

Pink Unicorns

People dressed as unicorns peppered the sanctuary of the North Corners Community Church. Some wore unicorn costume hats with the horn sticking straight up between two equine ears. Others had on full costumes that included sparkles and tails that stuck out from behind their chairs. Young mothers cradled newborns in pink crochet knit caps sporting the single horn of a unicorn. On my black tie, a prancing white unicorn stood out against the pink background provided by my dress shirt. It almost looked like a taping of “Let’s Make A Deal” rather than the memorial service of 5-year-old Audrey, the little girl who loved unicorns and the color pink.

Regulars at a local bar, Dane, Audrey’s future father, and I formed a friendship over beer and our common background of being in tech for a living. Dane met his future wife, Kate, on a blind date. A stunning couple as both stood 6’ 4’ with Dane a husky 280, and the slender beauty Kate, a statuesque contrast with long dark hair. Focus shifted to them in any room they entered. Dane shared with me and other friends at the bar that it was an unusual courtship for him because Kate, who prayed and practiced her faith daily, insisted on abstinence until marriage. Kate, we found out later, did not like this type of sharing.

The first time I met Kate, I had brought my brand-new Amazon Fire Tablet to the bar to show to Dane. It had just come on the market, and he asked to see it. I shook Kate’s hand then broke out the Amazon Fire Tablet, set it upright on the bar facing them both, and opened the browser. A couple in flagrante delicto immediately popped up on the screen.

Horried, I aimed at the “X” on the window to close the browser but my finger, as if coated with butter, slipped off the target repeatedly. Amid Dane’s roaring laughter, I frantically

stabbed at the device, seeing Kate's red faced "Oh my" look, as my finger missed its mark multiple times until, mercifully, it landed on the "X" and the browser closed.

First impressions are hard to erase, especially that one. Although never brought up again, a bit of awkwardness existed between Kate and me from that point on. Even a year later, in the reception line at their wedding, I exchanged a sheepish smile with Kate while Dane graced us with a knowing grin. Nonetheless, our friendship grew and over the subsequent years, we celebrated the births and birthdays of their two children, Audrey and David, and I watched a happy, healthy family living life.

In the sanctuary, I sat at the end of an aisle next to another friend from the bar. Dane and Kate took center stage on the pulpit. The spotlight on them seemed to magnify their pain. As Kate spoke on behalf of the family, glancing at notes, Dane stood next to her, head down, silent. His large body looked dry, desiccated, his skin the color of sour milk. Dane rocked forward and back slightly, as if caught in a breeze. The touch of a finger could have knocked him to the ground.

"God took our Audrey, and we are pissed," Kate began. She recounted what happened on the day after Christmas. She had tucked Audrey in for her regular afternoon nap, then went about her day. A few hours later, when Kate went to wake her, Audrey's lips were blue, and she was not breathing. Paramedics and an hour of emergency care at the hospital, could not revive their little girl. All subsequent post-mortem tests returned inconclusive, Kate explained, then said: "Audrey's heart just stopped beating."

Pictures of Audrey's life appeared on a screen overhead, each image punctuating Kate's words: Audrey playing with her baby brother at the beach both covered in sand, holding "a

shopper in training” grocery cart at a store, asleep on her mom’s lap. Sobbing filled the sanctuary. A disturbing thought popped into my head, *Instead of playing with Audrey and her new Christmas toys, Dane and Kate had to choose a casket for their first born.* I didn’t know I could cry so hard.

Clutching my tissue, I saw the people in the row in front of me start to hold hands, gently clasping one after the other, traveling to the right moving in a wave. The momentum reached my row and, as natural as a handshake, I extended my arm. My hand met my friend’s hand, and her hand met the person’s hand to her right, and so on across all the rows; as if by completing this circuit, it would diffuse the pain, somehow lessen the anguish so plain on Dane and Kate’s sunken faces.

Then, at the end of Kate’s talk, her bravest words: “God took our Audrey, and we don’t know why. To all my wonderful friends here today, despite our anger, we feel God’s presence. Please do not lose your faith because you will be worse off than we are. And we are pretty bad off right now.”

The service ended and Dane, Kate and the immediate family exited up the aisle to the church’s common area, where tables of food and other refreshments awaited. I left the sanctuary and took my place in the line of people waiting to console Dane and struggled with my thoughts.

What was I going to say to him? It needed to be profound, soothing and somehow, explain the situation. I remembered quotes such as, “Grief is love with nowhere to go” and “Where there is deep grief, there was great love.” Then the cruel trophies of their sorrow crept into my mind: The empty chair at the dinner table. The car seat, never to be used again. The unmoving tricycle. The bedroom where Audrey lived and died. And most of all, the soft body and sweet smell of their baby girl, gone, in an instant, like a puff of warm breath in the winter’s

night. Those quotes, as beautiful and powerful as they are, now seemed trite. My mind whirring, I looked up and there was Dane. It was my turn and I had nothing to say.

We embraced and hugged hard. His bulk swallowed me, our cheeks touched, and our tears mixed. Dane's massive chest convulsed and echoed against mine. I could feel the fight going on inside him as he battled not to lose it. I whispered in his ear, "Don't worry. I didn't bring my Amazon Fire tablet."

Dane laughed. A real laugh. We broke our embrace and he looked at me and he said, "I love you, you asshole." I said, "I love you too."

I walked away happy, trying to dry my face with my last tear-soaked tissue. I uttered no profound words as I'd hoped, but by reliving my humiliation, I was able to give my friend some respite – if ever so brief – from his pain. Pain that will not end until his memorial service.