

## **The Tragedy of Loss: The Learning that Comes From It**

By Christina Wilke

“You have to let people go. Everyone who’s in your life are meant to be in your journey, but not all of them are meant to stay till the end.”(Unknown). This is a quote that is very closely related to Tassie Keltjin a 20-year-old college girl in Lorrie Moore’s A Gate at the Stairs. After an interview done with writer Lorie Moore the theme of this novel was unknown, in one instance she talked about how it was about hate and in another it was about chores. Then later on it talked about how it was about post 9/11, all of these ideas are approached in this novel. However the overall novel is the story of Tassie who is in the process of coming of age. Throughout the novel, Tassie is trying to find herself and evolve into the person that she is supposed to be. During these early 20’s Tassie experiences a lot of significant loss. Although the losses she experience are detrimental they in return are important because without them Tassie wouldn’t be where she is today and learned what she knows. Instead she would still be the quiet girl that is unnoticed. These tragic instances of the loss of Mary Emma the little girls she babysits to Reynaldo, the first love of her life, and then finally the death of her brother have allowed for Tassie to open up and let go allowing this novel to take us through her coming of age story.

Winter was approaching and Tassie was on the search for a babysitting job. Tassie a young woman in college is finally experiencing something other than her small rural farming town. She is now attending college and has the freedom to do as she pleases. Tassie is one like many teens who is attending college, in Troy, in a new setting, away from home and very lost as to whom she might be. Throughout the novel Tassie experiences multiple large losses in her life, however from these experiences of loss it allows her to find more about herself and shape herself into a young woman. It is not just the loss that shapes her but also the relationships that she has

with these people that she loses that makes these losses such a learning experience. Tassie starts off the book as a quiet nobody but once we get to the end she is finally making something of herself and allowing herself to be vocal and be accepting of the changes she has gone through.

The beginning of the book starts off with Tassie as a quiet, unstable and in a state of avoidance young college girl. These early portrayals of Tassie are shown through multiple different instances in the beginning of the book. From the first pages of the book Tassie was in search of a babysitting job because she needed the money and she said she was good with kids. She also added that they are sometimes interesting, however just as perfect description of early Tassie she says “After I spent too much time playing their games, my mind grew pecking and longed to lose itself in some book I had in my backpack. I was ever hopeful of early bedtimes and long naps” (Moore, pg.4). Tassie enjoyed losing herself within herself. She often times chose to just be alone, especially since her roommate got a boyfriend and was over there all the time, so then it was just Tassie and the apartment. She went to class and she came home. Sometimes she would go to the little Chinese restaurant and eat alone. However it wasn't until she was going door to door trying to find a job that she met Sarah “Brink” the soon to be mother of a little girl, a little girl that would soon change Tassie's lack of self accountability.

Tassie arrived at the Brink household and as soon as the door had opened Sarah examined Tassie. From being the Tassie she was early on in the book her response to this was the feeling of being uncomfortable she even says “I had always felt hidden as the hull in a berry, as secret and fatal as the curled fortune in a cookie, and such hiddenness was not without its advantages, its egotisms, its grief-fed grandiosities” (Moore, pg. 11). Tassie soon found out that Sarah and her Husband Edward were going to be adopting and that they were looking for a new babysitter. Sarah owned a restaurant and her husband was gone most of the time. After hearing

from Sarah that she received the job, she started on a journey that would be full of surprises and heartbreak. Tassie went along with Sarah to meet a potential little girl at a nearby restaurant, unfortunately that fell through. However one day Sarah called and told Tassie that they would be going to Packer City to go meet a little girl. This is where Tassie met Mary Emma at two-year-old African- American girl. Throughout the visit to Packer City Tassie was just along for the ride. She didn't talk much and just sat there. After meeting with the adoption agency the three of them, Sarah, Edward and Tassie, went out to dinner at a fish fry. Tassie didn't speak much and just sat there, she felt uncomfortable as she stated, "Edward and Sarah were sitting across the table from me, grinning as if I were the most adorable child. My face heated up in response to what I felt was mockery. For a second I wanted to stab myself" (Moore, pg. 97). This was a good example of how Tassie relationship was with Sarah and Edward at the beginning and Tassie's personality in general, she hated the attention being on her.

Before the even returned home with Mary Emma Tassie had already began her journey with the baby, she attended her first checkup at the hospital with Sarah and Edward. This is a major checkpoint in a parent's life, one that Tassie now experienced with them.

