



# The Ways We Wear Our Grief

Kaylie Mancino

**A**ndrew bopped his head to a song Emily loved when she occupied the backseat of his Toyota Camry. Despite the air fresheners he draped carefully over his dashboard mirror, the muted scent of weed still filled the empty space between us. I wondered if my mother would catch a whiff of it on me, but it didn't matter. Emily had died. I was allowed to cope with it however the hell I wanted to.

Andrew fumbled with the radio and hummed to himself quietly. I noticed that he wore his grief quietly, dotted like perfume behind his ears and on the insides of his wrists—you had to sit close enough to really notice it.

I looked out the sunroof and at the parting clouds above our heads.

The sun was just rising but I'd known that the sky that day was going to be a bright blue that day, the kind that douses happy people in sunlight. I watched the forecast that morning on my living room sofa and stared at the weatherwoman. Her mouth curled into a grin that made my chest hurt and my blood boil. It was irrational—feeling angry at someone for smiling—but it didn't matter. Emily was dead and I wasn't sure if I could do anything but cry ever again.

A card and a small bouquet of white lilies rested on my lap. The florist had given them to me this morning along with a small, pitying smile that existed inside the dip of her mouth and the crinkles of her eye. She told me that lilies were the most appropriate flowers to bring; white lilies represent the restoration of innocence, she said. If I had replied with thanks it was through a throat clogged by every failed and shivering sentence that lives inside of me.



Andrew and I drove to the funeral home alone in a silence only ruptured by the soft blaring of his car speakers. He grasped onto my left hand and didn't let go, even when my palms grew clammy and he needed to use his own to steer. I tried to convince myself that he needed me more than I needed him, but I knew if he drew away my body would crumple beneath the passenger's seat like an old, forgotten napkin. If that did happen, would I fly away like Emily did?

"We'll be a half hour early," Andrew spoke from beside me. "Is it appropriate to show up early?"

I didn't answer. I wasn't sure if I knew how to.

"We're waiting outside for Natalie anyway," he reasoned. "Plus, I doubt everyone will show up when they're supposed to."

The parking lot was already full when we arrived, just like I'd predicted. When a child dies, it doesn't matter when a service is held—they'll camp outside and sob into each other's arms about the youth slipping through their fingertips like the sand on their beaches. "She was too young," they'll cry. "Too smart." They'll clutch their own children to their chests and ignore the fleeting, relieved parts of themselves that are glad their family won't have an empty chair at the dinner table. They'll hug Emily's mother and hand her condolence cards. They'll leave once she stops talking and stares into the faraway distance. They'll wonder what she's thinking about and thank whatever god they believe in that they won't ever have to know themselves.

"I think I see Natalie," Andrew said, pointing a finger towards the very back of the parking lot, where the trees cast long shadows over the pavement.

She stood there in her old prom dress, the black frills blowing slightly in the wind. I wasn't sure what to wear myself. I settled on a cardigan and jeans. Andrew threw on an old suit which was too big on him. It sagged on the sides and wrinkled at the bottom. He looked a bit like a child who broke into his father's wardrobe. We all dressed a little older to feel anything but young.

I remember the lapse of quiet that trailed behind us on our way to see Natalie, the tension of not knowing what to say to the best friend of the dead girl. She wasn't the one who found Emily. Claire was, but Natalie was the last person she texted. It was a quick message that said, "see you soon! I love you."

Two hours later, Emily's body was discovered in her bedroom. Andrew said that Claire tried to perform CPR as the ambulance came with their lights and sirens but by then, it was too late.

Natalie mustered a half smile and sniffed as we approached, her arm outstretched for a hug. Andrew and I each took one arm, holding it securely in both of our own.

"Thank you guys for coming," she whispered, her voice a stripped down version of her normal volume, loud and booming. Her fingers kept picking at the torn fabric of her stockings, tracing patterns with her nails.

"I'm so sorry," Andrew said, although I wasn't sure what he was sorry for.

Natalie didn't seem to know either, because she just shook her head. "At least I'm not Claire," she said, but I know a part of her is jealous at the fact that Claire grew a lot closer to Emily over the last few months of her life.

Andrew offered us a half-smoked joint that he pulled out of the front pocket of his suit. I declined because it would make me anxious. It would make Natalie anxious, too, but she grabbed it without saying anything and smoked it until only a charred nub was left.

"I can't say goodbye to her sober," she explained. "I'd rather not remember this day at all, if I'm being honest."

I waited for her to finish and then led the way to the entrance of the funeral home, stepping over freshly bloomed flowers littered over the grass. I wished I could have dug soles of my shoes into the dirt, twisting until they reached the roots buried below the soil. I was angry at the flowers for sprouting at such an inconvenient place, and I was angry at

the clouds for parting at an angle where the sun shone directly on top of our heads. I was angry at the notion of a world that never stops turning even when my friend no longer stands on top of it.

I spotted a few people from high school that I no longer talked to; my eyes remained focused on the ugly patterns of the carpet to prevent the inevitable, awkward encounters with them.

“We made fun of that kid in middle school,” Natalie said from behind us. Her eyes were trained on a tall boy who stood by himself, lingering near the entrance of the funeral home.

“It’s sad that he came here alone,” Andrew said.

Natalie was no longer listening.

How could she?

Emily sinks below the Earth tomorrow and she would watch.

“Sean McConnel’s here,” Natalie said.

“Oh,” Andrew said. “Who’s that?”

“This guy she used to have a crush on. I told Emily he was a dick but she let him lead her on anyway.”

