



Blackbird

A Mother's Reflections on Grief,
Loss, and Life After Suicide

BETSY THIBAUT STEPHENSON

What Happened

I have three urns in my living room. Three ceramic monuments to six stupendously horrible weeks in the summer of 2022.

The urns arrived at our home separately, the result of unconnected events. They huddle beside each other, watching over us, catching our tears, hitching the breath of unsuspecting houseguests.

Our family has not shied from sharing the outline of our *annus horribilis*. We know it's human nature to be drawn to the prurient plot points of so much death. Who hasn't scoured death notices and obituaries for clues to ascertain *what happened*, analyzing every word choice for signals and context?

A reference to a "valiant fight" implies an illness, as does "surrounded by loved ones." The back end of "in lieu of flowers" can reveal a health-related cause of death via an entreaty to support the war on Alzheimer's, heart disease, cancer, or ALS. "Died suddenly" and "left us unexpectedly" are riddles. They hint at the uncomfortable or unmentionable. These phrases can also be euphemisms for taboo or complex departures.

Inevitably, the readers ponder the age-old question: Is it preferable to watch a loved one die slowly but expectedly, or are there benefits to being blindsided, plunging into loss with no preparation? I've yet to hear a convincing argument favoring one path to sorrow over another, and perhaps this existential

mystery is why we're drawn to the details of death, especially when it's a young person whose life is cut short. The death details feel essential, even urgently important, as if knowing the circumstances and contributing factors might change our own behavior and ward off future tragedies. The voyeurism feeds our relief at being alive with our dear ones intact.

Unexpected death is high-octane fuel for exploding texts and frantic video chats. Phones buzz with factoids and gossip, hindsight and regret. Digital investigations of social media posts and comments reveal glimpses of information that can sometimes be pieced together to form a clearer picture of what happened: "He seemed fine." "I wish she had told me." "We tried to help him, but it was more serious than we knew."

Even the rabid reporters of today's media often err on the side of discretion, communicating with the same neutral terms found in obituaries: "Student dead; homicide is not suspected." "Discovered dead in her boyfriend's apartment; suspect in custody." "No threat to the public."

Deaths of despair, like suicide and substance-related fatalities, are shrouded in their own distinct codes, a passive shorthand designed to blur the details: "was found," "found unresponsive," "didn't wake up."

When my son, Charlie, died by suicide, my immediate impulse was to burrow in and lie low. His death was absolutely unexpected. But I soon realized that hiding would not work. Inquiries about his life and death would persist, whether I chose to address them or not. Cover-ups merely invite closer scrutiny.

Suicide and its copilot, depression, are mysterious. The mystery is part of their power. Talking about mental illness and suicide reduces their power. So, I've raised my head as high as I am able, to speak as unflinchingly as I can about losing my son, my youngest child, my boy. Here are the facts.

Name: Charles Harper Stephenson

Born: February 21, 2001, Washington, DC

Hometown: Alexandria, Virginia

Parents: Charles and Betsy Stephenson

Siblings: Grace and Abigail Stephenson

Height: 6 feet, 1 inch and still growing; proud that he'd be taller than his father

Weight: 150 pounds; skinny and getting skinnier because, toward the end, he had trouble eating

Hair: Thick, straight, that light-brown color of a formerly towheaded toddler

Eyes: Deep brown and gentle

Smile: Ever present, tilting toward impish

Frame: Sinewy arms; long, slightly bowed legs; hairless chest

Occupation: Student; rising senior at Texas Christian University

Life station: Beloved—deeply, urgently, endlessly loved

Death: July 10, 2022, Fort Worth, Texas

Site of death: Bedroom in group house off campus, bedroom door closed

Time of death: Unknown, likely late morning or afternoon

Witness: Found by roommate, who cracked the door and saw “just enough to know what happened”

Method of death: “Hanged self with scarf and ties” from ceiling fan, per the coroner’s report

Charlie died on a Sunday. The night before, he stayed up until 3:00 a.m., talking and playing cards with friends. He spoke to one friend at length, both of them immersed in that unique brand of late-night drunken rambling between long-time pals. The friend expressed anxiety about a developing situation in their social group. Charlie reassured her, "Whatever you're feeling now, it will pass." He extracted a promise that she would contact him if she needed support. He swore he'd always be there for her.

Charlie and the group of students had been at bars in the Fort Worth Stockyards earlier that night. According to his credit card statement, he ordered a final drink at 1:00 a.m. He was not overly inebriated, moody, withdrawn, or agitated. He acted like himself.

He and I exchanged our regular good-night texts around 10:30 p.m. his time.

Me: Good night, bub. Hope you're doing great. Love you.

Charlie: I'm doing awesome! Love you.
Good night.

On Friday, the day before his last full day on earth, he talked on the phone deep into the night with his best friend from high school. They were preparing for Charlie's return to Alexandria, where he would spend a week with our family before joining buddies for an annual trip to Nantucket.

Two nights before that (Wednesday), his sister Grace and I called him on the phone. He sounded upbeat, busy but not overwhelmed. They talked of a trip for her to see him in Texas and a trip for him to see her in North Carolina. They spoke about football games they'd attend and bars they'd check out.

He was acting like himself. He was surrounded by friends. He was engaged and connected. He was making plans.

All to say, no one saw his suicide coming.

We will never know how he reached the point where his vision narrowed so severely he was unable to see past the immediate pain and uncertainty. We're not even sure what may have caused him pain, though nothing should be painful enough to end your life. Nothing.

Just a few hours before he died, he had the presence of mind to counsel a friend about the fickle nature of moods and feelings. Yet on that blazing hot Sunday in Texas, his worries metastasized, and death was the only solution his mind could generate.

When the police knocked on our door at 11:45 p.m., July 10, my life forked away from the clean hum of empty nesting to the crude grinder of traumatic loss.

Unbelievably, Charlie was not our only loss in 2022. Within a six-week period, we lost our son, his grandmother, and our family dog. Yet losing Charlie saturated us in a sadness so complete that we had little capacity to appropriately address the other deaths. Our unaddressed grief is still a source of no small amount of guilt.

There's an expression in my profession of public relations: "If you don't tell your story, someone else will." The story I tell myself is a convergence of memories, questions, and acceptance. I aspire to infuse it with healthy doses of honesty, humor, forgiveness. It lacks the efficiency of the story of the police report or the brightness of the story within my social media prior to July 10. But this story is mine.