

# a funeral and a wedding

*for the Spencer family*

Early on a Tuesday morning in May, just before Memorial Day weekend, my brother called me. I missed his call, and I knew by how early it was that something must be wrong, so I called back over and over until he picked up. When I finally got him, I was on the corner of Madison and 28<sup>th</sup> Street, by the BP station, and the sun was glinting through the windshield as I waited to turn right.

Our friend Clark had been in an accident the night before, he told me, and he had been killed. I was on my way to work but kept going past work, to South Haven, where Clark lived, where my mom was, where Todd was going to meet us. We sat silently in our friend Jodi's house, waiting for Todd, drinking coffee, and when he drove up and got out of the truck, he hugged me so hard and for so long that I thought he might knock me down, that I might bend under the weight of his grief. For the next several days, we told stories and cried and cried.

The whole town stopped, because Clark was an extraordinary person, the fourth of five boys in an extraordinary family. In the evenings of that week, we went

over to his family's house, and two of Clark's friends played their guitars and sang, and we listened and sang along and leaned on one another, and in the silences every few minutes someone would murmur, "Clark would have loved this." And he would have. They sang Damien Rice's "Volcano," and now when I listen to that song in my car, I cry and think about Clark.

He was twenty-one. He painted our dining room bright turquoise with my brother when we moved to Grand Rapids, and he sometimes sat with me at the Sunday night service at church and helped me make dinner afterward. Last Christmas, my mom was in a terrible car accident, and none of us could get to her, but Clark did, and he picked her up and made sure she got back home safe. We called him my mom's angel, and it feels doubly cruel that when her car crashed, he was there to help, but when his car crashed, no one could help him.

On the day of the visitation, literally every flower in town was at the funeral home. The florists had no more flowers, and that felt fitting, that every fragile, beautiful living thing in town wanted to be where Clark was.

Clark's funeral was on a Friday, a cool blue-skied Friday, and straight from the funeral, I flew to Chicago, because one of my oldest and dearest friends was getting married and asked me to officiate the ceremony. I had to leave straight from Clark's funeral to go to her rehearsal and rehearsal dinner. On a small plane over the lake, alone except for the pilot, I felt brittle and hollowed out, like I had cried out all of my blood that week. I felt the two events gain clarity from one another, and I was strikingly aware of the connections between them.

Clark was loved deeply and expressively by his parents and his four brothers, who stroked his hair and

touched his lifeless fingers throughout the visitation. In the small church, seven or eight hundred people packed into a room for about a hundred and fifty. My brother loved Clark, and their friendship was one of the closest Todd had ever experienced. Clark was supposed to move into Todd's new house and had just sold his own house the day before the accident.

As I flew over the lake and joined Brannon and Chris and their families for the rehearsal and dinner, I felt urgent and purposed. I wanted to whisper to them, hold them by the shoulders. I wanted to say, "This is a good thing that you're doing, making a new family, joining together in love, promising to walk through life together. Because I saw something this week that I pray you will never experience, but if you do, may God bless you with a family like Clark's family. May God give you brothers to stand with, or a wife's hand to hold, or a sister to weep with, because we won't make it through these things alone. We can't stand in the way of death, but when it comes, we can stand in its face together, and celebrate life and celebrate family and celebrate having loved fiercely and expressively."

Standing in front of Chris and Brannon, during their wedding ceremony at the horse farm where Brannon had been riding all her life, I looked at her four sisters and his best friends and both of their parents, and I invited them all to celebrate this new family, because a new family makes the world better. It brings people together, creates new connections, creates bonds that we all need in daily ways, and then desperately, when death comes to our home the way it did to Clark's home.

Brannon was an impossibly beautiful bride, and Chris a handsome groom, and the light came through the trees in the most perfect way. It felt like a deep honor to pronounce

*cold tangerines*

them husband and wife, a hopeful and delicate moment rising from a week of despair.

As they danced that night, with such happiness and abandon and sweetness, I sat at the edge of the dance floor with my brother, and we both knew that the other was thinking of Clark, and who Clark might have married, and what Todd's wedding day will be like without Clark standing with him, and I thought I might burst at that moment, so full of sadness and beauty, so thrilled for this new family, this new symbol of possibility and life, and so heavy with the grief I carried with me. And that moment felt like a rare gift, like the essence of life and love and family was sitting in my hand, like a tiny bird.