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Why We’re Here

Peggy Wood

There are six mourners, seven people total if you count the counselor, in this room. Each is of a different age with different backgrounds. There are three males and three females.

“Shall we get started?” the singular counselor of the group asks. No one says a word; each is somewhat solemn as they look into the faces of those around them.

One of the men has a faded look. His eyes are cloudy and he stares into the ceiling as though his mind has wandered to the past leaving only a vacant shell. He was by far the youngest man in the room, and likely in his late twenties. He has some stubble, as if he’s forgotten to shave, while the rest of him is clean cut and ready for the day.

One is a teenage girl who fidgets and glances at people before looking back towards the ground. She is uncomfortable and feels as though she doesn’t belong. Her arms are covered with fishnet sleeves and wrists surrounded by many studded bracelets. Her face is coated in thick make-up and her clothes look as though someone has taken scissors to them. Everything about her, from the dyed tips of her hair to the thick platform of her boot’s screams stay away from me.

One is a foreign looking woman who wears an equally thick make-up, but her look is to make her appear dressed up rather than punkish. She has a pink skirt suit and a pink purse, and pink shoes to match. She is curvy and her plump lip sticks out just a tad. Her nose looks permanently pulled upward, even as her head aims downward so that she can stare into her purse.

One is a man with crossed arms and crossed legs. He glares into the group uncaring of their discomfort and huffs whenever someone looks him dead in the eye before turning from them. He gives off the feeling that he should be in an anger management class rather than
here. He is tanned and muscular and likely works in construction if the dust on his shoes says anything. He isn’t too old, but he isn’t young either. Maybe he is in his early forties or late thirties. His hair is already beginning to gain a little salt in his pepper.

One man, dressed in a black suit and looking as though he hasn’t changed out of it since a funeral, holds his head in his hands as his elbows imprint into his knees. He looks pale and thin, his hair is unmanaged and he almost appears to not be breathing; if not for the gentle sob escaping his mouth every so often one might assume he had died in that very chair. His hair is roughly half grey and half black with only a small mixed barrier in between. He is easily the eldest person in the room.

The last woman is likely in her mid twenties. She is dressed in jeans and a t-shirt. One leg bounces up and down while the other stays firmly planted. Her hands are held in front of her and she is carefully looking at each person with a desperate look of hope that someone will speak first so her awkward hatred of silence doesn’t make her do it. Her long hair is pulled into a tight ponytail that hangs low rather than high.

“Welcome, first comers, to group therapy. How about we all introduce ourselves, and then tell why we’re—” The counselor doesn’t get to finish as the cloudy eyed man speaks up.

“I lost my wife,” he says as he turns away from the ceiling to look at the ground. His voice goes a little lower towards the end of the sentence causing the other mourners to lean forward so that they can hear what he has to say. He smiles as he starts telling them the story.

“We always knew we would be together,” he says looking around at the others as though he is talking to new neighbors with a big sloppy smile on his face and twinkling eyes. Subconsciously, his hand grasps at air just above his leg that he gives a little squeeze to as though something were there. His eyes lose a small twinkle, as it is apparent he knows what he’s doing and can’t seem to stop. “We were
born just minutes apart you see. Our mothers were neighbors who became best friends... They got pregnant right around the same time, and around the time they were due they got into a little argument that somehow made them both go into labor. We were raised like cousins, or maybe even brother and sister—but by the time we were eight we knew we would get married. We'd play house all the time, and at first I hated it, but that was because she would kick me out of the playhouse so that I could 'go to work.' Eventually we started to switch every now and then until I was almost always the 'house-wife' and she was the 'bread winner.' When we went to middle school we started dating and even though we had break-ups, we always made up...” He took a deep breath, and paused. His smiled faded and the cloudiness returned. “I proposed in high school—senior year. She didn’t answer then... she said after college she’d say yes. We dated all through college, even states apart, and when I graduated after four years we moved in together while she attended graduate school. She said yes, and we got married. Everything was perfect. We were together, working stable jobs, planning to have our first kid and then...” He started to frown and rock back and forth. “She caught a cold at work. At least... we thought it was a cold but it went on for weeks, and I couldn’t get her to go to a doctor...” He froze completely before he started to shake, and the tears began to fall. “Pneumonia... Severe pneumonia...” He suddenly couldn’t take sitting there any longer. He stood up and walked to the nearest window to get some fresh air. He stayed there at the windowsill for several moments. He stood frozen, as if time had stopped for him before returning to his seat at the insistence of the counselor. He didn’t say another word. The counselor handed him a fresh box of tissues.

