

October: Five Days and a Eulogy

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The Five Days

Thursday October 17, 2002

When I find out that my littlest brother Adam is dead, I collapse to the earth and hold onto whoever is near me by their clothes. Gripping. Trying to grip. I am led into buildings into chairs by desks near phones. I am held and patted and comforted and looked in the eye. And I am gripping. When I go for a walk I take my water bottle that I do not drink from and a handful of tissues that I do not let go of. I walk slowly towards the greenest parts of campus and I openly, loudly, unabashedly cry. Until I cannot walk any more and my knees give out to a squat. I cannot see anybody's face, I only notice a black crow over my left shoulder. It is not far from me and it is not flying, it is standing on the grass and I feel as though it is as aware of me as I am of it.

My friend Frank comes and picks me up. He takes me home and neither of us know what we are supposed to say or do. We take a walk over the university bridge and on the way back; a black crow comes and perches on the railing right in front of us. I know who you are, I say, stop following me around. I did not. Know who it was or want it to stop following me around. It flew up and landed on the top part of the bridge. Still not leaving me. In a handful of days, I will sing Blackbird at my brother's funeral.

Blackbird singing in the dead of night
Take these broken wings and learn to fly

By midnight, I've had a double shot of cuervo and am on a plane headed home. Knowing that my favorite part of home will not be there when I arrive.

Friday October 18, 2002
My parents' wedding anniversary

My aunts Teresa and Gerrianne pick me up at the airport with tears and hugs. We almost forget to get my luggage because we are distracted by deep sadness. They take me to my Aunt Joan's big house in Penfield, where my mother meets me in the driveway. Barefoot.

We hold each other long and tight, and she tells me that she got an overwhelming sense of peace last night. As though Adam finally was at peace. She says his body was still warm when she found him lying on the kitchen floor. She knew he hated his vocational training class and had decided to let him sleep in an extra hour on Thursday. She does not remember what woke her up at 8:30am, but when she went into Adam's room to lay out his clothes, she realized he wasn't there. She knew something was strange and when she went down the stairs she saw him. There was no real mess, just a small pool of blood by his head. But she could not turn him over to see his face. She rubbed his back and hugged him and told him she loved him and while she was holding him, his body got cold.

She believes that his spirit waited for her. Waited so that she might say good bye before he left.

My brother Frank arrives within minutes of me. Shaking violently. My Uncle Dave had been on a business trip to phoenix and had driven to Frank's house to tell him about Adam in person. Frank did the dishes before Dave got there, so my Uncle wouldn't tell mom that he lived like a slob. He did think it was funny that Uncle Dave knew his telephone number and address. When Dave got there, he realized why. They flew back to Rochester together. And I don't know if Frank would have made it without him.

We spend the rest of the day sitting around the kitchen table. Drinking coffee. Eating pie and muffins and whatever else is put in front of us. I have no appetite and eat to have something to do. My mother's sisters Jean, Teresa, and Joan, her brother Tommy and sister-in-law gerrianne are there. It was my grandma's birthday. She and Pa come over. There is a melancholy exchange of gifts. My aunts gradually get louder and I rapidly get sadder. My brother Frank collapses into a strange bed. My mother and my Aunt Joan stay on the phone with funeral homes and the lovely Christian bitches at church. They call the medical examiner to argue that it was an accident rather than suicide; they try to explain the inexplicable workings of Adam's mind. That is when they find out that the gun had been in my brother's mouth. From where I am eavesdropping, I can hear a small break in my mother's heart. I climb in bed with my brother Frank, curl up on top of the covers and cry myself into a short sleep.

When I wake up, Frank proclaims that he needs to get out of there and leads our first visit back to the house since the accident. He plays the car radio on the way. Maybe so we can't hear each other cry. And I expect some kind of explosion when we get back to the house.

But there is nothing like that. There is nothing at all. The dogs do not greet us in their usual fashion, but stay at the top of the stairs until they hear my brother's voice. My mom disappears into the den where she keeps her clothes, to find a dress to wear and Adam's baby ring. I search the kitchen for blood. Any blood. Any trace I can collect to help me piece together what happened there while the rest of the world was sleeping. There is nothing. I cannot remember if the hole in the ceiling had been there the last time I'd visited.

