



## The First Summer Funeral

by Alyssa Nedbal

[Home](#)

[Fall-Winter 2013-14](#)

[Summer-Fall 2013](#)

[Spring-Summer 2013](#)

[Winter-Spring 2013](#)

[Fall-Winter 2012-2013](#)

[Summer-Fall 2012](#)

[Spring-Summer 2012](#)

[Winter-Spring 2012](#)

[Autumn/Winter 2011-12](#)

[Summer 2011](#)

[Winter/Spring 2011](#)

[Autumn/Winter 2011](#)

[Summer 2010](#)

[Spring 2010](#)

[Winter 2010](#)

[Autumn 2009](#)

[Summer 2009](#)

[Spring 2009](#)

[Autumn 2008](#)

[Summer 2008](#)

[Spring/Summer 2008](#)

[Winter/Spring 2008](#)

[Editor's Note](#)

[Guidelines](#)

I've never been lucky enough to win an eyelash wish. I pluck the fallen lash from my cheek, squeeze it between thumb and index finger, and then whisper to it; asking it to tell me which finger it's going to cling to. Because if I choose right, whatever I wish for will come true. That's what Mom always tells me. But every time I make my decision and pull those fingers apart, the finger I chose is always blank. The lash sticks to the other, so ground in by the force of my squeeze, that it's a curved black sliver on my skin.

"Thumb, thumb...index? No, no, thumb."

"Jake?" Mom calls from the kitchen.

"Thumb?" I nod. The skin under my nail is white with pressure.

"Thumb," I decide.

Mom pads into the living room. "I don't want you to be alarmed if Trevor looks odd. They had to fill his head with wax so it'd stay the right shape."

I peel my fingers apart as Mom totters on the carpet in her heels, stuffing her purse with tissues from the box on the end table. I stare disenchantedly at my thumb, which is empty.

"Jake." She spins me around. "He cracked his head open on that manhole cover when he bounced, so you might see that, too. Just don't freak out if he doesn't look how you remembered him, okay?" With both hands she smooths my flat black hair. I scrape the eyelash from my index finger and it embeds itself in the Berber. "But you can cry, hun. I've got enough tissues for the both of us."

Mom snaps her purse shut. It's not her normal, everyday purse – the whicker one with the green and pink striped scarf for a handle – but the little black one shaped like an envelope. It's a bulky black leather envelope; the kind you have to take to the counter for extra postage before you put it in the slot. Its snap closure is straining to keep the tissues from bursting free. The fancy black purse matches Mom's only black dress, which she has donned today. Mom doesn't wear it much because Matilda, our yellow lab, gets hair all over it.

Mom plucks a few strands of Matilda's hair from her hem, realizes I'm standing so close, and then brushes the hairs from my lapels. I'm in my only black suit with matching patent shoes that Dad shined this morning. He got up early, at five a.m., to polish the scuffs out of them. That's his contribution today, Mom says, since

he can't make it to the funeral.

"You ready, Jake?" Mom asks me. I nod.

"Bye guys," Dad whispers, voice gruff. He's leaning on the door jamb, coffee in one hand, the other in his pocket. "Be careful."

I get into the backseat of our light blue Chrysler mini-van since Mom insists I'm not tall enough to sit up front. She throws a few crumpled White Castle burger boxes from the passenger side footwell onto the floor of the garage. Then Mom sets her purse on the center console and pulls out of the driveway.

"You're buckled in, right?" she asks nervously a few feet down the road, glancing at me in the rearview mirror.

"Yeah." I pull the silver seatbelt from my chest to show her.

"Good."

It's a very slow drive to Morganstine's Funeral Parlor. We don't talk and Mom doesn't have the radio on. I feel like it's not the appropriate time to ask her to turn it on, either. My view out the window is mostly of passing cars and the middle floors of buildings, so I listen to the whirr of the tires on the road and a loose pencil rolling around under the passenger seat. I tap my patent shoes together softly, but then stop because I don't want to go home and have Dad see them scuffed.

When we pull into the funeral parlor, Mom circles for a while, trying to find a parking space. The lot is small and most of the cars are parked on the grass. With nothing open, we end up in the church lot. From there, we have to cross the street to get back to the funeral parlor.

On the sidewalk corner we triple check for turning cars, and just as I'm about to cross, Mom grabs my hand. She hasn't done that since I was six, but I let her hold it until we get to the other side, in case she's afraid of falling in her high heels.

