

## Learning to Say Farewell with *Life Is Strange*

There's a moment midway through *Life is Strange* where Kate Marsh, a student at Blackwell Academy, climbs atop the roof of her dormitory. A crowd gathers below. Max, another student, ascends to the roof to pull Kate away from the edge. Max's newfound abilities to manipulate and rewind time afford her the chance to get to the roof unnoticed before Kate can jump, but when she's almost by Kate's side, her powers give out, and what unravels is—"jarring" doesn't do it justice. One second, Kate is standing mere feet away from Max. The next, she's plummeting in a slow-motion descent, like the universe is taunting you and your powers, reminding you that you can't save everyone. Kate's fate is final here; there isn't a chance for a do-over.

At its core, that's what *Life is Strange* is all about: accepting the tragedy of loss no matter how much we wish we didn't have to. Main characters Max Caulfield and Chloe Price are forced to confront the loss of friends and family time and time again. The way they process their grief, either through reluctant acceptance or brazen denial, shapes the events that unfold around them. Max's time travel powers first come to her when she prevents the untimely demise of Chloe, and the butterfly effects caused by her abuse of these newfound abilities produce ripples in the fabric of reality, eventually culminating in a tornado that threatens to destroy the entire town. By living in and desperately trying to redo her past, Max is unable to move forward. This comes to a head at the end of the game when the final choice is to either sacrifice the town or return to the moment of Chloe's predetermined death. Without powers of her own, however, no one is living in the past more than Chloe. Spurned by her father's death and Max's moving away to Seattle five years prior, she's gone the route of lashing out, self-medicating with cheap weed and

alcohol, and pushing people away as a defense mechanism. Even as the two sleuth around Arcadia Bay looking for her missing friend, she's still reminiscing on their grandiose dreams of starting anew in Los Angeles. If life is a tale full of sound and fury, no one's living it up more than Chloe.

*Life is Strange: Before the Storm*, the prequel to the original game, and its bonus episode, *Farewell*, takes players back to the day Chloe's father, William, dies. As her mother opens the door with a policeman behind her, Chloe rushes to meet them, immediately filled with a sense of dread. Tears stream down her face as she's told the news. Cue "Black Flies" by Ben Howard. The ending track plays over a stoic montage: Chloe and Max soak in the news, they attend William's funeral, and Max moves away as she struggles to find the last words to say to her best friend in person. In short, it's a song about losing someone you care about, posing the agonizing conundrum at the center of healing from grief: does moving on mean forgetting?

I think we found out Donny had committed suicide before his father did.

We met in freshman year of high school. You meet a lot of Nguyens when the homerooms are organized by last name. We were seemingly nothing alike, but I'd come to find out how wrong I was in assuming that. Later on, I'd learn that Donny reinvented himself in the summer before high school. He and I were practically the same person only a year before: overweight, shy, and entirely obsessed with video games. A mutual friend showed me a picture of "old Donny" and remarked how we even looked similar. We were like most high school friends. We talked about crappy jobs we were trying to get at the mall and games we were excited for. I don't remember having many classes with him, but he'd always pop into classes randomly to get out of his own and he got on well enough with most of the teachers, several of whom would later show up to his wake.

He was one of the popular kids and I was a bit of a recluse, so we didn't hang out much. After graduation, we did what most people do: drift apart. People move out of their hometowns, go to college, and pursue bigger things. We'd run into each other every few months, filling each other in on our lives and making plans we'd never keep. But it felt genuine. While I was going to school and working, he was always stationed somewhere else in the country due to his job in the military. He seemed to have matured a lot after high school as I assume most people did. He was a little quieter and less rushed than he used to be. He didn't have the same ego or boyish crudeness about him. Instead of butting heads over petty arguments or ogling over who we thought were the cutest girls in our grade, we talked about what kinds of protein to buy on a budget and when we might hit the gym together.

It's weird watching people you grew up with become adults. I still think of myself as just a kid; I can't imagine that feeling is ever going away. When I looked at him, I still saw the kid who would walk his girlfriend to class and end up ten minutes late to his own.

It was through the *forever in our hearts*, *R.I.P.s*, and *we'll miss yous* that I found out what happened.

Much like Blackwell Academy's halls are lined with tributes to Kate after her suicide attempt, all I saw on Facebook for a few days were posts about Donny. I spent more hours than I'd like to admit scrolling through his page and reading all the messages people had about their memories of him. I didn't post anything. If you read the slates in the dorms, you'll see the people who bullied or ignored Kate are heavily affected by her circumstances. I didn't feel like I deserved to mourn this loss. We hadn't been friends since preschool or hung out all the time or opened up about our individual struggles. Was it fair that I was allowing myself to be so

preoccupied when it was his family who was hurting most? At the time, I thought the answer was no.

The Kübler-Ross model describes denial as being the first stage of grief. I didn't deny it so much as I couldn't understand it. Donny's funeral service was held at a Catholic church one town over. His family offered brief, stammering speeches, but otherwise deferred to the Vietnamese pastor officiating the service. My native tongue is a little rusty, so I gathered only tidbits here and there. I remember looking around the room at his fellow servicemen-and-women failing to hold back sobs and our former classmates with their heads hung low. Nearly everything about that day is a blur. I couldn't make sense of any of it: why this happened, how I was supposed to get over this gnawing vacancy, how I was expected to go back to work the next day and act like nothing happened. I didn't even know how he took his life. As I sat in the pews, I wept silently, unable to understand the unfairness of it all.

I played *Life is Strange* for the first time less than a month later. Chloe is hard-headed, selfish, and too-often stuck in her pain to move forward. She alienates the people who want to care for her without realizing it. She's not intentionally being spiteful, but it's the way she's learned to cope. There's a cold callousness around her, a fear of allowing herself to become too attached to anyone else. Everyone's going to leave her eventually anyways, so why continue to open herself to being hurt?