I go up to my old room and get my art portfolio. Find the series of drawings and photographs I did of Adam while I was in high school. I tiptoe around his weight bench and the heaps of clothes and things on the floor. I feel like it is important that I don't disturb anything.

I hear my mother go into Adam's bedroom. I know she is looking for the suit that he used to wear when he gave speeches to boards and classrooms about the miracle of inclusive education. I don't remember if I hold my breath. But I hear my mother suddenly sob and walk downstairs. Frank walks out of Adam's room with his face so flushed, I feel like I can't breathe.

But I want to go in there. I sit on the edge of his mattress on the floor, inches from his television set. And look around at the model of the solar system and the peeling wall paper,

the soft porn magazines laying on the floor, the pair of khaki pants in the middle of room that are still shaped as though he had just stepped out of them. The empty video game cases and a VHS tape of W.C. Fields. So many toys and gadgets and gizmos and figurines and cds and books piled throughout the room. I don't cry. I want to. But I don't. I cannot believe that he is not still there, that he might not show up any minute and accuse me of intruding on his space. I smile at the hole in the ceiling above his door, where he has smashed his head into the weak dry wall while doing endless pull-ups.

I go downstairs and help my mother carry clothes and bags of photographs out to the car. I put the vase of white flowers I'd received from my friends at school in the kitchen. And I feel better to have something white in that space. Something clean. Something living.

Then I take the cheap bouquet of yellow flowers I'd gotten on the drive home, and put a few where the top of the back fence is broken for a foothold for Adam to climb onto the upstairs deck, to get into the house without a key. And I put some in the doorway of the shed in our backyard. And I climb up to Adam's tree house and that's when it starts. The sound. The vibration escaping my body at violent speeds and force. I keep saying no. Repeating it over and over again. No, this isn't true. No this is not happening. No I will wake up and I will never take any one for granted ever ever again. No Adam wouldn't have done this. No Adam would not do this to my mother or to Frank or to me. No he would call us. No he would do pushups instead. Nononononono. He knows we need him too much to leave us now. From the top of his tree house, my soul screams with enough grief to shake the earth and change it forever. The earth will never be the same. I climb down and through crab apples at my garage and fall into the grass and pound my fists against the ground that has watched me grow up, the ground that Adam has stumbled and tiptoed and ran over. And I never stop. No. No this is not right. No this is not how this story ends. I walk through the woods to where Adam built a chin up bar in the middle of an overgrown meadow. And I start to kick and punch the posts, the wooden two by fours. Violently. Trying to cause damage. Trying to get it out to make it clear to the universe that this is unacceptable and impossible and too painful to be true. I scream and yell until I have nothing left in me. Then I walk back to the house, and hug my mother in the driveway. I hope she can forgive me for not being as strong as she is.

I ask the locust trees at the end of our driveway to hold the last of the yellow flowers. And sit silently in the backseat on the way back to Joan's house.

We stay up late that night, my mother, Aunt Joan and me. Drinking beer and wine and cream sherry. Laughing and crying. I do not want to go to sleep.

Saturday October 19, 2002

The hardest time is when I first wake up in the morning. When I remember that I will never see or hear or hug Adam again. That is the hardest time, and I cry. Tears roll very wet and effortless down. And then it sets in and I know I have to face the day anyway.

My mother goes to the village florist, Don Ehrementraut, to order the flowers for Adam's funeral. An arrangement for the coffin and an arrangement from both Frank and me. As Mr. Ehrementraut expresses his condolences and regrets, my Aunt Joan notices my mom

suddenly grab her blouse and look under her shirt. When she lets go, she pulls a long string of white chewing gum from where it is stuck on the lapel of her black jacket to her wrist. Slightly mortified, and still assuming that nobody has noticed her sticky mess, my mom hurriedly tries to string the gum back into her mouth, picking it off her jacket and scraping the remnants from her chin. My Aunt Joan stifles her laughter and tries to look somber.