Inspired by the man, or maybe just hoping to relieve herself of talking later on, the youngest of the room spoke next. “My name is Lily and I’m nineteen.” Everyone turned his or her attention towards her. Some were slightly slow to do so, but while she took a few silent moments to prepare herself it gave them the time to focus on her tale.

She mumbled for a second, before taking a deep breath and
trying again. Her voice cracked as she spoke, but the words came out anyway. “I had a brother,” she stated. She glanced around before training her eyes on her painted nails. She began to scratch the paint off as she spoke, something that appeared like habit.

“He was older than me by seven years and he was always mean. I can’t really remember anything he did that was too nice to me that didn’t come at the insistence of our parents. He tugged my hair, destroyed my toys, and sometimes he would open markers and drop them in my drawers so that all my clothes looked like I had slept on the damn things... but even so he wasn’t cruel. I mean, he was nice sometimes but like, secretly... Like, every now and then I saw him sneak an extra rice crispy into my lunch box, and he wouldn’t let his friends say anything mean to me... and a couple of times he even cleaned my room when I forgot to. He thought... or at least pretended to always find me annoying... and I was, because... because that’s what you’re supposed to do, right? Little sisters are supposed to annoy their brothers... anyway. We were kind of spiteful toward each other, and when I turned ten I thought I was all grown up and he thought I was being too snotty. For a while we started fighting... I can’t really remember why I thought this way... or why we started to act that way, but I do know that I was convinced he hated me and I hated him.” She paused.

She bit her bottom lip and scrunched her brows together as her nails scratched at a particularly hardened piece of polish. “He was in his senior year of high school and weeks away from graduation. He walked home from school everyday, and picked me up—even though I told him I could go by myself! I think he did it because he would have been grounded otherwise, but even so he always did it. He told me that he would drag me by my hair to school the next morning if I didn’t wait for him and one time I didn’t and he followed through so I never did it again. That day—the day he... that day I decided to play kick ball with some of my friends while waiting for him. We had been let out early, and not many parents were there yet. I kicked the ball too hard and it went into the street—I didn’t even think to look both ways, I mean... no one ever drove fast around our school. It was in
a residential area, ya' know?" She ran out of polish and went to start scratching her arms thru the fishnets. "I ran into the street and right as I was grabbing the ball I heard this screeching noise before I felt two big hands shove me super hard. I mean hard. I flew backwards and hit the curb so hard I had the wind knocked out of me. By the time I was breathing again, teachers surrounded me and someone was screaming and another was giving out orders but for the life of me I can't remember what they said. All I remember was that through the gap of their legs was my brother's face lying on the hot cement. His face was bloody and didn't look right. He was positioned weird, with his hands out in front of him, laying on his back, but his head sort of side ways..." She started to breath shallow breaths as tears formed in her eyes. The tissues were pushed towards her but she didn't want them "He was looking at me. He was still alive for just a few minutes and he was looking at me, and when I looked at him he smiled, and tried to say something... but all that came out was blood and, and, and he just closed his eyes as if he was going to take a nap. He didn't move after that." Her voice broke near the end, and everything became sort of raspy. "They never caught the car that hit him. I don't even know what it looked like. If it was blue or red, or black, or gold... I don't know. I just know it hit him and that they never caught it." That was the end of her speech. Her voice disappeared completely as she curled herself up into her seat.

As if a trend was started the next woman spoke. She nodded her head to each, even to those that weren't paying attention and introduced herself in a light accent as a Mrs. Anonymous. "I too lost my spouse," she said giving an especially low nod to the first speaker as if to show how much she understood his hardship. She swallowed hard before continuing. "I never loved him like a husband, but I did love him. It was an arranged marriage, by our parents, and even though he was an odd man, I grew to love him like a close friend. He was never really in love with me either, something we found a mutual bond over. Each of us loved someone unobtainable. His was a lover who married another and mine was a man too cruel to ever consider a serious monogamous relationship with. We found, over this bond, that we had mutual tastes and interests and eventually found it in..."
ourselves to at least try having a sexual relationship. It was... weird enough to only occur every now and than except for when we planned to have a child and really tried *ehem* ‘going at it.’ Together we... we had two girls and a boy.”