Tassie babysat often and became very close with Mary Emma. She would feed her, take her out, put her to bed and be there when she woke up. From the first time that Tassie woke Mary-Emma up from her nap there was a special connection "when I lifted her out of her crib, she was eager, and clung to me and quieted down" (Moore, pg. 133). As the two of them spent more time together it was less time that Mary-Emma was spending with her mom. Tassie was now becoming a mother like figure to her and she was becoming attached. "Attachment can be defined simply as an emotional connection to someone, evidenced by proximity seeking, feelings of security in the persons' presence" (Stroebe and Archer, pg. 29). Mary Emma felt this way just

as much with Tassie as Tassie did with her; it was shown in an instance where Mary Emma wants to go to Tassie instead of Sarah. This connection between the two allows for Tassie to take a sense of ownership in Mary-Emma and pride, two traits that she had before lacked. She enjoyed spending time with her and taking her out in public despite the looks she might get from having an African American little girl with her. Along side this relationship and growth of her relationship with Sarah was also evolving. The two went from twenty questions at the beginning to now sitting down and drinking wine together. It wasn't until one day when the two of them were sitting down together talking that Tassie world came crashing down. While sitting down together Sarah told Tassie that Mary-Emma would be taken from them by the adoption agency. It was due to something that had happened in Sarah and Edwards past. For Tassie this was a turning point, instead of doing what she normally would have done which is say nothing and sit there, she finally spoke up for herself. She told Sarah "you sought her ought and brought her here. She loves you! Excuse me for saying this, but you have a responsibility now" "You have to fight it! For her!" (Moore, 245).

Through this relationship and the realization of the loss of Mary-Emma has allowed Tassie to find herself and a voice for herself. She has used this experience as a growing experience and allowing her to finally find a sense of ownership. This is one of the relationships throughout the book that loss has allowed the shaping of her coming of age. Without this relationship she may not have learned to have a voice and to give her opinion of something that she strongly disagrees. Although it was hard for her and left her confused and at a loss of what to do she got out of it an experience that can't be duplicated and was unique.

Another significant person that Tassie encounters that allows her to better find herself was Reynaldo. Reynaldo was a "tall, handsome brown-skinned boy" that Tassie sat next to on

her first day of her Sufism class (Moore, 142). Reynaldo was a Brazilian boy that caught Tassie's eye and heart from the beginning. They started off by passing notes in the class, it then turned into walking back from class together and then one day they had their first "date", a coffee and coke together. Before they even officially started dating Tassie would dress up for class hoping that he would notice. In conversation one day he had asked her if she was a virgin she answered yes, however this didn't seem to bother him and eventually took her virginity. By this point Tassie was totally over taken by him. She would go over there every chance she got even when she was watching Mary Emma. She would bring him doughnuts and other things. When they were together just the two of them they didn't often talk but just lay there. Tassie would tell him that she loved him however he wouldn't say it back. Often times she would say it twice and he would say back "is there an echo in here?" (Moore, 167), to Tassie she was so in love that she didn't notice the obvious signs. Tassie even risked her job for him. Sarah found out that Tassie had been taking Mary Emma over to Reynaldo's house and so instead of stopping she found a back way through alleys so that no one would see. She would do just about anything for him but what would he do back, nothing. As the two of them grew in their "relationship" Tassie let her guard down and she allowed him to completely come in and take over her. This is what happens when a girl falls in love for the first time. She gets engulfed with the feeling of someone caring and showing attention. Tassie was experiencing what most girls do the first time and because she had not had a boyfriend before or had never talked of one this was her first experience.

One day as Tassie found herself on her way over to Reynaldo's place the lights were out she had an unsettling feeling. As she opened the door she saw a completely packed up apartment with Reynaldo sitting in the middle of it. Her life was about to get a lot lonelier, he was moving to London and she would never see him again. As she said looking back on the situation "In the

future I would come to know that look as the beginning of the end of love- the death of a man's trying" (Moore, 204). Tassie was heart broken. She ran from his apartment never looking back and eventually was paralyzed with sadness and exhaustion. Tassie went into a depression like mode and just letting everything go. She didn't clean her apartment and she rarely left her bed. Research has been shown that there are links between relationship transitions, Tassie going from "in love" to single, and mental health (Overbeek, Vollebergh, Engels, Meeus; 670). This is what she was experiencing the loss of a loved one not from death but just pulled out from under with no warning, or at least she didn't see these warnings.

Tassie grew from this relationship with Reynaldo and the loss of him. She learned that you have to be careful of whom you are getting yourself involved with and whom you are letting take over your life. When the relationship ended Tassie soon realized that she didn't know all that much about Reynaldo and that she was just too wrapped up in what was going on. She later stated that "Let the hint be written across the heavens in skywriting done by several planes- I was dense" "EVEN SKYWRITING WOULDN'T HAVE WORKED!" (Moore, 191). This shows that as she self reflects on the relationship that she got something positive out of what she thought was the love of her life being taken. Tassie got to experience her first heartbreak but it was for the better because she learned and grew from it. She learned that in life you can't let everyone you think is "cute" in and that as an adult you have to keep a guard up. This is valuable as she moves on for future relationships to come.