When they get back to the house, we make coffee. Talk about the showing. Correct the misprint in the obituary. Feel tired. Screen phone calls. Try to make sure my Uncle bob and Aunt Ethel will be getting here from Philadelphia. My Aunt Joan talks to people that need to be talked to and when the funeral director calls, she answered the phone. Hi, this is the funeral director. Yes? I'm calling about Adam. Yes? Well, the suit you brought doesn't seem to have any pants. Oh, really? Yes, and I've looked everywhere and I don't think I've lost them. Okay, we'll try and find them and bring them over later today. Thank you.

So, Adam almost goes pant less at his own funeral except, of course, for his wwf boxer shorts.

So, my mom and Aunt Joan head out again while I hang out with Frank, my cousin Kristin, and Frank's friend Joe Saden. We sit around the kitchen table and talk. About Adam and politics and frat parties. I kind of start to enjoy answering the phone. I want to act normal and I want to help. So when my mom calls from Joan's cell to tell me that I'd given her the wrong house key, I have a small moment of panic. And then I instruct my mother and my Aunt on how to jimmy a lock open with a credit card. I am astonished and unbelievably proud when I hear them fall into the house laughing, "It's open! It's open!" she hangs up the phone and I try to picture those two ladies, in all their grief, trying to break into a house. I think about how Adam always tried to keep us from taking ourselves too seriously.

That night, we order Chinese food and go through boxes and bags and files of photos. We laugh and wonder about how much everyone's grown. I try to fight my shame about always being front and center in every picture I've ever been in. but I find it easier to look at photos of my dad now that Adam has joined him wherever he is. I can't get over Adam's smile. And how easy and relaxed and beautiful he could look when he wasn't worried or frustrated. And about how much the three of us siblings resemble each other in our light coloring and wide foreheads and jaws. The shape of our smiles is the same and we all have had carefree moments with our arms around each other. And there was a time in that house, that has hosted so much death now, that we laughed and passed time with mischief and cartoons. We have spent afternoons there, running up and down the gravel driveway chasing dogs and butterflies, smelling smoke from the grill, carving pumpkins on the deck and hanging from trees. I think of how lucky we have been, to have each other, each of us so strange and smart and impossible.

Sunday October 20, 2002

I try to sleep as late as I can. I try not to wake up into what I know is inevitable.

We arrive at the funeral parlor at 3:30 in the afternoon. I am wearing a new black dress and a pair of nylons that I'm hoping will be tight enough to hold everything in. as we walk up the steps I hold my breath and wonder what Adam will look like. The funeral director, a gentle

man named scot, says the casket can be open for a while. But that is always so strange. The way they are puffy and rigid and cold. The subtle traces of make-up and lipstick coloring. The only thing that ever seems true is the hair.

Both my mother and my brother start to weep violently when we enter the room. I can't even see him before I can't stand to look at him anymore. We set up the photos we'd brought and the pumpkin we carved for him and a basket with some stationary in hopes that some of the people he knew will share their thoughts.

When my Aunt Jean and Uncle Dave enter the room, it is over. She sobs. He sobs. Frank collapses into a chair in the corner. My mom sobs. And I hold onto whoever will come near me. I hate this part, Aunt jean keeps whispering in my ear. I hate this part. Yes. Yes. Me too.

By the time four o' clock rolls around, and the wake officially begins, the room is full of people. My mother's parents and family, Rod and Lisa Cutten, and about a half a dozen of Adam's school friends who nobody knows. Everyone is so sorry, and everyone is so sad. And the numbers grow. For the next two hours, people from Adam's life line up around the building to come in and say goodbye. To cry and wonder why or how this could have possibly happened to such an amazing, important, joyous, strong person.

The funeral director expresses concern and tells us that the coffin will have to be closed in an hour or two. He looks panicked and explains that he cannot stop fluid from leaking from Adam's ears. The damage is too great, he says, I have exhausted my expertise. I overhear the conversation and my mother does not agree to close the coffin. We will work something out. No, I'm very concerned, he says, the fluid is very vivid and I would hate to have people see him like that. I look at scot, our kind funeral director, and I see that his concern is not only professional. He is worried and he looks upset. I assure him that we will work something out.

