

Remarks of Cecily Strong
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The Strongs are a bit of a WASPy bunch, which to me meant my immediate and extended family was a small fraction of the size of my Catholic friends' families. Although Owen and Leda are technically half Jewish and half Episcopalian. A combo which, Owen informed me, made him "Epissy- Jew". There are two Strong branches in our immediate family: The New York Strongs and the Chicago Strongs. Well, my dad says NY Strongs. I call them the string bean Strongs. As they are long and lean, like string beans. While the Chicago Strong's are just a little less "long".

While age differences are a much bigger deal as kids and can keep you from getting close, I loved getting to visit my "little" cousins. I was so enchanted by this funny little boy with bright red hair who could be so ridiculously serious at times. And then by his somehow equally wonderfully bizarre in the best way little sister Leda. My grandma Scotty would laugh as she told me some new funny story about them- like the time Owen confronted some New York construction guys who were working in his apartment, storming in saying "I'm three years old and I'm not afraid of you." Or when Leda, who had a bit of a low voice as a toddler, told a waitress "you have very nice blood circulation"

The thing I knew most about Owen as a kid, though, was that he LOVED birds. Like to an obsessive comedic degree. Because also- what kid chooses birds?!? One time, Owen put together a beautiful bird model and while tossing it around the Tolson's back yard to see it fly, the dog got ahold of it and wouldn't give it back. This resulted in lots of tears, but also lots of laughs as a distraught but very determined five year old chased a little dog around all afternoon to save his beloved bird. As an adult, even Owen conceded his love of birds was pretty funny and why the hell didn't he study ornithology? He couldn't tell ya.

He was full of surprises. One time in the park when Owen was chasing pigeons instead of playing on the swingset (naturally), we asked what he would do if he caught one. Knowing Owen, you'd think it would be to maybe keep it as a pet. Or study it. Or play with it. His answer was "I'm going to catch it and fry it in butter". And then he grinned.

When I came to New York for my first couple rounds of auditions in summer 2012, Owen made sure to see me every night. Even though I had only seen him once or twice in over ten years. But he showed up, and we had a blast every time. He even sang some Shaggy at karaoke with my friends and me. And over the past seven or 8 years that showing up never stopped. I think finally by around the third year I stopped being so surprised to see all or some of the New York/String bean Strongs at an event that I hadn't even bothered inviting people to, knowing how busy life is in New York especially. But Owen kept showing up. Usually with Leda in tow. No questions. And I realized I was starting to feel that I was never without the support of my family. That's a kind of selflessness and kindness that I don't know many possess. So I tried to tell my cousins as much as possible how proud they make me and

that I'm forever awed by the amazing people those silly little kids became.

And speaking of, I'm so grateful I finally got to meet Stacia. The girl who changed his life. The girl who would text him she was on her way home and he'd respond "hooray!" every time. And that level of happiness is usually only reserved for our dogs when we get home. So much rarer in humans. What a gift to know he was so puppy-level happy after finding this great love with you. In the midst of what may seem like a tornado to all but the bravest and most special people.

I told Owen often that he was my hero. And he was. And even though I hate even bringing up his cancer, I do so because during the last year and a half, Owen somehow took on the role of OUR fearless leader. Showing all of us how to fight. How to smile. How to stay full of love. How to "take no guff" like he told Stacia before work every morning. How to throw a massive blow out balls-to-the-wall badass 30th birthday party. Let the world do as it may. That's a real life hero.

So how to make some kind of sense to any of this, and the pain now filling so many lives that it seems our tears flooded the streets of New York earlier this week. How to somehow wave goodbye to the little boy brave enough to stare down giant construction workers. Brave enough to chase a wild dog for hours to save his bird. Brave enough to show up anywhere ever for anyone. Brave enough to sing karaoke in front of strangers and share his own music with the world. Brave enough to hit any dance floor. The man brave enough to fight a cruel and unpredictable disease and never let it take his spirit. Brave enough to fall madly in love in the midst of it all. I don't know how really. So today, all I can think to say is that it seems the brave little boy who loved the birds so much flew away before the rest of us.