She stops to rifle through her purse as tears start to drip out. She has so much control over her speech that it is hard to believe she felt anything for the man she speaks of, but the tears tell otherwise. A handkerchief is rescued from the purse and she dabs at the salt water ruining her make-up with a hurried motion. “They, our children, don’t even like to talk about him. It’s like they want to forget that he was even there and I can’t tell if it was because they were so young when it happened or because they think poorly of him. My in-laws call him a shame, and whenever my children see them they spout these horrid lines... it drove me to strike my eldest across the cheek when she spoke last time. That’s why I’m here.

“I feel so terrible about it now, but at the moment I was just so outraged that she could ever say anything so cruel about the man that tenderly rocked her to sleep and wiped her tears and pushed her on the swing and adored them all so much... I just, I couldn’t believe how they could say something like that. I told her to stop and she wouldn’t listen and I hit her, he would have been so angry, I know it... He never even raised his voice to them... He would be patient and when they calmed down from a fit he would tell them what was wrong with what they did. I had to lock myself in our room for nearly an hour to cry before I confronted the three of them and apologized and told them why they should never say or think such ill will of him. You see, he was quirky and loving but he was also ill. He would have terrible moments of depression. Sometimes he would leave for a few days so that no one would have to see him in such a way, especially not his children. On one of his ‘outings’ as I called it... he suffered a deeper spill than usual. He had gotten into some trouble at work and he called me from a motel and I didn’t bother to pick up. I should have picked up, but I was busy with some menial chore that I thought was important at the time. He was drunk and his words slurried but he told me he loved our children and me and that he was
sorry that he wouldn’t be home again — but that it was the only way to protect us... and then he hung himself in a motel room. He left the front door wide open so that someone would find his body and he left a note with a copy of his will.” She choked on the last part of her sentence. “It was a struggle after he died... I had to get a job, and I had never worked in my life, but apparently I make an excellent online sales person because now I don’t have to work eighteen hour days at different jobs and I can be home with my kids before and after school. I just wish that he was here. I wish he could see them grow up because they all look so very much like him... I’m sure he would be proud of us...” She rambled for a minute before whispering, “I just wish he was here.”

The angry looking man spoke next, his accent thick and odd to the people in the room. “My name is Butch, and I repair houses. I lost my best friend and business partner to prostate cancer almost a year ago. It really hit our business hard but my wife says it hit me harder.” As he uncrosses his arms, the ring on his left hand stands out. He begins to play with it as he speaks. “My wife said that if I didn’t come here she was going to do something drastic like go to her parents’ until I did—or worse, invite her parents here to ‘help.’” He moves the foot resting on his other leg to the floor so that he can lean in more towards the group. “Jake was my best friend since we were in high school. We were on the same football team and at first we got off on da wrong foot, but after a few games we got over it and were like brothers ever since. Heck—he came out to me before his parents and looked scared as hell that I’d abandon him. That id-i-ot. Maybe I was narrower minded before we met, so I guess I get it, ‘cause when he came out to his parents and they kicked him out... I think I got it figured why he was so scared now. I mean, they made him drop out the team and I was pissed because I swore I wasn’t gonna let him go alone. Don’t get me wrong, I didn’t pretend to be homosexual or nothin’, but I did resign my position so that he didn’t have to hang out by himself. That really irked me at the time, I mean we was, sorry were, good players but it’s a small town that we were from and it was, maybe is, pretty norm in those type “A” places. After his parents kicked him out we got a place together; my parents weren’t too happy
but they raised a good man and a man doesn't turn his back to a friend in need so they got over it. I mean, he was still the same Jake we all knew and loved, he just wasn't all that into the cheerleaders. Besides, he hooked me up with Molly, my wife! He may not have been into women but he sure knew how to set you up with one - though I swear he got me and Molly together 'cause he had a huge crush on her brother. It was real hard when he told me the doctor told him he had cancer. I thought that meant I was gonna be takin' my best friend to chemo and watchin' his hair fall out and watchin' as my wife tells his lover that someday the hair might grow back and to have faith that he'd get through it—something I was sure he would, but he said nah to all that. It was some rare form of prostate cancer and too late for him, he told me. I just could not believe it.” A pause as he stopped fiddling with his ring for a moment.

