

Overcome the Podcast - Episode 3
by Christian Bowman

As the sun drew lower into the afternoon sky, the Emergency Room and nursing staff had been informed of the accident. A crew of people stood by the Heliport as the rotor beat of the aircraft approached the landing pad. They were all waiting for us. Ready. The skids of the ambulance touched down and Sonia and I were lifted up. Our stretchers were pulled out and loaded onto silver metal gurneys. Somehow, I woke and responded to the wind under the rotor wash and was suddenly clearly communicating with the medical staff, answering questions about the crash and how I felt. As we were pushed away from the chopper, the blades slowly winding down, Sonia was right next to me. The nurses were running. It was a race against time. We made it through the doors and into a hallway together. Then, my wheels turned one direction and hers turned another. I looked over at her as we parted ways and it was the last time I saw her alive.

My name is Christian Bowman, and this is Overcome.

Looking up at the corridor ceiling as the fluorescent lights passed overhead, my answers slowed down. Small details began to stand out as I drifted away from the questions being asked. The orderly's voice droned away. One of the wheels of the gurney was slightly off and hit the separations of the floor randomly. Sometimes I would feel the sharp pain again and it would bring back around. I saw the silver scissors they were using to cut my clothes off as they ran me down the hall. I don't remember much more before blacking out again and going in for surgery.

While I was under, I remembered Sonia on an archeological expedition we went on. She would have this intense deliberating look about her and then suddenly smile so brightly as if she and the ancient relic shared an inside joke. Kneeling down next to the riverbed with the meticulously documented grid map and artifact location sheets. The old soft bristle brush in her hand as she meticulously cleaned off the fossil she had just discovered. Binoculars always around her neck so she could immediately turn to see what birds were singing nearby. The Field Guide to North American Birds in her pocket to identify mating dances and nesting sequence details.

In the meantime, my stomach had been cut open, and doctors were inside my abdomen, assessing the damage.

When I woke up, I didn't know how many days had passed. Vanda had flown to Chicago from Italy and drove down to Pontiac to see her daughter. Sonia's father, John, had flown in all the way from Zimbabwe near the southern tip of Africa. There was a reason they were both there. I already knew it, but one of the doctors came into the room and officially said it. Sonia Isabelle Herzog had died at 6:08pm on Thursday July 23rd.

Then, they confirmed that my mom had died at the scene of the accident at 1:25pm, along with the grandmother, Patricia, who had been driving the other car.

Then... they told me, a little girl had died. She was only nine years old. Katie. Then, they told me that there were survivors from the other car. A twelve year old little boy named Mike. He had broken his back was in the ICU right down the hall.

And then they told me about Jenny. Katie's nine year old twin sister.

Jenny had multiple injuries. The accident had broken her left arm, fractured her left hip, and destroyed her right knee. She was also in Intensive Care and undergoing multiple surgeries.

I was so sedated, I needed to be retold again. The doctor was so sincere and caring, but I was still in a state of shock and disbelief.

I Knew how difficult it must have been for the doctor to tell me all this. I could feel their pain as they said it.

In a study from the Baylor College of Medicine titled ADDRESSING PHYSICIAN GRIEF AND BURNOUT, doctors LoboPrabhu, Garza, Lundin, and DeBakey describe Grief as a shared, universal, and natural neuropsychobiologic expression in response to loss. Distinct from mourning, a practice that varies in expression across diverse cultures. While doctors spoke about burnout, the single most consistent and recurrent finding in the interviews was the description of compartmentalization resulting from patient loss.

Physicians used phrases such as “denial” and “dissociation” in describing this process as patients died.

A separate study on the impact of unacknowledged grief describes Distraction: Inattentiveness, impatience, irritability, emotional exhaustion and burnout doctors. Half reported that grief could affect their treatment decisions and motivation to recommend care. This also affects doctors’ ability to communicate about end-of-life issues with patients and families. Half of all doctors interviewed distanced and withdrew from patients as patients got closer to dying. The grief spillover has a negative impact on their personal lives. This need to normalize death and grief as a natural part of life is critical.

The need to make space for physicians to grieve like everyone else is very important and many doctors are encouraged to express this publicly. In a 2012 study by Sansone & Sansone, Siegel says “Please don’t cry in empty rooms, stairwells, or locker rooms- cry in public and let the patients and staff heal you and see you are human”. Watching the doctors try to keep it together as they told me showed me how hard they tried and how much strength they needed to keep going. When they left and it was just Sonia’s parents in the room with me, I was overwhelmed.

Remembering the letters Sonia had sent to me over the Christmas Break made it so much harder to see her father. She described her time with him and the rest of the family so beautifully. She loved Africa and all of her friends there. John was very nice

to me in the hospital. I don't think I stopped crying enough to really say anything real to him. Vanda was very nice too.

I was in a body cast from the waist down. I was told right away that I would probably never be able to walk again. Trapped in the room on that bed. John and Vanda identified her remains and left. Then the rest of my family began to arrive. It was a little surreal. Everyone wanted to tell me how lucky I was. To tell me how sorry they were. To try to cheer me up and tell me how much better I'll be soon. I even have a strange polaroid photograph of my biological father smiling next to me as I lay there unable to move and pumped full of pain killers.