Inside, Morganstine's smells like vanilla candles. It's a little hot, unless you get under one of the slowly rotating ceiling fans. The halls, the rooms, the benches and chairs: everything is covered in black. Mom puts her hand on my back and guides me through a series of rooms as people, also in black, turn and look. Some nod, others say hello. Mom whispers condolences and clutches white-knuckled to her purse like I do to my eyelash wish. The people in black become more and more populous until we get to the final room. At the threshold I sense an invisible curtain that no one wants to cross. People prattle to one another in the hall, but avoid looking in the direction of the final room. I feel the change in the air as Mom encourages me through the invisible curtain. Outside the

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room, it is noisy with chatter. Inside the room, there is no noise, though four people are already there besides us. Mr. and Mrs. Kimby sit on folding chairs I recognize from church functions. They are backed up against the far wall. Mrs. Kimby has her hands clawed in her lap like twisted branches – like she clutched something too tightly and they stuck that way. Sitting before the Kimbys, on a metal stand ratcheted all the way up, is a long wooden box, half of its satin-lined lid propped open.

Mom whispers quiet hellos to the Kimbys, then steps in line behind an elderly couple cooing into the casket. When it is our turn to look inside the casket, I find that I am just a little too short to see over the lip. Mom slips her hands under my armpits and heaves me off the ground so I can see. I can feel the tension in her arms.

Lying inside on the tufted white satin is the upper torso of Trevor Kimby, dressed nicely in a black suit like mine. I see the white skin of Trevor's neck, his closed mouth, and his overly flushed cheeks. His eyelashes are long against his skin, and his hair is the same brown I know. If Trevor would open his eyes, they'd be blue. I know that, too. But there is something out of place on Trevor. It starts directly above his right eyebrow and stretches into his hair until I can't see it anymore. It looks like a scar sewn up with thin thread. Coating the scar is a yellow substance that looks like wax – like the stuff ancient kings would pour on their envelopes before they put their official seal in it. Only, no one has put their seal on Trevor. His wax has dried into a slightly lumpy, yellow lava train on his forehead.

Mom's arms shake and then she sets me down hard. "Sorry, honey. I don't have the strength to hold you up any longer."

I nod. I understand. She takes my hand as a consolation prize. I feel I'm too old to hold my mother's hand twice in one day, but because it's a funeral, I don't pull away.

Mom stares into the casket for another long moment while I admire the polished side of the coffin. Then she smiles again at the Kimbys and leads me back to the rooms with all the people in black. We make our way to a table with cookies, coffee and punch on it, though neither of us takes anything. Sitting on the corners of the table are pictures of Trevor: One, his most recent family photo, another, a baby picture, the third, a shot of Trevor in little league, and finally a shot of him with the fourth grade class of Saint Timothy's. I arrived at Saint Timothy's the day after that shot was taken. My father had accepted the job at Community Hospital as their new general surgeon. We came three months into the school year in this very small, very historic, Minnesota town. I had been placed next to Trevor in Sister Mary Catherine's class – in my own row, since I had thrown off the perfect numerical balance of the fourth grade.

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“Whoa, you’ve got really bushy eyebrows!” Trevor said after Sister Mary Catherine introduced me. “They’re as dark as your eyes, too!”

At my old school I took advanced placement courses, where I would sit in a room with a bunch of fifth or sixth graders, my feet swinging about an inch above the floor when I sat at my desk. In another year or two, I had thought, I’d be tall enough to avoid that. But even at Saint Timothy’s I was the smallest in class, and they didn’t offer advanced courses. Instead, I’d talk to Trevor everyday. His legs did reach the ground. I helped him on his math equations and in return he’d draw me little cartoons on cafeteria napkins. When one of us snapped a colored pencil lead, the other always lent out the right color. Then I learned Trevor lived around the corner from me – in the same style brick home, but his had a big tree in the front yard – and we started walking to and from school together on the red cobblestone sidewalks.

Mom didn’t acclimate as well as I did to the new town. “One of those housewives finally got the nerve to talk to me in line at Walgreens,” she said to Dad one night. “She asked my name, but then scrutinized me when I said Jen. It’s like she’ll only accept that I have the name Habib or Krishna because of my skin.”

“They’ll get used to us. We’re the first non-white ones,” Dad replied.

“What does that have to do with anything?” I asked through my rice.

“Nothing,” Mom assured me.

Because I had arrived the day after the official class portrait, no one counted me as a bona fide member of the fourth grade, except Trevor. The other kids at Saint Timothy’s stared at me when I walked the halls to recess or lunch, and I began to wonder if Mom was right about us being treated differently because we didn’t have as pale a skin tone as the others. But that didn’t seem possible. At my old school, Mrs. Housley’s fourth grade class was full of white kids who talked to me. And when I moved here, they had all signed a good-bye card for me. I noticed the stares more and more at Saint Timothy’s, then started wondering if it wasn’t my skin but my height that was throwing them off. But after a few weeks I stopped worrying all together. I’d sit on the floor with Trevor, making jokes about the amount of leg hair Sister Mary Catherine smashed into her pantyhose. Together we made a make-believe kingdom behind the slide on the playground, and transferred it to a tiny desktop version on rainy days. Trevor even made it possible to muddle through early afternoon Sunday school.