If Andrew wore his grief like perfume, Natalie melded hers into a pocket knife to brandish at the football players who walked through the door. She deemed most of them to be undeserving of a final goodbye.

“He asked her out as a joke in tenth grade,” she whispered, pointing to a pimply boy I vaguely recognized from biology class. “She would hate that he’s here.” She turned to me, her expression a mixture of pain and acceptance that comes with standing in line at your best friend’s wake. “Why is he here? He shouldn’t be here.”

We watched from afar as the boy stopped in front of Emily’s casket. His eyes sunk low and lower to where she lay still and silent. A flash of something—maybe guilt—crossed his face. His feelings were buried beneath the rubble of past mistakes and apologies he could no longer give.

His grief? Ash from the houses burned down before they had a chance to be saved.

He made a cross with his hands and lifted himself up from his knees, brushing off his pants as he walked away. I wondered if he was praying for forgiveness or something bigger than himself.

“Do you think Emily’s in Heaven?” Natalie asked, her eyes trained on the mountains of prayer cards lined up on the back wall next to her picture. From where I stood, I could see the glimmer of Emily’s sparkly eye shadow beneath the dim overhead lights. The brief inscription written in cursive below her smiling face was a poem about the happiness one should feel after the passing of a loved one. Emily never understood poetry. I wondered if she would understand this one.

“Of course,” Andrew said emphatically. “She’s probably with everyone else.”

I didn’t say a word because I knew that they had nothing in common besides the loss of breath in their lungs and the houses that were built on the same suburban streets.

Claire and her mother sat next to each other in the seats reserved for family. I watched as they clutched onto polaroid images of Emily’s face caught in a smile, of trips to New Jersey beaches and outings to Applebee’s. I was never particularly close to Claire, but after spending a sunny, inebriated afternoon with her and Emily last summer, I felt guilty for not at least offering my condolences.

But before I could leave my place against the pale gray walls, Natalie grabbed my hand.

“She hasn’t spoken to anyone since...” she trailed off. “I tried but she didn’t even look at me.”

I stared at Claire, at her face that didn’t change in the slightest. She was simply a statue of a girl cemented in her grief. Her lips wilted at the edges, her tears too stubborn to fall from the edges of her lashes.

“We’re up next,” Andrew whispered, and I realized that I had forgotten what we were in line for.

Briefly, I wished I’d taken up his offer on the joint.

Natalie took a deep, withering breath in. She held it for a few

moments and let it out in a sigh that sounded more like a desperate fight for the last of the oxygen in the room. I placed a comforting hand on her back and beckoned her forward, making sure to give her space to run or throw up or pass out on the floor.

Oddly, she didn't do any of those things. She only smiled down into the casket.

"Hi, Em," she said. "I wanted to be mad at you for leaving me alone but all I am is sad. I miss you a lot, but I'll see you soon, okay?" Tears started streaming down her cheeks; they let themselves drip onto the front of her frilly black dress, staining it with all the pain and acceptance she held so delicately in her eyes. She leaned down to place a kiss on Emily's forehead. She left her lips there until Andrew wrapped her in his arms and gently guided her away.

It didn't register that it was my turn until they both looked expectantly at me. As I took a trembling step forward, I realized that nothing in my life could have possibly prepared me for seeing Emily's face for the last time. Her skin was a sickly pale color, but her cheeks were red from whatever makeup the mortician doused her in.

My vision blurred as I caught a glimpse of Emily's mother. She was hunched over the other end of the casket, fingers trembling against the weight of her daughter's body and soul.

I looked back at Emily. She looked like a doll and nothing like herself. I fell to the ground.

The well of everything I'd been holding back fell with me as I wept on the floor. Emily's mother stared and stared and stared.

Soon, her mouth opened and she, too, spilled all of the grief she held inside. Rivulets of tears soaked the carpet below us.

I wondered if she was hiding from it as well, but I couldn't bring the words to fly past my lips.

I don't remember what happened next, but we made it back outside. The condolence cards disappeared into purses and bouquets of white lilies sagged downwards towards the soil. Natalie was crying and

Andrew was holding her. He held me, too, as we made our way to the parking lot. To the eyes of passerby, the three of us must have looked insane: one in a prom dress, another in an oversized suit, and the last in a ratty cardigan.

Still, we held each other together.

“Do you wanna smoke a bowl?” Andrew asked once we returned to his car.

This time, I took the first hit. The three of us sat with the windows down and listened to the sounds of grief spilling from the outside of our smoke-filled cocoon. I smelled Andrew’s grief perfume and felt the sharp press of Natalie’s grief welded knife against my back. I was enveloped in everything we lost and were trying to find again. I sagged against Andrew and let my eyes fall shut. I listened to Natalie’s labored breathing in the backseat and the two sets of heartbeats pounding strong against my eardrums.

We sat like this for minutes, maybe hours until we heard a sharp knock against the passenger seat window. Through the fog of late evening, I managed to make out the figure of Emily’s mother. The collision of bone and glass deafened my ears. She seemed relieved. I didn’t know what for until she held up a pack of Marlboros. Her questioning gaze met mine, then Andrew’s, and finally Natalie’s.

She finally broke the silence, “Do you guys have a light?”

Although the question wasn’t funny, I let out a laugh. Perhaps it was inappropriate, but it was the only sound I’d made all day.

I kept laughing. It felt so good to make noise. Andrew and Natalie started laughing, too. Together we laughed and handed her all four lighters we had in the car.

“Keep them,” were the words that finally broke free from me. 