

# MEMENTO VIVERE



## **Content Advisory**

This memoir contains discussions of grief, suicide, mental illness, and loss. Some readers may find this material distressing. Reader discretion is advised.

If you or someone you love is in crisis, call or text **988** for immediate support.

Memento Vivere

by

Dustin J. VerBeek



## Dedication

*Memento Vivere* is dedicated to those who have lost so profoundly that absence itself became a companion. May the memories that remain burn bright enough to guide you out of the darkest places.

To my family and friends: I ask for your grace as I lay this story bare. Each of you has carried trauma in your own way, and I honor the weight of that truth with all my heart. Your love, your constancy, and your unwavering presence are the threads that pull me forward when the world feels too much.

## Disclaimer

This book is a work of memoir. It reflects the author's personal experiences, memories, and perceptions, as they were understood at the time they occurred. Memoir is, by nature, subjective. Events are presented through the lens of lived

experience rather than as a comprehensive or definitive account of all perspectives.

Certain names, identifying details, and characteristics have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals. Some scenes, dialogue, and timelines have been reconstructed from memory. Any such reconstructions are intended to convey emotional truth and narrative continuity, not to serve as a verbatim or legal record.

This book does not assert findings of fact, legal conclusions, or judgments about the intent or conduct of others. It is not written as an investigation, accusation, or diagnosis. It is a personal account of loss, grief, and survival.

The views expressed are solely those of the author.



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## Forward

By Brooklyn VerBeek

Memento Vivere is not a book you read for comfort. It is a book you read because comfort has already failed you.

In these pages, Dustin VerBeek takes us into the aftermath of the unthinkable—the suicide death of his fourteen-year-old son, Max—and refuses the distance that time, politeness, or euphemism usually provide. What unfolds is not a clean arc of tragedy to healing, but an unfiltered descent into grief, guilt, rage, faith, madness, and the fragile, stubborn will to remain alive.

At its heart, this is a love story. Max: bright, loyal, ordinary, extraordinary; is rendered with such tenderness that his absence becomes a physical presence. Around that absence, VerBeek builds a brutal, intimate portrait of what it means to survive your

child: the way shame metastasizes in silence, the way institutions protect themselves, the way grief ignites both purpose and destruction.

Memento Vivere is also a reckoning—with mental illness, addiction, faith, and the stories we tell ourselves about accountability and blame. The author does not cast himself as hero or victim. Instead, he offers something far rarer: honesty without self-protection. His bipolar disorder, his history with alcohol, his public unraveling, and his obsession with justice are laid bare not to be excused, but to be understood.

This book asks dangerous questions.

- What if one moment didn't have to be fatal?
- What if someone had spoken up?
- What if love alone is not enough?

And perhaps most unsettling of all: how do the living continue when meaning itself has been shattered?

Written with lyrical force and emotional precision, *\*Memento Vivere\** is a testament to the thin line between survival and surrender. It is a book for anyone who has loved deeply, lost catastrophically, or stared into the dark wondering whether life still has permission to go on.

This is not a guide to healing. It is proof that healing is not the same as living.

And that living: messy, furious, unfinished; is an act of courage.



## Preface

There is a Hell reserved not for the dead, but for the living. I call it Living Hell. It is an alternate existence where suffering replaces air and pain becomes the only constant. Silence roars here—its deafening emptiness clawing at your thoughts until there is no escape. In this place, every fear is fulfilled. Every weakness is hunted, exposed, and torn apart. Grief does not wound—it disembowels, carving through you again and again. Memories refuse to fade, replaying endlessly.

*What if? What if?*

Living Hell exists beyond the reach of light, buried beneath the shadow of shadows. A darkness so absolute it feels chosen, deliberate—reserved for only a few. Here, the veil between the mortal and the immortal is paper thin.