Sonia's body had been returned to Italy with her mother and taken to a little town on the outskirts of Naples. Sonia had grown up in Rome with her mom but bounced around the world. She had lived in Stamford, Connecticut with some amazing family that I had the pleasure of meeting once, Dakar Senegal where she spent a great deal of time in her early teens, and Harare Zimbabwe, where she split her time with her dad. She had attended high school in Paris, France before attending the University of Pennsylvania at Philadelphia when we met. She spoke more languages fluently than I ever really knew, and she was teaching me French, which seemed to hold strongest as her mother language. She was always surprising me. Both of her parents worked as Socio-Economists and she was extremely intelligent. She was drawn to archeology and cultural anthropology. She loved Jim Morrison and the Doors. Her wardrobe contained colorful garments she had collected from her travels around the world. She would write

beautiful letters on airmail stationery to friends and family just to describe a flower she had seen. She loved photography. She loved to dance. She wrote and illustrated a short story about sea turtles. She was beautiful. Everyone loved being around her. She had just turned 23 years old. Her casket was drawn by horses to her final resting place in Marigliano under the shadows of Mount Vesuvius. I have still never been.

My mom's body was cremated. My older brother kept some of her ashes in an urn. I think my stepdad also held on to some, but I'm not sure. I don't really know what was done with the rest. Carolyn Walsh, or as everyone knew her: Care, had grown up in old money Ocean City, Maryland. The wealthy lineage included presidents and explorers. Somewhere along the line, she fell from the graces of the family and married outside of high society. She became the black sheep. She gave birth to my oldest sister, Kym, with her first husband. Then, she remarried, and had my older brother Mike with her second husband. After that marriage failed, she met my biological father who was a hippie at the time living out of a van. She left the east coast and decided to move out west with him. I was born on the road en route to Northern California in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. Then, my two younger brothers: Matt and Josh and my youngest sister, Crystal, were all born near San Francisco. Care was involved in a series of Rainbow Family communes and splinter church groups during the 70's. We lived up and down the California coast in the VW camper until my father left her in San Diego for another woman. Her popularity in the church group continued to rise and she was asked to travel a lot. The kids grew up bouncing back and forth between her, their respective fathers, her brother James in New York, and family friends around the country until she

met Jimmy, my stepdad, in Austin. They were in love and very happy together until the day she died. It hurt him tremendously to lose her.

I didn't really know anything about the two who passed in the other car, Patricia or Katie, for a very long time. When I finally did learn about them, it inspired me to create this podcast. At the time, I was told that Patricia had come down to pick up her grandkids and take them back up to Chicago. I would find out much more about them later due to a wild twist of fate.

In addition to the accolades the medical staff deserves for their work with me, being seventeen years old at the time helped my body recover rather quickly. I worked hard to get off the bed and into a wheelchair and learned how to get around, but I refused to give up. Being told you'll never be able to walk again really makes you want to run. But I learned how. At first on crutches. Then a cane. Although the process was painful and grueling, I knew those little kids down the hall had it far worse than I did. It seems faster now, when I was eventually discharged, and I walked out of the hospital on my own. I never got to really thank them for everything they did.

My stepdad, Jimmy, and two of my brothers, Matt and Mike, were still at the log cabin in Missouri when I got out. The house itself was isolated down a long staircase on the side of an Ozark hill in the middle of the woods. It was difficult to get up and down, but it helped push through the physical recovery process.

I felt blamed by my family. I felt blamed by everyone. Even if I wasn't. Survivors guilt is a very complicated issue. There's an emotional paradigm known as the Kubler-Ross Stages of grief: which postulates Anger, Denial, Bargaining, Depression and Acceptance, in no particular order. I was still in the denial phase of grief phase at the time. I relied heavily on the spiritual ideas in the moment and continued to talk to them as if they were still there and just about to walk around the corner any minute. I would either cry uncontrollably or be almost happy go lucky pretending everything was fine.

Jimmy decided to take advantage of a transfer opportunity he had with work and move to Hawaii. What better place to heal. I knew I reminded him too much of the tragedy and I needed to go somewhere else. But I didn't have anything. The car insurance policy on the wrecked station wagon was so little it didn't really provide Jimmy with anything to prepare for the funeral much less cover the car itself. He had been using the car Sonia and I had purchased so that he would be able to continue going to work. I just gave it to him. It was getting cold. It was time for me to get going again.

My first stop was down to Austin, TX where some family friends that owned a place called the Chicago House promised I could stay in return for helping them with a move. My old nylon string acoustic had been destroyed in the accident. It was the only thing I had to my name aside from a pair of jeans, a t-shirt from the folk festival and a coat. A local musician named MJ Torrance, who frequently played at the Chicago

House, had heard about the accident and my guitar. She didn't even know me but one night she gave me a beautiful Takamine that I would later take around the world.

I was scared to go back to Philadelphia. To face her friends. Our friends. To see the familiar faces and places alone. It was March and my eighteenth birthday was coming in a week. I needed to return. I had just a little bit of money from working at the club in Austin and caught a bus east. I got back to corner of 41st and Chestnut. By the time I arrived, the house had different people living in it. I tried to find out from friends if anyone had gotten any of our things. I learned that, between her family and friends, there was nothing left. Everyone had grabbed a memory. I didn't know what to do anymore.

My uncle Jimmy, Care's brother, lived in upstate New York. I used to go and stay with him every once in a while, and with nothing left, I decided to give him a call. When he answered, it was the first time we had talked since the accident. I had to tell him how sorry I was for killing his sister. He didn't blame me. But he was extremely concerned for me and asking me where I was, physically. I told him I was calling from a payphone in West Philly. He let me know that a toxicology report had come back from the hospital. They found trace amounts of THC in my blood system.

There was a warrant out for my arrest.