

Speaker's Note: This speech was delivered during a 2017 competition circuit for Toastmasters International. It won 3rd place at the district level in front of hundreds of people, but more importantly, it won a place in my heart. It gave me comfort in a time when I was grieving and missing my friend, and allowed me to share a hopeful message with my audiences.

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I love a good story. When I was younger, I liked any story that kept me away from my own for a little while. I never wanted to write in my own book, because I was always so sure that nothing good waited on the next page.

Madam Toastmaster, fellow Toastmasters, and anyone who's ever felt lost in their own story...all of that changed when I met Brian. Brian signed his name in my book in broad, bold strokes. We met in my first year of college; a handful of puns and a few Star Wars references later, and we were fast friends.

I thought I went away to school to learn all sorts of important life things - you know, gain employable skills, find a job, build a retirement fund, succeed at that adulting thing. ...Then I chose a writing major, so that sort of went out the window. To my surprise, Brian taught me more about life than any class ever did.

First, Brian taught me loyalty. He was so supportive and would go out of his way to be at your performance, recital, or any other event that was important to you. Granted, I think sometimes he showed up just so he could have dirt for later - like the time I accidentally knocked the toupee off a guest during a dinner show. When I got off the stage, he was *still* laughing as he gasped to me, "Well, that was a *hair raising* experience, now wasn't it?" [dryly] Did I mention he was hilarious?

Second, Brian taught me about laughter. He always believed that the ability to laugh at yourself was important for navigating life. Every time something bad would happen and I would think, "this is the worst thing that's ever happened to me," Brian would find a way to turn it around and put it into perspective. Like the time I threw my back out and was in a wheelchair for a week. He met me outside a bunch of my classes and helped wheel me around the campus. He only let me roll down a hill and hit a tree...once. ...Yeah, I can laugh about it now.

Third, Brian taught me about courage. In 2005, when my father was diagnosed with kidney cancer, I didn't know what to do. So, I called Brian. You see, Brian had perspective on this that I didn't because he was already a two-time cancer survivor. I said, "Brian, how did you do it? How did you stay positive through everything? This is so scary." I'll never forget what he said.

"I had people like you, Kristy. You'll be that for your dad, and I'll be that for you." I'm happy to say that after a few surgeries, my father is cancer free and doing well.

The things I learned in that experience helped me summon that courage in September of 2015 when I got a phone call from Brian. All he said was, "Kristy. The cancer is back." I took a breath.

"I don't know where the story goes," I said, "But I'm going to write it with you."

Throughout his treatments, Brian continued to demonstrate the incredible traits I'd grown to admire in him. He continued to show loyalty to his friends, making events when he was able. He shared laughter all throughout his chemo - the bald jokes were flying everywhere! And he continued to show remarkable courage as the prognosis got worse... and worse... and worse.

Although I had been saying it in my heart for some time, Brian taught me one of the hardest lessons I have ever had to learn: how to say good-bye. On August 4, 2016, Brian's role in my story ended. ...Or, so I thought. Nothing could prepare me for what happened next.

*He was haunting me!* And not in the "Woo-oo, I am the ghost of Christmas past!" sort of way. I mean that whispers of him were *everywhere* and I didn't even know it. I saw his loyalty live on in his brothers, who made the time to call me and ask me how *I* was doing, even amidst their own grief. I saw his laughter live on in our friends, who poured into my house the night he died, sharing spaghetti - his favorite - and telling stories about all of the wonderful experiences we'd had together. And I saw his courage live on in me as I stood at the door to his apartment to gather some mementos.

I had been wondering, all that week - what now? What do I do without you? What comes next? I was back to wanting to be in any story but my own, which was now starting a chapter that didn't have Brian in it. I was still plagued by these thoughts when the answer hit me on the head - literally.

When we were moving a shelf, a book tumbled out of it. Once I blinked away the stars swirling in my vision, I realized what it was. Brian carried this thing around for years when we performed at Renaissance Festivals together because he'd played a scholar. When I opened the book, I was disappointed to find that it was empty. I wish he'd written something in it. Maybe he had? I turned a page. Then a few more. All blank.

All at once, I realized what a present Brian had given me. In our thirteen years of friendship, Brian taught me how to embrace my own story with loyalty, laughter, and courage. He taught me that *my* story was worth writing, and it was still worth it, even though he wasn't here anymore - to love myself and my time here. He was permanently etched into my narrative, and even as I continue turning pages in my story, his adventures would never end because he'd always be here [hand on my heart].

We are all a part of each other's stories. Whose story have you written yourself into? Who's written themselves into yours? Take the time to savor *your* story, and help others learn how to enjoy theirs, too. Because the greatest gift we can give ourselves and each other, is...

One more page.