, though, Brian. My blood tests were all messed up. The doc said he needed to talk to me about my blood test. I swear to God, Kiddo, I panicked. I just knew they were going to tell me I had HIV.”

I froze. “But you don't? No HIV?”

This was the very early '90s. There was no AIDS Cocktail yet.

Joey shook his head. “No HIV, Kiddo. But the point is: it *could* have been that. It's kind of a miracle it wasn't. We have to be careful from now on, okay, Kiddo? Every time.”

My thoughts wandered, for a moment, to Joey's *other* guys. Two older men he'd slept with since the summer. Both one-night stands Joey had told me about, him regretful, me confused.

“So if it wasn't HIV, what was the health news?” I asked.

“Get this, Kiddo: diabetes. Can you believe it, *diabetes*?”

I tried to think of everything I knew about diabetes, which wasn't much. Except I thought only inactive or overweight people had it.

“But you're fit, an athlete!” I protested, ridiculously.

He unclasped the watch my grandfather had given me from my arm and put it on his own wrist, as he sometimes did, admiring it there. “I guess I lost the genetic lottery, my Little Prince.”



I thought of the pills Joey took, the liquor and beer he drank.

“Okay, Joey,” I said, actually feeling hopeful. “We can think about this as good news. You’ll *have* to take care of your health now. Get clean. Get sober. You can find treatment. I can help you. I *want* to help you.”

Joey took my hand, kissed my knuckles. “Always the optimist, Kiddo. You know I love that about you, right?”

I blushed. I didn’t know what to say.

“I guess this means Prince Brian is going to find the money to send me to some fancy treatment center. Some place Kurt Cobain would go?”

Nirvana’s *Nevermind* had dropped the year before; Joey was obsessed with it. I was obsessed with Courtney Love and Hole’s *Pretty on the Inside*.

“Whatever it takes,” I said. “We’ll figure it out.” I was already picturing a future Joey. One who wasn’t confined by his Big Jock on Campus image. One who didn’t need sports or a girlfriend as a cover for who he really was. A Joey who would go to rehab and then go to college, who would be *out*, out with me.

A Joey who existed only in my head.

When I left his room that day, I left it for the last time, though I did not know that then. Not knowing it, I left hopeful, joyful, even. I may have whistled as I descended those stairs one last time.

**“All is forgiven, listen, listen...”**

I didn't see much of Joey the next couple of weeks, as his leg limited his mobility, and doctor's visits and diabetes consultations took up a lot of his time. He began sleeping in the living room, downstairs, to avoid the hassle of the stairs, with his cast. The living room was not private enough to enjoy any alone time. Especially since his mom had sold the house, and everything was being packed up, getting ready for the move.

But he called me, on my birthday, in February.

"I'm guessing the Little Prince got a new car as a reward for turning the ripe old age of sixteen?" Joey said, teasing me.

My embarrassed laugh told him all he needed to know. "Come pick me up, then, Speed Racer."

I drove us to our spot on the lake. I was weirdly nervous, with Joey watching and judging every driverly decision I made. I was weirdly nervous about parking with Joey, too. We'd parked in our spot plenty of times, but never with me in the driver's seat, never with Joey in a cast.

Joey put his hand on my knee, which definitely didn't make me any less distracted, as I stared at his wide, veined hand. "I need to tell you something, Kiddo. It's important."

I looked in his eyes. I held my breath.

"You need to know this, Brian," he said, smiling. "You're an absolutely awful driver. Seriously. *Totally* terrifying."

"I'm not—" I started to protest, but he silenced me. He kissed me.

Joey twisted around and pulled out the box he'd dropped in the backseat. He handed it to me.

“It's not as good as a car, I promise you that, Kiddo. But happy birthday. Happy sweet sixteen.”

I ripped open the box. I caught my breath.

“It's —” I couldn't believe it. “It's your letterman jacket.”

“It sure is,” he said, smiling, happy about my breathless reaction. “Last remnant of my glorious athletic past.”

“I thought Jennifer had this, though.”

“She did. She gave it back. We're sort of on the outs. Have been since the infamous night-of-the-broken leg party.”