In about a half an hour, through the masses of people around the coffin, I notice tissues in Adam's ears. My Aunt Jean is nursing his body, keeping him clean, determined to let everyone who loved him see him for the last time. But it is my grandmother who has brought him a small white teddy bear with two red hearts that say "we love you, Adam." she props the bear up right next to his softly closed eyes, and there it sits, absorbing whatever fluid might cause a terrible problem...and allowing Adam and the rest of us to be peaceful during our last few hours together.

I meet teachers who have changed their classrooms because of Adam's presence. Mr. Woodard, his art teacher. Mr. Goodling, the choir director. Mrs. Westby who taught Adam's film studies class and knew that his soul was "too deep for this world." she said he had an old Slavic soul. She tells me that Adam's favorite movie was "Rio Bravo" even though the death of Brando's brother in "on the waterfront" just about destroyed him, "just like you and death of a salesman," she says.

David, an old classmate of mine, is there with his mother and little brother Ryan, who knew Adam and shared many of his challenges in school. It isn't until his mother hugs me and tells me that Ryan tried to hang himself three weeks ago that I know her sadness is deep like ours. Why Adam and not Ryan, she asks, why? And she sounds so, so scared.

For hours, my mother stands next to the self-portrait Adam made in art class and she receives everyone in line with a quiet graciousness that fills the room with dignity. She knows. That Adam influenced every life he came in contact with, and she welcomes those lives to her now. I am standing next to her when a group of eight men, short and muscular, make their way passed the casket. “Hi Mrs. Kaminski, I’m Mike and that’s my brother back there. We’re The Squids, and we loved Adam.”

The Squids. Finally we have faces to match the legendary stories of the weightlifters Adam would hang out with at the gym. The super strong guys that Adam admired so much, and who made Adam a home that was only his. My mother would wait in the car, reading detective stories, until Adam would mosey out of the gym at one in the morning, armed with stories about the bible-banging bill who asked Adam to be his training partner, and crazy ken who used to be the head of the squids but is in jail now for murder so he’s handed the gang over to big gay mike until he gets out. Adam would mortify my mom with locker room talk and then laugh at his shock-value. Johnny, the guy who worked the night desk would employ Adam to pick up all the weights at the end of the night and then give him a power bar or a Gatorade for his help. And I can picture Adam there, studying the guys and their dirty jokes, the way they talked about women and obsessed over their bodies. And I can’t help but smile when I think of the commentary and inquiries Adam must have added to their conversations.

Later that day, I meet tony, who can’t stop fiddling with the zipper on his north face jacket and has six gold hoops in his right ear, “Yah. I can’t believe this. I wasn’t goin to compete this year, but Adam kept on me. You’re lookin good tony, he’d tell me. He was there most nights, and I work out nights, so I got to see a lot of him. I wasn’t there last week cause I had so much stuff to do, but I tell you, the next show I’m doing for him. Man, was he tough.” I want to kiss tony and wrap him up in tissue paper and take him home to keep on my dresser so that I will never ever be able to forget that I was not the only person who knew that Adam was tough.

I start to make a point of introducing myself to people. I want to meet all the pretty teenage girls crying in the corner, and the two rough-looking black dudes that wait in line to kneel at Adam’s coffin and then walk out without saying a word to anybody. “Did you know Adam?” I ask a young kid looking at his baby pictures. “Yah. Are you his sister?” he asks. “I can tell, you look like him.”

Adam Cummings, who has lived down the street from us our whole lives and went to school with Frank, comes and gives me a hug. This is enough for your family, he says, I hope this is the end of your pain. Then he walks over to Frank and hands him his engineering pin from college. I am thankful that there are such good people to share this terrible time with us.

My father’s old “friend” Stephanie comes with her husband and offers her condolences, completely unaware that I know she used to sleep with my father. And my father’s business partner, Brian Simpson, comes and reminds my mom how important my dad was to him. Our neighbor across the street, Zeke, who opened his house to my mom and family on the morning of Adam’s death and kept them warm with coffee and company until the police

left... he comes. And he reads the binder about Adam's inclusion lectures and workshops from cover to cover. He says he had no idea what a difference Adam made in the world.