Despite all of that, there is a resounding humanity to Chloe that I can't help but empathize with. For someone who so boldly presents herself as hardened and careless, she's motivated, whimsical, and fiercely protective of the people she loves. She's a dreamer and an optimist, even when she likes to pretend she isn't. The harshly dyed hair, the sleeve tattoo, the punk rock music—it's her armor. What initially seems like a caricature of a generic angsty

teenager raging senselessly at the world ultimately culminates in a character who is immensely relatable. Running around Arcadia Bay with Chloe was reminiscent of my teenage years when I too thought I was untouchable, when I had no idea how much bigger the world was than myself. We were the fabled Captain Bluebeard and Long Max Silver, exploring our boring hometown, unearthing secrets, and getting into trouble along the way.

In the brief moments where she's vulnerable and able to express her pain, I wept alongside her and wanted more than anything to help. In more ways than one, she became a friend who understood the myriad of emotions I was struggling to express. Somewhere between the contempt for her overbearing stepfather, disappointment with what felt to be an increasingly detaching mother, and general loathing of the poor choices and even worse luck that often accompany her, I felt like I had found myself. Maybe this was why I was so crippled by the game's final choice. Sacrificing Chloe ended her story as one of redemption and acceptance, but sacrificing Arcadia Bay meant that you learned nothing throughout the journey and weren't yet willing to move on. I chose the latter and spent the rest of the day too burdened with regret and grief to get out of bed.

It was the *whys* and *whats* that bothered me for so long. *Why did he do it? What sent him over the edge?* I spent most of that first year after Donny's death agonizing over the answers I would never find.

I visited his grave again a year after his passing. This time, I let myself be more vulnerable, but I was far from healed. I was still struggling with asking myself the same questions. I hated myself for never reaching out to him, never asking how he was doing. I cried there and allowed myself to post about him on social media. The next day, my coworkers asked

if I was okay. They said I seemed real bent out of shape in my Facebook post. What was I to do other than lie and pretend I was fine?

Grief is uniquely singular. No one tells you exactly how it's going to feel or how to approach it. No one tells you how long to grieve and when it's appropriate to move forward. When someone dies, we share empty apologies, attempt small talk, and the world keeps turning. You go to a funeral one day and work the next. When my grandmother died shortly after Donny did, I felt very little. After years of increasingly worsening medical conditions, her body finally gave up. She was a shell of her former self for the last few years of her life. When it came time, we were given warning and it was expected. In a way, she had died years earlier and we had all this time to grieve beforehand. Donny was young. We were barely more than kids, still just years removed from high school. He was engaged, had prospects for the future, and was surrounded by friends and family who adored him. He wasn't supposed to go. He was supposed to be invincible.

As much as I'd like to continue paralleling Donny with Kate, their similarities only go so far. The signs of her deteriorating mental health are a focal point of the first half of the game. The girls at school torment her, and the bullying heightens after she is recorded acting promiscuously at a party while drunk. She's entirely isolated, and the only people on campus who are kind to her are more akin to acquaintances than friends. Her suicide is a shock, but to say that she is beyond miserable is not some leap of judgment. Furthermore, you can actually save her. You can take the time to snoop around in her belongings to understand her familial issues and the Biblical verses she holds the most dear. You can be a true friend and show her that you really care, not only about her not dying, but about her getting the chance to live. I couldn't save Donny. I don't think any of us could have. There wasn't a do-over or some stupid dialogue

tree that would've pulled him back from the edge. Kate might be the poster child of depression; the signs are all there, and no one bothers to help. But Donny is how it so often manifests: a silent killer that ails so many around us without us even knowing. How do you help someone who's always smiling, who's seemingly got everything going for them? How do you even know if they need help?

I've struggled with my own depression for years. There are brief, desperate moments when the jokes aren't just jokes anymore, when it starts to feel like it might be easier to let the tide wash over me. If he couldn't do it with everything I envied—a home, a family, a future—how bold, how fucking stupid could I be to think I would fare any better? It's in these darkest moments that I most think about Donny. I may never know the depths to which he was hurting. I may never know the *whys* and *whats*.

I reacquainted myself with Chloe almost a year-and-a-half after his death by finally playing *Before the Storm*. In it, Chloe struggles with recurring visions of her father. There's the initial shock and the following acknowledgement that it's not real, just a terrible guilt-laden nightmare. She sees the car crash again and then it's over as quickly as it started. Towards the end of the game, Chloe finally has a conversation with William instead of telling him he isn't real. Choose the right dialogue options and she'll prod him for answers and truths. Did he ever lie? Did he have secrets that would have made her love him less? Eventually, at the climax of the conversation, he says that there's nothing his answers would change.

He's gone.

There are no answers in questioning the deceased. Would knowing the *whys* and *whats* of a loss she could never undo really change anything? What solace would Chloe have been afforded? Her father was still gone.

At Donny's wake, I was given a pin with his photo on it. Each day it sits there in my peripheral vision. I've moved several times since then, and every time, it's the item I'd most hate to lose in transit. When I'd start unpacking and setting up the new room, it's one of the first items to find a secure home, its metal backing magnetized to my monitor stand until I would move again. In the photo, he's smirking more than smiling, one corner of his mouth raised more than the other.

I pass by the cemetery where he's buried almost every day. Some days, I don't look out the window. Most days, I see the short hill that marks his grave and I'm okay. But there are rare days, few and far between, where I find myself biting back tears, fists clenched in a white-knuckled grasp. And maybe I'm not ready for those days to be gone.

Not yet.