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Notes from editor (not for publication):

Hi, Todd — I’ve given this a thoughtful edit, but it will likely not be perfect. If anything bothers you or — especially — if I’ve done something that compromises science, tone, or otherwise harms this heartbreaking and beautiful memorial, please let me know, and we will continue working on it. I scoured your Google footprint and created a bio for you, but you are welcome to give me one that you prefer. As we discussed, I removed the part about reverse-engineering the specifics of Mayah’s last minutes, and I’ve added text with the suicide hotline that I last used for Cassandra Holloway’s piece about her son Gavin.

Questions: Mayah’s obituary mentions her dog’s name as Cleo; if that’s wrong, should it be spelled “Chloe”?

I appreciate your trust in submitting this piece and letting me work on it with you.

And hi to Coretta, who also entrusted me with conveying heavy truths and family legacy in another unimaginably heartbreaking time. Daniel’s and Rita’s atoms are eternal, too.

All the best, Jeff



HEADLINE ELEMENTS:

####BEGIN HED####

1 Searching flowers for my daughter’s atoms

####END HED####

####BEGIN SUBHED####

2 ‘In Mayah’s early teens, she loved playing in my lab,
3 fascinated by complexity and experimental mystery. She would
4 love what I am doing. She would find it wonderfully weird,
5 slightly counterculture, and fascinating.’

####END SUBHED####

6 TEXT BODY:

####BEGIN TEXT####

7 THIS SPRING, I'm going to collect fungi, greens, and
8 flowers of various sorts from around the grave where my 25-year-
9 old daughter was buried the spring before. And test the plants for
10 traces of her.

11 As I type this, it's been nine months — 36 weeks — since
12ayah took her own life on May 29, 2025. She was a week shy
13 of her 26th birthday.

14 She was a hard-driven, curious, warm, happy, smart, and
15 strong person. But in the last couple of years of her life, she had
16 fallen into fentanyl and never managed to get back out.

17 She tried hard, more than once. I drove her a couple of
18 times to the methadone clinic, where I saw the humiliating
19 system and the effort takes to endure it. She joined the people,
20 wanting to heal, who stand in the long lines in the cold of the
21 Vermont winter, who give tests once inside, who are spoken to as
22 if they are subhuman.

23 These people who are *trying* to quit opioids, the people
24 trying to heal, are treated like dangerous criminals. Often, people
25 end up going back to street drugs because they are experiencing
26 post-traumatic stress from the "health" system itself. Once the old
27 part of our brains get trained, habits are tough to break.

28ayah described the pain of withdrawal to me once as
29 both freezing and burning at the same time, with overlapping
30 feelings of suffocating and hyperventilating. Migraines build. You
31 worry that you're experiencing a heart attack.

32 You suffer from terrifying paranoia and alternating loss of
33 hearing, smell, and sight, followed by oversensitivity. She
34 described hot flashes, with bursts of extreme depression and
35 anger in a random staccato she always felt lurking.

36 I've been addicted to alcohol, and it was hard and
37 painful to stop. It was nothing like she described. It would also
38 take me a day or so without alcohol before I'd start to feel
39 withdrawal symptoms.

40 Those dependent on fentanyl start experiencing
41 withdrawal after three to six hours, day or night, and they talk of
42 "dope sickness" really getting hard to handle after eight hours.
43 Which is incredible, and a big part of why it is such an incredibly
44 dangerous drug.

45 * * *

46 MAYAH WAS BURIED in a green burial, in a plain pine
47 basket in the forest, in the woods at the farm where she grew up.
48 Her body is becoming part of the local ecosystem. In my kitchen,
49 watching flowers from her funeral begin to droop, I began
50 thinking about the clear symbolism.

51 I realized I might be able to detect traces of her — to see
52 her, in a way — within the plants growing around her grave.

53 I considered lots of options, from looking at gas
54 emissions through the ground to temperature differences from the
55 processes happening below. I'd have lots of excuses to design
56 new tests, which I love, and to pull rarely used gear from shelves
57 and put it to use.

58 But I caught myself.

59 I did not need, or want, to verify that we put Mayah into
60 that hole. I didn't want to see the dissolution of her old life. I
61 wanted to see the new life she inspired.

62 I realized that, with near certainty, I could trace
63 potassium-40 (K-40), a radioactive isotope that hitches a ride
64 onto the kinds of potassium that all human life requires, but
65 makes up a tiny 0.000001% of the good stuff. It accumulates all
66 through our bodies.

67 I'd be able to "see" her in new flowers that grow near
68 her. I could bring those flowers from her grave, knowing some of
69 her is in them, and then watch them decay, which is both healthy
70 and unhealthy for me to see.

71 Then, as I thought about how the mechanics and timing
72 of her rippling out into the life around us, I realized I could hold
73 on to some of that energy/matter. I could with certainty knock
74 some of the K-40 atoms out of those plants and embed them into
75 any other material — like a crystal for a necklace.