The flow of people does not stop. They line up for hours, and continue to filter in and out until the visiting hours are over at 8pm. My Uncle Dave starts escorting family members around to the back door so they don't have to wait in the cold, autumn air. My Uncle Steve goes out to get the aunts coffee.

Late in the afternoon, my godfather and my Aunt Ethel arrive from Philadelphia. And I am so, so glad to see them. Especially my Uncle bob, whose chest feels like my father's when I hug him. He has a stubborn gallantry that I've always admired and he gives me a long, uncertain, nervously prepared speech about the human dynamic. He tells me that this is tragic, but that we are not special in our grief and that this is part of the human experience. There is nothing anyone could've done and there was no way to prevent it. He tells me about my grandmother's sister, who lost her husband to suicide after the Second World War because "he had a wound that wouldn't heal." and he tells me about his college roommate who shot himself after having a fight with his girlfriend. And he tells me that this is how it is with great spirits, that there is a belief in astrology that they briefly pass through the world and leave as soon as their work is done. He tells me all of this. And then he asks me how it sounds because he's hoping to say the same things to my mother. I smile and admire him more for feeling such a responsibility to make sense of this to us.

When eight o' clock finally rolls around, after the longest four hours I've ever known, my Uncle Dave gathers Jacksons and Kaminski's around Adam and announces that "We love you, Adam. And we miss you. And the world will not be as good of a place as when you were here with us." And we all have a final cry and some hugs.

We are the last ones to leave, of course. Along with Joe Saden, Frank's friend who does not leave his side even for a moment all day, and Rod and Lisa Cutten. Lisa had introduced me that afternoon to her father and her Aunt and to both of Rod's sons, Adam's surrogate family that I never knew. Apparently, they had spent a lot of time together. Lisa told me that when her father, a retired mason and laborer, took up golf, Adam announced that he didn't know what this world was coming to.

I do not know what to say to Rod. He was Adam's one-to-one aide from the time that my mother pioneered Adam's inclusion in mainstream classes in the fifth grade until Adam graduated from high school. Rod spent every day with him, except for lunch hour, at his side...answering his questions and wedging his bets, shouldering his defeats with him and sharing in every small victory. And Rod was Adam's best friend. Especially after my father died, Rod gave him the guidance and the confidence to grow into a gentleman. Rod did not cry at the wake. He stood in the back of the room, talking with Adam's classmates and looking towards my brother. He told me that he'd promised Adam that he'd punch him if he ever did anything like this. Hard enough that he'd sit straight up from the grave. At the end of the day, when I ask Rod if he'd punched him, Rod says yes. Hard? I ask. No, he says, I was scared to.

Before we leave the funeral home, and the poor old man who is in charge of ushering us out, we have one last hug. My mother, my brother Frank, Rod, Lisa, and I put our arms around

each other and put our foreheads together. I look at the ground and feel filled with our love for this boy who will always be a part of each of our lives... "Oh, here's Adam," I whisper, not wanting to let go.

When we walk out to the car, we hear a bellow that makes the ground shake and the earth go quiet for a moment. It is Rod. He is screaming.

That night, I stay up until three in the morning, composing Adam's eulogy.

Monday October 21, 2002

I must have set the alarm wrong, because my mother wakes up at ten after seven without a word. She goes into the bathroom and I set myself about getting dressed. Try to do my hair and end up piling dozens of bobby pins on top of my head and hoping I don't look inappropriate. It is hard to know how one should look for your little brother's funeral.

Frank, mom, and I go to the funeral home early to say another last goodbye. It is terrible. I bend over my baby brother, slip a note under his jacket telling him how proud of him I am, and beg him in a whisper not to leave me. I demand that he realize how many people love him to the edge of the world and back, and tell him that I will alwaysalwaysalways love him. Then Frank and I step outside to see the morning in the town we grew up in.