This place is forged from unbearable loss,

sustained by relentless anguish. It feeds on the most broken, the most grieved. Each day is a new ritual of torment, bound to a single question that echoes without mercy:  
*Why? Why, God?*

*For it is here that I dwell.*



# Chapter One

*Max*



Maxwell “Max” Ver Beek could walk into a room and light it up without trying. He didn’t need to be loud; his presence was quiet but undeniable. People remember his smile first ; warm, sincere, carried by a kid whose friends called him loyal and funny. They remember his perfect hair and the way he took pride in his hoodie and sneaker collection. They remember his joy over barbecue wings and the way he laughed at even the silliest jokes. Born October 15, 2008, Max shared his journey through life with his twin sister, Samantha, and three other siblings (Isaac, Brooklyn and Levi). But life had already taught him loss by the time he was three — his birth mother, Lindy VerBeek, passed away after a hard fight with breast cancer, a loss that shaped, but did not define, his tender spirit.



At school and around town, Max was known as a good kid. He loved golf, basketball, and hours of video games with his friends, whether at the Sperry Moviehouse or grabbing food at Hopcat. He was just starting his freshman year at Zeeland West High School in Zeeland, Michigan—excited, nervous, hopeful. Every freshman is, right?

Max and Samantha arrived together, two lives tethered from their first breath. Twins

don't have to explain themselves to each other; they just know. They share a language built of looks and pauses, a way of standing shoulder-to-shoulder against the world even when they are arguing over something small and forgettable.



From the beginning, Max watched out for Sam. Not in a loud or overbearing way—he wasn't that kind of kid—but with a quiet attentiveness. He noticed when she was uncomfortable, when she felt left out, when

something wasn't right. If someone teased her, Max would appear beside her without drama, a presence that said, *That's enough.*

At home, the twins moved through the house like paired magnets—sometimes close, sometimes repelling, always aware of where the other was. Their bond was not perfect or sentimental. It was real. It survived slammed doors, eye rolls, and the small betrayals that come with growing up. It also survived loss.

When their mother died, the world tilted. Grief entered the house like an uninvited guest and never really left. Max was too young to fully understand what had been taken from him, but old enough to feel the absence settle into his bones. He learned early that people could disappear without warning, that love could be permanent and fragile at the same time.

That kind of lesson doesn't announce itself. It just sits quietly in a child's chest, waiting.

Adults like to say it after the fact:

*He was a good kid.*

But with Max, it was true in ways that mattered. He said thank you without being prompted. He apologized when he knew he was wrong. He had a softness about him that made people trust him. Teachers described him as respectful. Coaches saw a kid who tried hard even when he wasn't the best player on the field. Friends knew him as loyal; someone who would show up, even when it wasn't convenient.



Max liked ordinary things. Video games that ran too late into the night. Food that left grease on his fingers. He liked sports, but he didn't need to dominate them. He liked jokes that were just dumb enough to make everyone groan.



He also liked being liked. That mattered to him more than most people realized. He was a handsome young man.

At fourteen, identity is still wet cement.

Every comment leaves a mark. Every laugh can feel like approval; or rejection. Max was learning who he was in a world that offered constant feedback and very little mercy. And like most boys his age, he didn't talk much about what hurt.

The first days of high school feel like standing at the edge of something vast. Hallways stretch longer than they should. Upperclassmen move with confidence that seems impossible to imagine. Everything feels like a test.

Max was excited. Nervous. Hopeful. He wanted this year to mean something. He wanted to belong.

The football game that night was supposed to be harmless; a rite of passage. Lights, the band noise, friends, freedom. Parents dropped kids off believing that safety lived in numbers, that supervision was enough, that danger looked obvious when it appeared.

It rarely does.

Somewhere between the stands and the parking lot, vodka entered the picture. It didn't arrive with warning labels or lectures about consequences. It arrived as a dare, a joke, a shortcut to feeling older than fourteen.

Max drank.

That decision would be dissected later, weighed and judged. But in the moment, it wasn't about rebellion. It was about fitting in. About not being the odd one out. About wanting to belong to the night instead of watching it from the sidelines.



Alcohol does not forgive young bodies or young brains. It accelerates emotion and erases perspective. It takes a moment of

embarrassment and convinces a child it is permanent.



Drunk, Max got sick all over a classmate right at the start of the football game. A principal is alerted. There's a big scene. Max is subsequently interrogated and passes inspection after approximately thirty minutes. A police officer is alerted but does nothing. Max texts me to pick him up. He said he got sick. The videos spread faster than concern ever does.