76 In a very green spot, life is all around. And this spring,
77 when the snow is gone and the plants are waking up, my instinct
78 is to just rush in and start gathering greens from above her grave,
79 knowing some of her is in there.

80 But I'm going to be patient. I want to do it right, so I've
81 been working on this for six months, preparing to start real testing
82 in the spring.

83 Fairly weird? Yes, but it helps balance out the agony
84 somehow.

85 Planning to do so carefully and critically puts me into a
86 place where I am thinking of Mayah, but still functional. Maybe it
87 is letting my left brain take on some of the load.

88 * * *

89 MAYAH WAS RAISED on a beautiful Vermont farm, in a rural
90 area, surrounded by close and extended family. And along with
91 the farm's horses, chickens, and pigs, I had a small physics/IT
92 tech lab. So it was a diverse environment for a kid, and she grew
93 into a true Renaissance woman, smart and very strong.

94 She travelled to see the world, often alone: backpacking
95 solo across Equador, traveling to Turkey to work, explore, and
96 much more. She had a kind of self reliance and courage I never
97 had that young.

98 Mayah loved bananas. She loved dark greens like kale,
99 she loved Brazil nuts, she loved mushrooms. And those plants all
100 love radioactive K-40. The plants don't crave the radioactive part
101 of it, but it comes with the package, and we all need potassium.

102 So K-40 gets to hitch a ride along with the part our
103 bodies want. Though a good Geiger counter can detect its
104 presence, you can't easily sort its radiation out from background
105 noise. However, I realized that another device, a scintillation

106 counter, would better help me sort her K-40 signals from other
107 radiation sources. (Watch out, they are all around you!)

108 * * *

109 IN NEW ENGLAND, a storm of opioids really started setting
110 in around 2010, with prescription opioids lighting the fire. Then,
111 as these painkillers became more difficult to acquire, heroin fed
112 the next addictive wave. And then by 2016, 10 years ago, the
113 heroin had become mostly fentanyl.

114 We were sitting ducks, innocently thinking stuff like
115 heroin was something consigned to dark alleys in big cities. We
116 saw plenty of alcohol and pot — sometimes mushrooms or some
117 rare other things on the fringes. But heroin? We thought it was in
118 a different reality.

119 So it quickly ate us alive: farm kids, people of all sort in
120 these little towns.

121 My daughter was among the young adults just starting
122 out in the world who got quickly hooked. She got caught in this,
123 getting a “hey, try this” someplace.

124 When I was younger, I went through times where I think
125 I would have tried any drug. But prescription Oxy hadn’t planted
126 the seeds in America yet, and fentanyl was unheard of.

127 * * *

128 WHAT PEEKS can I get at bits of the universe that were part
129 of Mayah?

130 I’ll first look at all the life around her gravesite, singling
131 out similar plants growing in similar conditions of light, water,
132 soil. Gathering, bagging and marking samples from each plant.
133 Taking photos and mapping where each sample is from.

134 And then, hopefully, I’ll find the patience to dry them.
135 The less water in the samples, the more information I will get
136 from their flowers and leaves.

137 In Mayah’s early teens, she loved playing in my lab,
138 fascinated by complexity and experimental mystery. She had a
139 natural talent for critical thinking that took me a decade longer to
140 reach than it had her.

141 She would love what I am doing. She would find it
142 wonderfully weird, slightly counterculture, and fascinating. She
143 would have new ideas and angles.

144 I will start tests using the Schumann resonances.
145 Harmonic radio signals like a river, which are flowing through
146 and around you right now. There are a couple of hundred
147 lightning strikes per second happening on Earth, and this
148 incredible amount of energy creates sound we hear and sound
149 we can't.

150 Sound at one particular frequency, 7.83 Hz, just happens
151 to reflect and bounce back and forth between parts of the
152 atmosphere and set up a "ringing" around the whole planet.
153 Some whales can hear and emit it. Some birds can navigate with
154 it. But most of us don't even have radios that can pick it up.

155 This main natural Shumann resonance is not a strong
156 signal, but it is always present, and it constantly makes some tiny
157 changes in the world.

158 I'll shower the crystal with energy that has first traveled
159 through the greens, mushrooms, and flowers. In first tests I will
160 separately and in combination try three frequencies (A, B, and C)
161 of ultraviolet light, wide frequencies of strong radio emissions,
162 ultrasound, and various types of ionizing radiation.

163 But I think of making gifts for people, and I think of how
164 tricky the word "radiation" is for folks. I'll just use the much-less-
165 scary sounding "whale song" range energy of the Schumann
166 resonance.

167 This is one of the ways I've been dealing with her death. I
168 also have bouts of agonizing pain that feel like they physically
169 knock me back into a chair. Crying like I've never experienced.
170 When alone, with no pride on the line, I'm letting it happen.