We speak of our eulogies. Frank decides to talk about Shelby. Our fat, little dog named Shelby, and the way he and Adam used to laugh at and pick on and rub and play with her all night, until the sun came through our kitchen window. It's hard to know. What to say. I mean, Frank wants to talk about Adam sleeping in his own drunken vomit on his birthday trip to Canada but isn't sure that is appropriate for church. It's amazing how concerned one can be over what is appropriate when the death of a beautiful man at the age of twenty is the least appropriate thing I can think of.

When we go back in, we join Rod, and all of us say one more last goodbye and get into the expensive car that will drive my family to the church. My mom and I in the backseat, Frank in the front. As we follow the hearse into the church parking lot, it is full of cars. Like Christmas Eve full. People from far and wide, close and distant, loved and strange, are there.

The pallbearers carry my brother's coffin into the church, and I hold my mother tightly as we follow it up the aisle. The choir sings "Be Not Afraid" as we pass sorrow on either side. We sit in the first pew...and I do my best to remember the prayers and the songs and the cues to kneel and stand.

My Uncle Bob gives the first reading (during which my Aunt Joan comes in late, clearly mortified and dragging my cousin John behind her). It is a beautiful reading from the Old Testament about how the number of years a man lives does not constitute the value of his life. God will call a pure soul to him before the wickedness of the world defiles it.

Aunt Joan gives the second reading.

The gospel is about the grain of wheat. About how if it does not fall to the earth and die, it remains only a grain of wheat. But, in death, it yields much fruit. And the priest's sermon is short and sweet (how I like my sermons these days). He focuses on the joy of a life lived and the need to grieve for what is lost and move on. He asks us to send attention and love to the family, to my mother, to we who grieve, rather than to Adam who has finally been welcomed into god's kingdom. Or something like that.

Perhaps it is around this time that five school-aged kids sneak in the back. I love them for playing hooky to come to church and for bringing some humanity into all this righteous divinity.

After the deacon misannounces Rod as the first speaker, Frank and I go up there anyway. And Frank keeps his hand on my left shoulder as I look over that crowd of people and tell them how wonderful and amazing and brilliant and difficult and perfect and loved Adam was. And I am relieved when they laugh a little at some of the strange and fascinating things Adam said. And when Frank speaks, Adam is there with us for a minute, I think. Frank and I do not really come as a pair. There is always three of us. There will always be a third to us.

When we sit down, Rod stands where he is (rather than walking up to the altar) and calls attention to all the people Adam affected from day to day. He calls Adam a true gentleman, and shakes as he reminds everyone to visit Adam's website.

After the mass ends, and we follow the coffin out into the cold, I try to scan the crowd. I want to impress on my memory the faces that knew him and the people who loved him. It is blurry, of course. But it is full.

In the parking lot of the church, people hug us and kiss us. My Aunt Kathy's strange boyfriend, rick, gestures at the coffin as they load it into the hearse and says, "Adam's not in there. That's only a vessel. But while you were talking, for a moment you brought him down and he was here with us. I mean it, he was here."

As our car leads the funeral parade to the cemetery, my mother notices a policeman stopping traffic. Arnie. The same cop who came when Adam tried this the first time so many years ago. And the first person to answer my mother's call this time. My mom had not paid for a police escort. Arnie had attended the service and had volunteered without a word. Later, we find out that he and another policeman who knew Adam, Mr. Godshell, tried to petition to give Adam a police escort on horseback. They were told they couldn't because Adam was not a public dignitary. Which is, of course, a matter of opinion.

The priest tells my mother that ours were the most beautiful eulogies he'd ever heard and decides to step in for the lovely Christian bitch who was supposed to do the service at the gravesite. And it seems like Adam has charmed this priest from the grave.

So we go there. To the same place on the earth where we buried my father seven years ago. We sit in folding chairs under an awning that is supposed to be sheltering us from something. The priest says the service and, upon my mother's request, invites people to speak. My Uncle Dave stands up and reads from a scribbled piece of notebook paper. Reminding us that Adam never learned deceit, maintaining innocence and pure honesty until

the day he left us. That being the case, when Adam said he loved you, it was the purest most brilliant love that could exist. How lucky we are who got to know his love. There is silence until my Aunt Joan whispers, “we love you, Adam” and Rod Cutten rallies a celebration for Adam’s life after all this mourning for his death. And then I sing. Blackbird singing in the dead of night, take these broken wings and learn to fly.