An iPhone lifted. A moment recorded. A moment frozen and shared out. Max's worst night wasn't just his anymore—it belonged to the Internet.

Posts fluttered across screens, and with them, he was immortalized—not for who he was, but for a single, stupid mistake.

I drove for the stadium with Samantha at my side, the night air sharp in my lungs, dread gaining ground with every mile. We reached the stadium just as the assistant principal emerged from the shadows, his expression already rehearsed.

The moment I saw Max, I knew—he was drunk. Every movement, every slurred word, screamed it.

He told me Max had been violently sick—all over another student. He told me he'd sat with him for thirty minutes, asked questions, watched his eyes, listened to his answers. Max, he said, was lucid. Coherent. He didn't believe he'd been drunk.

I apologized, the words automatic, hollow. The assistant principal nodded once and disappeared back into the stadium lights. Samantha slid behind the wheel and pulled away.

We hadn't made it thirty seconds down the road when it happened.

Max erupted.

Vomit poured out of him in a relentless surge, splattering the back seat, the floor, the windows—everywhere. The smell hit like a physical blow. Rage flared, hot and blinding, and I snapped.

“What did you take?” I shouted, twisting around in my seat. “What did you take, Max?”

“Nothing,” he sobbed, his voice cracking, tears streaking his face. “I didn't take anything.”

I'd been to rehab three times before that. I knew the lies. I knew the rhythm of denial,

the way it clung even when the body betrayed it. I yelled the entire drive home, my words sharp, relentless. He cried through all of it, swearing over and over that he hadn't taken a thing.

But Max didn't walk through our front door carrying just shame that night.

He carried something far heavier.

He carried a plan.

Teenagers understand shame differently than adults do. To them, it feels absolute. Endless. Inescapable. There is no "tomorrow" where people forget. There is only the echo of laughter and the certainty that everyone has seen you at your weakest.

Max was humiliated.

He didn't have the words for it. He didn't have the tools. What he had was a phone full of proof and a brain soaked in chemicals telling him this was the end of

who he was allowed to be.

Now at home, Max was sent to his room to clean himself up while I summoned Amy. The house felt brittle, as if it might splinter under the weight of what was coming. Voices were raised. Anger filled the space where fear had been.

After enough pressure—enough shouting—he finally broke. He admitted he'd been drinking.

Then we asked the next question. Who gave it to you?

The answer came quietly.

And it was one we were completely unprepared to hear. This classmate was going to be in big trouble.

About an hour later, I went to check on him.

He looked wrecked—pale, hollowed out by the booze, misery written across his face. I stood there for a moment, taking him in,

trying to read what I'd missed. I told him I loved him. I told him everything was going to be okay—that we would figure it out, together.

I kissed the top of his head. Told him to sleep it off and we'd talk in the morning.

That was the last time I ever saw my son.

Sometime in the early morning hours, Max took my Jeep. In the chaos of the night before—the shouting, the sickness, the unraveling; I had left the keys in the ignition. A small mistake. An ordinary one. He slipped away with almost no effort at all.

And now the question lives with me.

*What if?*

There was no dramatic goodbye. No letter carefully explaining his pain. Only an “I’m sorry” scribbled messily on ruled note paper. There was just motion—fast, irreversible motion—born of a teenage

brain overwhelmed by shame and alcohol and despair.

The road outside Hamilton was sleepy. There was plenty of room to accelerate. The tree did not move.

One hundred and thirty miles per hour is not a mistake. It is a decision made when the future feels unbearable and the present feels like a trap.

The impact was catastrophic. The Jeep disintegrated. Fire erased what force did not. Our son burned up.

Back at home, time stretched thin and brittle as we watched his location blink on the screen. Every second felt louder than the last. Amy paced, phone clutched in her hand, her face pale with a fear she didn't bother trying to hide. She called 911. Officers were already on their way.

I told myself he was just joyriding—that this was teenage recklessness, nothing more. I tried to believe it, whispered it like a prayer.

But beneath the hope, something sour and  
heavy twisted in my gut.

I already knew. I could feel it.



*Maxwell “Max” VerBeek,  
Savannah, Georgia, 2022*