“Jake was a fighter, but I feel like he gave that up. He said he wanted da live life for as normal as he could, the longest he could and for a little while it all seemed fine. I mean little. Like months little... maybe weeks. He started leaving me notes on how to take care a his side of the business and teachin' me stuff I already knew but I let him anyway 'cause he was being so strict about it. They gave him medicine that he couldn't drink with, but he ditched those to have a couple of beers with me in my garage during Super Bowl... and then he had to be confined to a bed. His lover fell apart and my wife kinda had her hands full with the kids so it was really me trying to take care of the business and help his lover with the bills and stuff. It whipped me real good... I was there in that final moment and it didn't register at first. He just fell asleep and stayed that way for awhile before the heart monitor went flat. He signed a do not resuscitate, but even if he hadn't I don't think anythin' coulda been done.” He stopped playing with his ring all together and clasped his hands together instead, as if to pray.

“After that I buried myself in work. It was actually harder than I thought to do the jobs by myself, so I had ta hire someone who still ain't as good at it as he was. His lover is starten' to move on and recently left all Jake's things that weren't linked to their relationship in
private way in front of the house for me. He said that he thought Jake would have wanted me to have it since I was like his family. I didn’t know that he had recorded our last Super Bowl together. I found it in the box. Spent a three-day weekend re-watching that video over and over and over in the garage. I don’t blame him for given-up but everyone accuses me of doin’ so. I was pissed that he did, and it hurt to all hell but I don’t blame him. I’m angry a lot, but mostly ‘cause I’m scared. Everyone wants to move on, but I just want to go back to watching Sunday night football in the garage and cursin’ on Mondays about hangovers when we go to work ‘cause we know we’re too damn old to be drinkin like teenagers. I even miss those stupid calls he’d make at the worst time possible to ask me to put my wife on the phone ‘cause it’s his turn to make dinner and after five years of asking her how to make the same damn dessert he still has to call her to ask how much sugar, or flour, or whatever ‘cause the ‘sorta-in-law’s’ are comin’ and they love his remake of her recipe.

Hell, I can repeat the thing by heart but he still made me put her on every time. It so different without my best bud here and its even harder cause no one wants to talk about it. No one says, ‘I miss him’ unless they add a ‘too’ at the end as though they are only saying it to sympathize with me. I want to move on, but I want everyone to stop telling me that I have to and I especially want them to stop tellin’ me to forget about him. As if they aren’t giving me a choice. I know he ain’t comin’ back. I accept that. But it doesn’t mean that I have to forget about him to move on and I don’t need anyone giving me false sympathy. That’s why I’’m angry and it got nothin’ to do with his actions. He was the best friend that went through thick and thin with me. He introduced me to the love of my life and made sure I didn’t go P’**in’ it up. We took care of each other. Everyone around me accuses me of being angry at him for not trying harder to live. Truth is I’’m angry ‘cause I can’t stand how after he died everyone wants to abandon his memory. I want my kids to know that I had a true friend and that I hope they someday have one as great and that sometimes it takes work. I don’t want my wife or my parents telling them to ‘ignore daddy’s crying’ just ‘cause I have a hard time tellin’ them about him.” The man huffed and clapsed his hands tighter together.
"I know what you mean lady... about wish he was here. I get it. I wish Jake was here too, but I know he's in a better place. I wish everyone else would stop trying to forget him all together and instead only forget the bad stuff. I want to be able to talk about him with my wife, and laugh about him every now and then.

"To be honest, I'm scared that if we don't try to remember the good stuff we'll be teaching our kids that when someone dies the best way to deal with it is to forget them. Like shoving them in the attic only to be glanced at with a 'oh yeah' smile when moving stuff around every now and then. We're not getting any younger - that's for sure, and heaven forbid that it happen anytime soon, gonna lose another friend or family member eventually. Are we gonna force ourselves to forget them too? Are we gonna tell our kids that even though they miss grandpa or grandma they should forget about them so it doesn't hurt as much? It frightens me and it makes me angry that no one, until today, listens." Somewhere along the way, he too had begun to cry, wiped the fallen tears on his sleeves until the counselor handed him the tissues. He accepted with a nod of thanks.

The man in the black suit was looked at expectantly, after all—the group had formed an unspoken order of speaking clockwise from the last person that spoke. He never moved and never looked up from his hands but he somehow knew they were all looking at him. He could feel their eyes watch him and this somehow gave his washed out nerves the stability to talk. From the thinness of his hair and the fact that there was a lot of greying, it could be assumed that he was older than everyone else. Since no one saw his face since arrival they simply had to assume so, but it was proven by his voice that he was at least in his sixties.