The service ends. People touch the coffin and take flowers from the arrangements, trying to salvage one last piece of Adam before he is put in the earth. Everyone gets directions to Aunt Joan’s house and Frank and I decide to stay, without my mom, to actually see him buried. “That’s my one regret from when we buried dad,” Frank says, “I should’ve stayed to make sure they didn’t drop him or anything.”

So we watch as they loosen the ropes and lower Adam into the ground. As the funeral director leans over to remove the last of the ropes, I see an envelope fall out of his pocket and into the grave. They jump down to try and retrieve it and after a few minutes of fruitless search, he walks over to Frank and me. “What did ya lose?” I ask. “Oh, only all of the legal documents and the check for the cemetery,” he says, clearly unsettled. “I’ve never seen anything like that in the twelve years I’ve done this. It jumped out of my pocket on the inside of my jacket.”

Frank and I crack up. It seems fitting that Adam might try to take our money back with his last breeze.

Finally, they do retrieve the envelope. Frank and I watch as the crane lowers the coffin lid into the ground. We walk over and take a handful of dirt from my father’s grave, and we say goodbye. We throw the ashes to ashes dust to dust across Adam, and tell him that he was the best guy we ever knew. The funeral director then places the pumpkin we carved for Adam into the grave. And we all watch as the bulldozer fills the wound in the earth. We stay until there is nothing left to see. Then we walk to where my mom is waiting in the car.

Later that day, we all eat and drink and talk and eat at my Aunt Joan’s house. Our family is big and wide. They are a comfort even during this time when I can be nothing but alone. I try to talk to everyone. I sit down with Adam’s classmates and feel like I’m eavesdropping into his life. At the senior banquet, when one of the girls asked Adam to get her more mashed potatoes, he comes back with a heap on his plate and takes a handful and gives it to her. When they announced over the loudspeaker that a girl named Lindsay had set the new school record for chin-ups, Adam stood up and proclaimed that he wouldn’t be beat by any girl and walked out into the hallway and started doing chin-ups on the doorjamb. He danced like a madman at the senior ball, running circles around every pretty girl he asked to dance. Then he asked Lisa Cutten if she liked his moves and told her that his sister Marya taught him everything he knows. Adam stopped letting Rod sit with him during lunch, when it stopped being cool, and Adam developed a habit of wandering from lunch table to lunch table. Hanging with everybody and anybody like they were old friends, which was his gift. He’d sit with the inner city kids and the wrestling team and sometimes he’d do the “collapsible reality” dance, which has something to do with a Jamiroquai song, but when a guy tried to demonstrate it for me it looked more like the old Slavic kicks my dad used to do. They all talk about the questions he’d ask, without hesitation or embarrassment. About condoms and masturbation in health class. About politics in history. And Rod said that

sometimes Adam would get so frustrated if everyone else didn't want to understand something as much as he did. Learning was important to him, more important to him than it is to most people who do it with so much more ease.

We spend the rest of the afternoon laughing and talking and drinking. Eating too many pieces of cake. I'm so glad when Rod tells me about the time the board of education flew Adam to New York City to speak at a conference on inclusion. And about how Adam wanted to see the city, so they walked from the Brooklyn Bridge to Central Park. And when Adam walked into their posh hotel suite and saw the stocked refrigerator, all he could talk about was the waste of tax dollars.

I try to sit with my grandparents and my Uncle bob and Aunt Ethel. I try to be close, to be present in this moment that will pass too quickly. I am not surprised when somebody says they spotted a falcon in the backyard. Great spirits come to pay their respects, perhaps.

As the day winds down and the terrible heaviness sets in, somehow my Aunt and Uncle get my brother and I playing a game of beer pong with our cousins. We drink and forget and laugh and are very alive and very young. There is a harvest moon. Bright and orange climbing through the dark. It feels important.