171 I know I have to let pain wash through me. But I'm also
172 finding my left hemisphere is working through this differently,
173 trying to make sense of it logically, to understand the physics of
174 what has happened.

175 It is not a cold way of looking at it; my right brain still
176 sends plenty of tears my way while I do it. But wanting to know
177 that some of her is in the flower I am holding — that is another
178 way of handling this change in reality.

179 The atoms ofayah, the building blocks, have simply
180 been rearranged. The First Law of Thermodynamics shows itself
181 here: No part of her has been destroyed. She has simply changed
182 form and has diffused. The bioelectrical patterns that were “her”
183 — her thoughts and live body’s programming — are now mostly
184 heat. Other parts of her have become parts of different materials
185 and energy.

186 The second law of thermodynamics holds. As
187 matter/energy/information diffuses, everything seeks the easiest
188 path. The settling of the universe, its decay, creates change. It’s
189 why everything exists. It’s why we exist.

190 Moving some ofayah into crystals sounds “new age.”
191 But this is not mysterious magic, there is no idea of infusing
192 “spirit” here, it is more a symbol to hold — a really tangible show
193 of the cycle of death and regrowth, one that I can hold, look at,
194 and think about.

195 I’m going to use mostly fluorite, a very pretty crystal type
196 that will absorb such particles well and will let me make
197 necklaces, carvings, and more.

198 * * *

199 I CAN’T EVER KNOW what was inayah’s mind in her last
200 moments. This fits with a kind of loneliness we all share — we
201 never really can really see things as somebody else does.

202 I never had harsh judgement about her choices in life, it
203 was only in her last couple of years that the opioids really took
204 choices from her.

205 In the years before, she had hopped trains with her sweet
206 dog Cloe and traveled the country. I always wanted to see her
207 world. She talked of the hidden meadows with little
208 encampments, abandoned basements by beautiful rivers, sitting
209 on top of a train going through the high Rockies, the farms

210 around the country where they could trade a bit of work for food
211 and lodging.

212 I was curious about her reality. I wanted to get to see
213 those secret spots and meet people. I was disappointed for a bit
214 that she didn't jump at that chance to show me her surroundings.
215 Now, I realize, who is going to haul their 50-year-old dad into all
216 the secret hangout spots in town?

217 It never took work not to be judgmental of her choices; I
218 just loved to watch and hear about whatever adventures she was
219 having. I don't know if my lack of judgment added to her
220 problem; I did not understand how deeply opioids had taken
221 hold of her. In the last two years of her life she became a ghost of
222 herself.

223 It recently helped me to realize how little I knew of
224 Mayah as an adult. She had been out in the world on her own for
225 eight years. How much do our minds change between 10 and 18
226 years old? A lot. And the growth doesn't stop, or even slow. We
227 change as much just between 18 and 26 as we did the previous
228 10 years. I knew her as a child and then a young woman, and I
229 got little time with her as a busy adult. Most of my last detailed
230 memories of her are still as a happy and optimistic kid.

231 Mayah was living in the guest room of her grandparents'
232 house, at the farm where she grew up, when I last saw her. Before
233 I drove back into town, she ran back out barefoot and gave me
234 another sweet, long, big hug.

235 It was wonderful, but the vibe was just a bit off.

236 Now I think it might have been a goodbye hug.

237 * * *

238 I HAVE PICTURES and memories of Mayah munching on
239 veggies fresh from our gardens.

240 Some of those plants are still there, now becoming part
241 of the life around her. The "cycle of life" talk regarding green
242 burials is corny and cliché, but it is true.

243 We want to think that consciousness, life, and souls
244 transcend our body's death. That is a beautiful idea, and I hope
245 such a thing is true.

246 But one thing I *know* is that the parts of Mayah are
247 rippling out into the environment in the woods all around.

248 I am going to carve that piece of fluorite.

249 With that certainty, I will be thinking of her and have a
250 new beautiful reminder of her in my pocket.

251 * * *

252 **If you or someone you know is in crisis:**

253 • **Call or text the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline at 988 or**
254 **chat at 988lifeline.org. The Lifeline provides free and**
255 **confidential support to people in suicidal crisis or emotional**
256 **distress 24 hours a day, seven days a week, across the United**
257 **States.**

258 • **Call 911 in life-threatening situations.**

####END TEXT####

BIO/COATTAIL:

####BEGIN BIO/COATTAIL####

259 **TODD MURCHISON**, a grieving father, has been
260 described as “a local physics geek and inventor/mad scientist.” As
261 described by her family in her [obituary](#), Mayah Anne Murchison
262 (1999-2025) “was a fearless adventurer [who] sought out beauty,
263 freedom and wonder wherever she went, living with a spirit that
264 was bold, curious and unbound.”

####END BIO/COATTAIL####

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VIDEO:

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LOGLINE (SOCIAL MEDIA):

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