"I saw a sign in the funeral home's front office and on a whim decided to come here. This morning I buried my 20-year-old daughter, and instead of attending the after get-together being hosted in my house, I'm here. She was young, and pretty, and was excited to be a junior in college. Loved by all, straight A's and a potty-mouth that put my sailor father to shame. My wife told her often it was her
only bad quality. I tried to get angry about it but all I could do was laugh whenever she'd say 'Oh shut your yap, Gramps' to my father for scolding her. The funny part was, she only cussed behind closed doors, never in front of friends or the boys she liked, but as soon as they were out of the house she'd say something like 'God, I love those f***ers.' It gave my wife shivers.” He still didn’t move his head from his hands, but the sobs were no longer being held quietly. “I’m told that she was being asked out by this boy at school and that she kept turning him down because she wasn’t interested. I was told he loudly asked her out again in the middle of the college gymnasium in front of a professor and forty or more students, to which she, again, turned him down as politely as possible. Then he shot her. He shot her, yelled to the room that it was her fault for turning him down and shot himself before anyone could stop him. Another boy tried to tackle him and get the gun away but it was too late. The police were called and an ambulance, but it was already too late. The bullet went right into her heart. She died in minutes...

“Minutes.

“In minutes, the life that I held in my hands as a baby, and raised, loved and worried over was dead. In minutes the vile boy that took her from me was also dead. If he were alive, I’d be on my way to kill him, but since he’s dead I can’t do anything about it. I can’t even accept it all yet. I keep thinking that after all this crying, I’ll fall asleep and everything will be back the way it was. Jenny will be at school, calling home to tell us how her day went and I’ll be telling her about work and how excited I am to be retiring in a few years, but no. Instead I’m walking about in a daze, unable to stop crying and unable to do anything but hold my wife in my arms and cry with her for hours on end before we have to get up and do something or other for all the people who showed up to her funeral. I’m broken inside and I don’t think I’ll ever be able to fix it.” One hand left his face to reach out for the some sort of wipe, which was handed to him in great quantity. From the right angle one could see bloodshot eyes, a red raw and wet face with bags beneath his eyes dark enough to look like a double shot of black eyes. Wrinkles could be seen on his face, as 80
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well as a solid handprint from resting his head for so long. He cleared away some tears, blew his nose and trashed the used and soaked material into the can the counselor brought forward.

The final member of mourners was the woman who now sat awkwardly spread out. She no longer looked uncomfortable, but she did look sad. “My name is Lauren. I’m here because I lost my sister, Sara, a few months ago... she overdosed on prescription drugs.” Lauren looked across the room before settling on the window across from her.

“Sara and I were fraternal twins... she liked being girly, and I never really had that sort of taste. When our parents divorced, they asked who we wanted to live with. I said my dad, and she said Mom and for a while we hardly spoke or heard from each other. Eventually, my dad felt torn about us living so far apart and moved to the area where Mom had taken off to, so by high school we were in the same town again, and had some of the same classes but for the most part we ignored each other. She had her friends and I had mine... My mom got remarried in our sophomore year and she started acting weird with her friends. She came to my and dad’s place asking if she could come stay with us and wouldn’t say why. I think my mom’s new husband was abusing her because she had some weird marks, but I didn’t confront her about it and she never brought it up. She just did a one-eighty though. She started wanting to hang out with me, and I didn’t really care. She was, well, a little princess with an attitude and I was a tomboy.”

“Well, she went from being the perfect princess to coming home late and hanging out with a bad crowd. She was still a good person, she just did some bad stuff. Right after high school, when she moved out to live with her boyfriend, she got addicted to some hard-core drugs. I didn’t see her too often since I left for college and I didn’t know about the problem for a while, but when I graduated and she showed up we all knew something was different... that something was... wrong.
"I took her to rehab a couple of times, but you can’t really help those that don’t want to be helped... she kept getting kicked out, or leaving. I had her move in with me, got her a job at a local retail in our area... I helped her get off the illegal drugs, and was helping her wean off the prescription ones... but I guess some itches are too hard not to scratch.

"I left for a business trip. I was gone for a week, and when I got home there was this terrible smell coming from her bedroom. The coroner said it had been five days. It was accidental, he said... and I think it was, but... it really messed me up. I keep thinking that if I just hadn’t gone on that damn trip I could have stopped her before it happened, or I could have called 9-1-1 or something. I wish I would have been there."

That was the last person who spoke and the last words spoken between the six for the remainder of the night.