And so it goes. October passes. And I am almost grateful to have spent this week with the constant movement of geese over upstate New York, literally watching the trees brighten their colors and dull into the cold that has already begun to come.

We will move into November. I don't want to. Not at all.

There has never been a time in my life when I couldn't escape into my work. Until now. The thought of passing my day doing anything at all makes me weep. All I want to do is be with Adam. Even only in thought. He was the rightist thing I have ever known, and everything seems wrong without him. But I suppose it can't be. I suppose that I can't give up on this life just because it couldn't hold onto my brother.

And I wonder what it is that I can do. To keep him close. To make sure the world does not lose his magic completely. I want to conjure him and his bold, intuitive, fearless questions. I want to practice his need to solve mysteries and learn more and understand more and to better himself in every way he was capable of. He did that. With so much humility. Never stopping to realize how much he was doing for himself and for everyone who came close to him. I will practice. His unabashed desire to talk to everyone, no matter what they look like or how they act or how much they know or where they come from. When I was small, Adam taught me a very difficult lesson in accepting him in spite of so much that seemed unacceptable. And loving him in spite of whatever he might never become. And believing in him in spite of how impossible his work presented itself. He had a genius that you could not write down in books or journals or laptop computers. To recognize and nurture genius even when it is indefinable and uncontrollable and uncooperative. I hope I can live my life like that. And with his powerful courage. Now we all know that he was not fearless, no matter how bold his manner. He must have been so scared. All the time. That is how one knows real bravery, I think. To be so scared and to reach forward anyway.

The Eulogy

St. Vincent De Paul's Catholic Church; Churchville, NY
Monday October 21, 2002

Blessed are the pure of heart, for they will see God.
And they will also see the good in everyone and the humor in everything.

My brother, Adam Kaminski, could tell a good joke, and he could lift twice his body weight, and he could handle a moth so gently. He could ask enough questions to make anyone dizzy and he could quote dozens of movies verbatim. He could teach you what it really means to be patient and what it really means to hope.

My brother, Adam Kaminski, was not special. He was a miracle. A miracle that some people thought would never learn to speak, or write, or wrestle. Well, little did they know...that Adam would never stop learning or pushing passed those walls with the power of a lion and the disposition of a lamb.

I know the world so much better for having shared Adam's mischievous laugh (the way he'd squint his eyes and put his head down and smile wide in a way that you knew he was thinking of the dirtiest thing he could conceive of). And I know the world better for sharing Adam's nagging and wonderful curiosity, and his brain that never worked quite as well as he wanted it to.

Even though, I'd have given anything in this world to be inside the workings of Adam's brain. Somebody told us yesterday that Adam would always ask why the NASCAR drivers didn't race in a figure eight, because wouldn't a cross make things more interesting?

I loved his mind. And I don't know how he kept it all straight --- the population of South America and inventory of superheroes squeezed in between his dark triumphs over reading all those backwards letters. And I don't know how all those things stayed in tact under the pounding of bullies and the pressures of why can't I be like everybody else?

Because he was not like everybody else. Adam had a mind that called things like he saw them and never stopped searching this world for what is right, and he had a heart that gave huge, powerful hugs and was so generous with his joy.

And that boy had a fighting spirit that could change the world. And did.

He touched every single person in this church, and so many more, with a spirit so bright and pure, that no amount of frustration or disadvantage could change it. I am sure that Adam never met a person he couldn't get to smile, either with his strange and passionate politics or a point blank question like, "Are you a pimp or something?"

He could disarm you.

And fill you up with an understanding of how amazing it can be to step back and see the world a little differently, and how much wisdom can be gained by finding difficulty with something the rest of us call easy. And pushing your way through it anyway.

In Adam's company, you could not help but appreciate life a little more. And now in the time of his death, I will mourn and I will weep that I no longer get to share the world with Adam's light, but I will not mourn for him. I look around and I know that he has done his work in this world, and that he finally has a peace that he could never find here.

But, man, are we lucky.
Not everybody in this world gets to have a miracle.
But we did. We got to have an Adam.
Thank you for sharing him with me today.