I held the jacket in my hands. *Joey's jacket.*

“But if I wear this,” I said, scared and thrilled, “people will know...they'll *know.*”

He nodded. “They'll know.”

I threw my arms around Joey. He laughed and kissed my cheek, my neck.

I wriggled and struggled, but I got the jacket on. I started to cry.

Joey wiped below my eye with his thumb, what he always did when I cried.

“Just do me a favor, okay, Little Prince?” Wait until after *my* birthday before you start parading around in that thing. That’ll give is both a little time to tell who we need to tell, to prepare.”

I snapped and unsnapped the jacket. I was never more in love in my life than I was in that moment, with Joey, our shared future wide open before us.

I only had to wait until *his* birthday. Three and a half short weeks away.

**“I used to cry till I was dry; Still sometimes I get a strange pain inside...”**

Two weeks later, one night just after the arrival of March signaled the end of the short Texas winter, Joey took way too many pain pills and injected way too much insulin.

And not by accident.

He would never see his birthday, his eighteenth.

He’d breathed his last breath on the bed I had shared with him so many times. He had managed to get up the stairs on his own. His mom was supposed to sign the closing papers on the house a few days later. Maybe Joey did it there, in that house they were leaving, so his mom and Eric could start fresh in a new house, a house he would never, himself, live in. I don’t know.

A couple of days after Joey’s funeral, his mom came to see me. She gave me a photocopied page. Even though the page was a copy, she’d cut off the top and bottom. I only got the part of the page that had the paragraph about me. I have no idea, still, how long Joey’s suicide note

was—it might have been two pages; it might have been twenty. Joey’s mom asked to see me with my parents. She hugged me as she gave me the torn page.

I read it, and fell apart, all over again, as I had done so many times over the last few days, since late, late that night when Eric called me to tell me that an ambulance had come for his brother, but that it was too late, that Joey was gone.

I had come out to my parents a few days after Joey gave me the letter jacket. I wore the jacket, as I told them, to give me strength. Joey hadn’t been with me, though he knew I was telling them and had offered to come over. I wanted to do it alone, though. Wearing his jacket as I told my parents what I had waited so long to tell them, I felt like Joey was hugging me.

The day after that, I’d told my two best friends. They weren’t all that surprised about my coming out. “*We been knew,*” they might have said, if that meme phrase had been around then. They had no idea about Joey, though, had no idea about Joey and me.

*You? Yeah sure, we get that, seemed to be their attitude. But him?! No way! He just seems so, so straight!*

I thought about that, about how Joey’s secret *was* different, in a way, from mine. I read and re-read his paragraph, scouring it for clues, for comfort.

*Let Brian know none of this is his fault either, Joey’s paragraph to me began. I told him once that he’s braver than me. I meant it. He’s out! Or coming out! I am so proud of him. Tell him to be happy when he thinks*

*about me, if he can. To always be happy. God, that kid. His smile. I should have left him alone, but I couldn't because of that smile. And the way he could talk and talk and talk to fill any awkward silence. Talk to make me feel better. My brave Kiddo. My sweet Little Prince. Let him know being with him, or even just thinking about him, always made me smile. Everybody wants to be worshiped [sic] I guess, and I loved seeing myself through his eyes, like I'm a hero. I'm not a hero, Brian, but I think you loved me and I loved knowing you loved me. I love you too, Kiddo. Keep being braver than me. I'm sorry, Little Prince. I'm so, so sorry. I wish I could walk around beside you as you wear that jacket of mine. I just can't, Kiddo. Take care, okay?*

I was brokenhearted and I was sixteen and I wore that jacket every night as I read that note, noticing, nerd that I was, how Joey started my paragraph by addressing whoever the whole note was written to, his mom, probably. But toward the end, he shifted, and addressed me, personally.

I cried myself to sleep, holding that note and wearing that jacket for a long, long time.

**“Detours, fences. I get defensive...”**

I wore the jacket to school one day in the weeks after Joey's funeral, Adam and Susan walking in with me. By then, my whole school, and Joey's, too, knew about us. What we had been to each other.