“I wish there was a way to get out of Sunday school today,” Trevor said. He was swinging his Bible in his right hand, looking through the trees at the robin’s egg sky.

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It was June, so we were almost done with school. By nearly all standards we were fifth graders. If we stopped participating in reading circle, didn't turn in the final math worksheet, and jeez, even skipped the rest of Sunday school, we'd still make it to the next grade. Nonetheless, our parents forced us to walk back to Saint Timothy's so we could sit in a room with Father and learn about the Bible. It had been easier to stomach in winter when the ground was slushy and the cobblestones were covered in mud and salt chunks, but now, it was too gorgeous to sit in church half the day. We wanted to hide in the grass Mr. Yunga never cut in his backyard. If we were quiet long enough, we could scare his poodle. We wanted to play baseball by the old paper mill in the team Trevor got me into. There, Trevor could run all the bases before chubby Ricky Grunk got the ball from the ditch. We wanted to see the new obstacle course at the South Side Park. We did not want to watch the ever shortening sunlight stream through Jesus' stained glass face without us.

"Do you think if we hid in the park instead of going to church, that anyone would ever know?" I asked, tracing the indented NABRE letters on the cover of my Bible.

"Yes. If Sister Mary Catherine didn't tell our parents, God would give them one a those parables of it in their sleep."

"What if we prayed really hard and promised that if we got today off, we'd go the rest of the year?"

"God doesn't make allowances," Trevor said matter-of-factly. "That's what Father says."

We were one block from Saint Timothy's, at the corner by Up the Creek Candy Store. Their sign read: When you're up the creek/ and missing that paddle badly./ There's nothing better/ than a little candy. It was posted on a giant, striped candy cane. I had been in the store once, when we first moved, and realized when I saw the sign, how much I wanted to go back.

"I could go for candy," I said.

We stopped on the sidewalk as Trevor gazed at the bright red candy store. "God would really send us to Hell if we skipped his Sunday school for candy. We'd better run."

And so we did. Trevor and I ran from Up the Creek, down the block and to the corner, trying to get the thought and marshmallow puffs out of our heads. I stopped at the intersection, my toes unable to pass until I checked for traffic like Mom had taught me since I could walk on my own. But Trevor had built up too much momentum to stop. He flowed from the cobblestone sidewalk right onto the street, like he was rounding another base. As I looked up, I heard the squeal of the tires – less amplified than in the movies – and the

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brake lights lit on a black sedan. Then I saw the nose of the sedan hit Trevor right below his hip bone. He helicoptered into the air, his right shoe flying off, his arms flailing. He smashed hard into the street, on the bronze-colored manhole cover, then bounced a good five feet until he came to a rest in the middle of the road. His head was twisted the wrong way from his body, his arm bent backwards at a strange angle. The driver of the black sedan got out after Trevor stopped bouncing, and the other cars on the street stopped too. Then people were surrounding Trevor, and a few came over to check on me. No one went and retrieved Trevor's Bible, which was lying, face-up, on the other sidewalk; the gold letters reflecting in the sun. The ambulance came a few minutes later, but Trevor did not get up. They covered him in a sheet, head and all, before my parents and the Kimbys came. It turned out we did not make it to Sunday school that day.

I look away from the fourth grade class photo sitting on the table at Morganstine's Funeral Parlor, and instead spot Sister Mary Catherine in the corner. The organ blares the first interlude and people move to travel across the road, towards the service seating. Sister smiles at me. The rest of the class parades past her, not even glancing at me or Mom.

"Mom, I have to use the bathroom," I sputter.

"Right now?" she asks, in the middle of pulling me towards the service chairs.

"Yeah."

I rush to the men's room and lock the door. I use the step stool by the sink so I can see my whole face in the mirror. When the hell will I ever grow? I twist my long, black eyelashes until my eyes water and one lash comes loose in my hand. I squeeze that eyelash between thumb and index finger harder than I have ever squeezed an eyelash before.

"Please tell me which one you're going to stick to. Please!" I mutter. "God, let me get this wish, just this once. Let me pick the right one."

I give the message a breath to get to Heaven. Then I start to think.

"Thumb or index? Thumb or index? Please, let me pick right."

I shout my wish in my head over and over as I loosen the pressure of my fingers. I'm afraid to separate them. I hope I've chosen correctly. I don't know what I'll do if I didn't. The organ gets louder and I hear the singing of the people in black as they march to Saint Timothy's with their hymnals. The women are high and shrill, and the men create a low monotone drone underneath them. I can

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imagine Mom's shifting heeled feet, her eyes darting to the quickly approaching end of the line. She hates it when I'm late. I let out the breath I've been holding. My fingers barely touch. Then I open them and look down.

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**Alyssa Nedbal** is a native of northern Wisconsin. You can learn more about her and her other writing and illustration projects at <http://alyssanedbal.blogspot.com/>.

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