

The Day of the Stevens

Ryan Newfell

My wife's brother died of a drug overdose. We don't hide that – some say there's a stigma attached, but we thought he was doing better, and it was unexpected, to say the least.

I had a job interview that morning. I thought the interview went well, although I wasn't sure after the phone interview. Do you ever have that *"every answer is the wrong answer"* feeling? I left the in-person interview feeling better – jittery and high on the feeling of a job gone well, but I had to return to reality as I had to get to my normal job. My interview was at 10 am, and I was running late from my "appointment" – and I still had to run home and change. I was in dress slacks, a shirt, and a tie and had to go semi-casual to work. I had a co-worker coming into the office that morning to shoot a video with me, and though I had emailed him about my delay, I was sure he was there.

I arrived shortly after, co-worker already at his desk. We began discussing various work topics – the typical work complaints, how we would frame and shoot the video – maybe a few Trump critiques mixed in!

"Give me an hour to finish some emails, and then we can start the video?"

Before my co-worker could answer me, the work phone rang. I ran over – the number on the caller ID looked familiar. It was my fiancé, Justine.

"Why is she calling the office?" I wondered – quickly realizing it must be an emergency. I whipped out my phone – this happened in seconds, you see. I have a few text notifications from Justine. A missed call. A missed call from her Mother.

I'm assuming the worst. Justine works at a mental hospital, which is not the easiest job. Twice I've gotten calls from her about patients attacking her – "minor punches and a kick to the knee," she would say calmly. That's just how she is – she's a trooper, a true New Englander, and doesn't let much bother her.

So you can safely say that at this point, I'm assuming she's calling from the hospital bed – telling me she's fine, but also she has two broken legs, a broken nose, and most definitely a concussion.

[PAUSE]

"Hello?"

"My brother died."

[PAUSE]

"Are you serious?"

"Yes."

"I'll call you back from my cell phone."

I told my co-worker I had a family emergency and called Justine back from my car. She had filled me in – Steven didn't show up to work – they called his best friend – the best friend called for a welfare check, and the police found him.

Emotionally, she seemed almost fine. Crying but in shock. It's not uncommon – that eerie feeling you get when it doesn't feel – real. I told her I would leave work. Her co-worker was bringing her home, so she didn't have to drive, and I wanted to get her to her family.

We got to her parents – her Mom, Dad, and Nana were there. We hugged and cried. Drank. Ate some pistachios. Eventually, we ordered some pizza and subs because who wants to cook?

You talk about the worst things. How to clear out an apartment. What to do with belongings. What about a relatively new bed that someone...died in? Funeral arrangements. But things happen in life – terrible things – and they need to be talked about sometimes.

I did the best I could – all I could, for them. I comforted. I was just – there – which was what they wanted. They are my family too, and I love them, and they love me. Justine and I were getting married in 5 months. This was a massive blow to all the fun planning that had been going on between the two families. Steven was to be a Groomsman at the wedding and was really looking forward to it.

We left her parents after a few hours and arrived home at dusk. As we walked down the front walkway, Justine jumped – a garter snake was sitting on the crack in the walkway, catching the last rays of light.

“That scared the crap out of me!” she laughed. It was the first laugh I had heard all day from her.

I enlisted my friend and “best man-to-be” to drive with me to get Justine’s car from her work – an hour round trip drive – he was happy to oblige, best man after all. We made the trip, reminiscing on life – he had known Steven through me – and then talking about work and eventually baseball to keep it happy. We arrived back, and Cole headed home. I checked on Justine. You could tell she had been crying.

On my way back up the walk, I noticed the snake from earlier in the same crack in the walkway. Odd now that it was chilly and dark, a typical April night. He was sluggish and appeared to be stuck. I looked closer. He must have tried to come up between the crack and got stuck at his mid-length, the thickest part. He couldn’t slither backward where he came from, and he had gotten himself caught by moving forward.

I didn't want to tell Justine. But I had to. Would she find him dead in our walkway tomorrow morning?
Not after all she had been through today.

"Can you come here quickly? I think that snake is stuck in our walkway."

We grabbed our gardening gloves, a large flathead screwdriver, and a dowel. I was going to get this snake out.

I put my gloves on and tugged him gently. He was really in there. I tried lifting the walkway slightly with the screwdriver. Nothing. It had to be as old as the house, 60 years, and well settled.

I started thinking quickly. Can we lubricate him? Would mineral oil work? I Googled "snake + mineral oil" – I can't say I've ever done that before... but can't you believe someone has posted a question in a forum about bathing their python in mineral oil? Forum consensus: Totally fine. Thanks, internet!

I grabbed mineral oil from the basement – Steven had given us a bottle and a beautiful butcher's block cutting board as a present for our housewarming party six months prior – the oil is to keep the board shiny and nice.

I put some in a cup and went outside. Justine was still working on finding a way to get the snake out. I poured the oil on him carefully and then lifted the slab with all my might using the screwdriver. Justine gripped the snake and pulled.

Slowly, more and more, the snake emerged.

"He's coming out!" she yelled, half excited and half disgusted.

Finally, his tail emerged, and he was free. I picked him up and brought him to the end of our yard, at the forest's edge – I wasn't going to let him get stuck in that crack again! I placed him down and watched him slither forward, assuring me he may be bruised but was uninjured.

I called Justine over. I wanted her to see that he was okay.

"I'm going to name him Steven," she said, tears in her eyes.

Tears welled in my eyes—what a day. We may have lost a Steven, but we were able to save one too.

Ryan Newfell