Everybody had found out, somehow, as people will, that Joey had left a message in the note for me, messages for Jennifer, too, and for his best friend, and Eric, and even for one of his coaches, and his parents, of course. They even knew what Joey had written about us.

My school was small; all the kids knew me, and all the kids now *knew*, knew I was gay, had loved a boy, and mostly the girls were extra nice and excessively sympathetic around me; the guys mostly avoided me.

My headmaster called me to his office on the day I wore Joey's jacket over my uniform. He'd talked to me a couple of times since the funeral, informally, as had our counselor.

The day I got called in, the jacket-wearing day, though, was different. Our headmaster's title may have been kind of grand, but he wasn't, really. He was friendly, usually, a little dad-goofy, even.

As I sat across his big desk from him, his attitude was unusually stoic. He barely met my eyes. Me, an excellent student. Me, actively involved in what Joey had always called all those "nerd clubs." The headmaster acted like he was embarrassed not *for* me but *by* me.

He told me a lot of things, very quickly. Told me he'd called my parents, that they were on their way. Told me I couldn't wear Joey's jacket at school. Told me that I could have "homosexual feelings," only if I worked to overcome them; I couldn't be "openly gay" in our Christian school. Told me I wouldn't be going to PE or showering in the boy's locker room. Told me I'd probably be happier at another school.

*Happier*. He actually said that, *happier*. To me, a kid, heartbroken.

I hated myself for starting to cry, for giving him reason to think: *those gays, they're so emotional, so soft*.

I stood up, trembling, crying. I wanted to tell him to go to hell.

“I loved him,” I said, was all I could say, “and he loved me.”

I walked out the front door of the school and never went back.

**“Joey, I’m not angry anymore...”**

I started my junior year at a new school, another private, but non-sectarian, one. Eric had wanted me to go to school with him, but that was Joey’s school, and I...couldn’t.

I had dreamed so many times, during those months with Joey, of our near future. When he would be in college, and I, a high school junior, would visit him, would talk endlessly and annoyingly to all my friends about my *college boyfriend*. Being a junior without Joey, without my cool college boyfriend, had never entered my mind. But there I was, in a new school, a junior, a grieving one, gay and out and alone.

Eric and I had spent a lot of time together that summer-after-Joey and continued to hang out that fall, me at his house, mostly, that new-to-them house that Joey had never lived in. I smiled—yes, I was able to smile, sometimes—when I saw the house had a third bedroom. Joey wouldn’t have had to share with Eric after all. Even so, on all those nights I slept over that summer, I stayed in my sleeping bag on Eric’s floor. Sad and confused, Eric didn’t sleep as well as he used to; we’d talk into the early hours before one of us finally drifted off to sleep.

Eric somehow never felt betrayed by all the sneaking around Joey and I had done. He was, and is, a pretty remarkable guy.

Someone else turned out to be pretty remarkable, too, someone I’d variously envied, hated, avoided, ignored: Jennifer.



She went away to college that fall, as Joey never got a chance to do. She went over a thousand miles away. When she came back, that November, for Thanksgiving break, she called me and asked to see me. I'd never spoken to her on the phone before, never spoken to her in person when it was just the two of us.

I was nervous, but I agreed, and drove my car (probably drove it *terrifyingly*, as Joey would've said), to her house. She was waiting for me in her front yard. She crawled in the passenger seat and said I could kill the ignition; we'd just sit there and talk.

"He told me about you, Brian," she said, looking not at me but out the windshield. "That night in January, at the party where he broke his leg. I couldn't believe it. I actually couldn't. I had no idea. Can you believe what an idiot I was all those months?"

She looked at me then. Did she want an answer?

I tried: "I knew about you. I mean, obviously. Everybody knew about you and him, the star couple. I just never..." what? What did I want to say? "I never really even thought about how what I was doing affected you. I didn't. I'm sorry."

She did something I didn't expect. She took my hand. I looked at our joined hands, two hands that had so many times, separately, held a boy we both had loved.

"People say I killed him," she said, laughing harshly. "For breaking up with him. For making him go crazy that night and breaking his leg. People say *you* killed him. For seducing him or whatever, for making him gay. People can't even decide which vile rumor they want to spread.