Towards the end of the book Tassie experiences the most significant loss of all, the death of her brother. According to research done by Mash, Fullerton and Ursano most individuals have experienced the death of a loved one by the time they reach college age, 81.3% of college students having experienced a loss within a family. From this it makes Tassie just part of a

statistic, however it is the gains from this loss that have allowed her to develop. Tassie and her brother have a typical sibling relationship. The two of them got along and talked occasionally about how life was going and what was new. However a conversation that they have over Christmas break is one that set the stage of what was soon to come in Tassie life. As they talked about college and what her brother was going to do Robert, her brother, informed her “my grades aren’t good enough, and college applications have to be in the first of the month. I may just join the military” (Moore, 57). This was alarming to Tassie and as an older sister was very concerning. Like many other kids in his position if they weren’t going to college they really only had two choices, which were going to trade school, in their town it was DDD (Dellacrosse Diesel Driving School), or enlisting in the army. Especially with it being post 9/11 there was a high demand for young men and women to enlist so that the United States would have numbers and people training. He assured Tassie though during this conversation “It’s peacetime. I’m not going to get killed or nothing-“ (Moore, 57). This was once just a line said by her brother that soon turned into reality. After her brother graduated he went off to the boot camp for eight weeks and then was soon shipped off after informing the family through a brief postcard sent from Texas. After only being over seas for less then three weeks something went wrong and Robert had been killed. Two military personnel came to the household to inform Tassie’s parents. Her brother was blown to pieces and the remains of his body were brought back to Dellacrosse for his Funeral. The family was at a complete loss and dealing with different ways; Tassie’s mom stayed in bed most of the day, her dad tried to stay busy and Tassie was just at a loss and it showed by her actions at the funeral as sort of losing it. When at his funeral Tassie couldn’t get herself to believe that her brother is truly dead, after everyone had left the church Tassie stayed for a while not being able to move until she went forward toward the casket and she soon

“climbed atop the gurney, up into the coffin, and fitted myself inside to nestle next to him” (Moore, pg. 299). She continued to lie there and talk to her brother. To most this seems extremely creepy and weird but to her it was okay and it was a way of coping with his death. This would be considered Tassie special mourning ceremony with her brother. A Mourning ceremony are the activities that people who are alive carry out to mourn the death (Chen, pg. 1042).

Tassie struggled with the loss of her brother. “The fulfillingness of my life’s’ every day had not just faltered but completely stopped” (Moore, 302). She lay in bed sick and not eating for a long while until she slowly started to work with her dad in the field and go on trips with him. She used these as her coping of her brother death. She soon learned that although her life my have stopped everything around her didn’t and that she was going to have to get back on her feet and keep living. After thanksgiving Tassie finally went back to school and once she was back had a sense of ownership that she had to continue on. She found a new apartment with a new roommate, she got a job as a Starbucks barista, one that involved lots of interaction with people, and she was all registered for spring classes. Tassie was starting to get a hold on her life and even though she got knocked down she was able to get up and see that she could continue on. This was a valuable thing for her to learn from the death of her brother and to have confidence within herself. It was another area that showed she was growing into a young woman and coming of age. Throughout life people get knocked down but it is all about how many times you can get back up and make the situation better. It was another hard loss but for her she gained a lot from it. As said by Chen, Loss is a kind of gain, and misfortune and good fortune can change into each other.



As seen throughout the novel Tassie lives a life that encounters unusual situation and relationships that resulted in loss and learning. These losses are hurtful to her immediately but it was she gains from them that make them such an important part of her life as she is coming of age. She shows that from loss we can make good and receive benefits from them. She transforms from a quiet unknown girl to an outspoken young women who has confidence within herself and is okay on to be on her own. She has come of age and made huge steps to becoming an adult. Moore uses powerful examples to show this process but they are effective and prove a point that growing up isn't easy and everyone will endure a loss along the way but it is what we make of that loss that is important for our lives and the people that we become.

## Works Cited

- Chen, Biao. "Coping With Death And Loss: Confucian Perspectives And The Use Of Rituals." *Pastoral Psychology* 61.5/6 (2012): 1037-1049. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 16 Dec. 2014.
- Herberman Mash, Holly B., Carol S. Fullerton, and Robert J. Ursano. "Complicated Grief And Bereavement In Young Adults Following Close Friend And Sibling Loss." *Depression & Anxiety (1091-4269)* 30.12 (2013): 1202-1210. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 16 Dec. 2014.
- Moore, Lorrie. *A Gate at the Stairs: A Novel*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009. Print.
- Overbeek, Geertjan, et al. "Young Adults' Relationship Transitions And The Incidence Of Mental Disorders: A Three-Wave Longitudinal Study." *Social Psychiatry & Psychiatric Epidemiology* 38.12 (2003): 669-676. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 16 Dec. 2014.
- Rich, Motoko. "Hate, Love, Chores: Lorrie Moore's Midwest Chronicle." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 1 Sept. 2009. Web. 10 Dec. 2014.  
<[http://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/02/books/02moore.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=2&](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/02/books/02moore.html?pagewanted=all&_r=2&)>.
- Stroebe, Margaret S., and John Archer. "Origins Of Modern Ideas On Love And Loss: Contrasting Forerunners Of Attachment Theory." *Review Of General Psychology* 17.1 (2013): 28-39. *PsycARTICLES*. Web. 16 Dec. 2014.
- "You Have to Let People Go. Everyone Who's in Your Life Are Meant to Be in Your Journey, but Not All of Them Are Meant to Stay till the End." *Search Quotes*. N.p., n.d. Web. 8 Dec. 2014.