Seriously, people, how about at least a little consistency?”

She laughed again, less harshly. She squeezed my hand. “So, I guess we’re both killers, huh, Brian? I guess we really suck.”

“The thing is, though,” I said, my chin trembling. “Those rumors about me? About me being *guilty* for Joey...doing what he did? I’ve thought the same thing. Blamed myself a thousand times for being responsible. If I only hadn’t walked into his room that very first night—”

I stopped there, crying too hard to go on. Jennifer did something else that surprised me. She scooted over to me and hugged me. We held each other as we both sobbed, there in my car, on a suburban cul-de-sac, in the pale November light.

“Me, too, Brian,” she said into my ear. “I feel guilty all the time.”

But I needed her to understand. I needed to tell her what I hadn’t admitted to anybody, not to Eric or the therapist my parents were making me see once a week.

“Jennifer,” I said, barely able to say anything at all. “I gave him money sometimes. I know he had prescriptions, I *know* that. But I keep thinking: what if the things he took that night, what if he bought them with money I gave him?”

I was crying hard again. Jennifer was crying too, softly. She gave me a minute.

“I gave him money, too, Brian. All the time. God, he was so charming he always knew I’d give him whatever he wanted! So, yeah, I’ve felt the

same way. *Everything is what if what if what if?*”

She sat up, flipped down her visor and looked at herself in the mirror. “Being away has helped, though,” she said. “It has. I’m sorry you’re still around all these awful people. I heard you even had to leave your school for...for being who you are. I hate that happened to you.”

It felt like Jennifer was wrapping things up, like she was about to open her door and say goodbye. But she must have reconsidered.

“He talked about you all the time, Brian,” she said, looking at me, smiling, a little sadly, but smiling. “*Way* too much to just be talking about his little brother’s friend. I didn’t pick up on it, dummy that I was. But he was always talking about *Kiddo*. About the *Little Prince* who couldn’t do anything, couldn’t do laundry or make coffee or find anything in a grocery store or pump gas or—”

I tried to laugh, through tears, interrupting her. “Okay, okay, Jennifer, I get the idea. I’m a nitwit. I *was* one, anyway.”

She laughed, a little, too. But then, soberly, said: “Yeah, you’ve had to grow up a lot in a few months, dude. Me too.”

We sat like that for a minute, both of us thinking about the boy who had been the reason we had hated each other, the boy who was the reason we were sitting together here, now.

Jennifer pulled my arm, tugged my sleeve up to my elbow, dug a pen out of my console. She started writing on me. “This is my number, at school,” she said. “Call me if you want, whenever you want. Come visit, even. Take a look at college life.”

Take a look at a life *after* Joey, I knew she was saying, see that there *was* a life after Joey.

And, yes, she was right: there was a life after Joey, an ongoing work-in-progress life, like any other. I made it through that year, and then the next, and then went to college. I talked to Jennifer a lot that first year. People thought it was weird that we'd become friends.

Eventually, whole days would pass when I didn't think of Joey and then, much later, whole weeks, sometimes.

Just a few years ago, I met with Eric to catch up, and I brought along Joey's jacket. I gave it to Eric; it was time. Even though it had been many years since I'd actually worn Joey's jacket, and even longer since Joey himself had worn it, I felt its loss.

And I still feel the loss of Joey, his absence, from time to time, say, when I'm in an elevator or driving down the highway and Concrete Blonde's "Joey" plays and I'm escorted, as if by *my* Joey, himself, back to a secret night in the summer of 1991, a summer night when I first fell in love.

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More of my story, here:

[\*\*Swimming in Elizabeth Taylor's Pool\*\*](#)  
[\*A Cowboy, A Crush, Secrets and Summerspsiloveyou.xyz\*](#)

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[Trevor Project](#) volunteers are available around the clock by phone and text to help prevent suicide among LGBTQ+ youth.

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*\*All subheadings are lyrics of Concrete Blonde's "[Joey](#)," written by lead*

*singer Johnette Napolitano.*

By [Brian Fehler](#) on [August 12, 2019](#).

[Canonical link](#)

Exported from [Medium](#) on May 23, 2020.