Teenage boys aren't known for sharing their fears and emotions, so if you're the father or sister of one, how do you know how he's coping with his mum's death?

Fifteen year old Hunter isn't entirely sure himself, and even if he could put any of it into words, he no longer knows who to say it to.
for my dad – MP
"Yeah, well maybe we should've just nicked them anyway. She's such a miserable old cow she deserves it."
Kirsty and Pete laughed loudly at Gordon's vehement denouncement of the suspicious corner-shop owner they loved to tease, but Hunter didn't join in. He leaned with one shoulder against the shop window, hands deep in the pockets of his long black leather coat, and stared into space.

"Want one, Hunter?" asked Gordon, proffering an open packet of Minstrels. Hunter looked at the packet, then Gordon's face, gave a barely perceptible headshake and looked away again, watching a cat delicately walk along a wall across the street. Gordon shrugged, ran a hand through his self-consciously messy black hair and put the chocolate in one of his many trouser pockets.

"What now?" asked Kirsty, looking to Gordon for guidance as usual.

Wordlessly, Hunter pushed himself away from the glass and shrugged his coat more comfortably onto his shoulders, preparing to follow the others wherever they decided to go. The other three set off along the street, walking abreast, laughing at a succession of meaningless in-jokes while Hunter trailed a few feet behind as always, head down and unsmiling.

They reached the bottom of Cockburn Street and turned up it, on autopilot. Over time certain places became traditional gathering-places, places where you could usually find someone you knew, someone you could show off to and compete with, however covertly. Gordon turned to check Hunter was still with them; the pavement was wide but he'd chosen to remain behind them as usual, watching where he was putting his heavily-booted feet rather than glancing at the people or shops around him. Gordon shook his head and continued talking to Pete and Kirsty, never thinking to include Hunter deliberately in their conversation.

The others occasionally wondered, when they gave him any thought at all, why Hunter hung around with them. He rarely joined in while they talked and laughed and fooled around together; most of the time it seemed he wasn't even listening, lost somewhere in his own distant world. Perpetually serious, he stood aloof from their childishness and they found that if they didn't simply ignore him, he could make them feel self-conscious and uncomfortable with his silent glances.
Hunter, for his part, often wondered the same thing, but for some reason they interested him, as much as anyone could ever be said to interest Hunter. At first glance, Kirsty and Gordon seemed different from most of his school year, with their dyed black hair and multiply-pierced ears. Somehow Hunter had gravitated towards them and become an accepted part of their crowd. Naturally as he began to observe them from closer at hand, he'd realised they weren't nearly as different as they'd like to think they were, but spending time with them filled up his evenings and Saturdays.

Hunter looked up at the darkening sky above the looming buildings of Cockburn Street. Nothing much was happening, though the usual rituals and power-struggles took place all around him, and he decided to head home.

"Hey, Hunter!" called Gordon, having noticed from the corner of his eye that Hunter was now six feet away, plodding slowly down the street away from them, his hands firmly in his pockets. Slowly, Hunter stopped and half-turned to look at his companions.

"You got a date to keep, Hunter?" called Kirsty, with a sly grin. In response he raised his right hand a few inches in what would have been a farewell salute, but since his hand was clutching the jade horse in his pocket it became a desultory flap of his overcoat. Turning, he continued his trudge away from their company.

"Why does he always have to have his hands in his pockets?" asked Kirsty.

"It's because if his hands were loose, he wouldn't be able to control them, and there's no telling what might happen," replied Pete, pretending to struggle to keep his own hands under wraps, before they burst from his trouser pockets and made for Kirsty's pale neck. She squealed with laughter and flapped at him with her frozen hands in their fingerless black lace gloves, and Hunter passed from their minds for the day.
Gregory, is that you?...

...I'm in the bath. Won't be long.
Catherine called this afternoon.

She might be down next weekend if she can get cheapish train tickets.
She was sorry to miss you but she’s going out tonight, I daren’t ask where.

She said you could try ringing her tomorrow if you like, though.
Is that you in for the day now, Gregory? Only I'm away out this evening. Phil and Carol...

I'd say come along, but I dare say you wouldn't have much fun with Georgie gone.
You shouldn't leave that horse lying around, son, it'll get damaged.
Robert Grant worried about his only son, particularly since the summer, when Robert's wife had died suddenly and left the three of them floundering. Catherine, home for the summer vacation, had seemingly been the first to recover, arranging and organising, taking over the business of running a family while her father was still in a state of immobilising shock. Gregory, on the other hand, could never be said to have recovered since there was no evidence of any change in him at all. It wasn't that he didn't care, no-one thought that he remained completely unaffected, it was just that the news was greeted by Gregory with few words and then apparently assimilated and dealt with. Catherine was of the opinion that he would bottle it up and get on with things, but their father had spent the next few months practically tiptoeing around the boy, waiting for some kind of outburst.

Thinking that the attention might prove too much, Robert had arranged at very short notice to transfer fifteen-year-old Gregory to a new school from the start of the autumn term. He was almost relieved when Gregory had requested that he be officially known as Hunter, his mother's maiden name and Gregory's own middle name, when he went to the new school. His forms were duly filled in using the name G Hunter Grant, but Robert could never bring himself to call his son by his newly-elevated middle name, and Gregory he remained within the walls of their flat.

Hunter, though he knew that his middle name had been his mother's maiden name, had never given that fact any conscious thought; he had simply seen the change of school as a chance to reinvent himself where no-one knew him, to become who he wanted to be. His father had seemed less strict recently, though Hunter never connected that with the death of his mother. Even when Hunter had emerged from the bathroom one evening with freshly-dyed black hair, his father's eyes had widened in horror but he had remained silent, mourning internally the loss of his beautiful golden-haired boy.

Now, watching his son unconcernedly drinking coffee and nodding silently in response to his words, Robert wondered if he should talk to someone about Gregory's reaction, or lack of it. He was as quiet and calm as ever, except for his repetitive stroking of the jade horse that he wouldn't let out of his sight. You couldn't get a babysitter for a fifteen-year-old, Robert knew that well enough, but his nagging doubt about Gregory's mental state meant he was never happy about leaving his son alone. It couldn't be normal for a boy so young, who had loved his mother in his own detached way, to react so calmly to her death.
By the time his father returned, Hunter was sitting cross-legged on his bed, reading a comic.
One afternoon the following week, Hunter, Pete and Kirsty were waiting for Gordon to emerge from the school gates at the end of the day. Hunter sat on the low wall while Pete and Kirsty stood and talked.

"Aw, go on Kirsty, go to the pictures with me tonight. Or are you still saving yourself for Hunter?" began Pete. Kirsty dabbed at her eyes, theatrically.

"Someday, my constant devotion will be rewarded," she replied, giving a sideways look at Hunter. Hunter gazed into the middle-distance, apparently oblivious of the conversation taking place three feet away. In fact he was taking note of every word, analysing every sentence. He knew, of course, that Kirsty was so uninterested in him as to be unlikely to bat a heavily made-up eyelid if he dropped dead in front of her, but it was a long-running joke that she bore the suffering of a deep unrequited love for him. She took every opportunity to flirt with or tease him, desperate to elicit a response. Most of the time, so she thought, he just wasn't listening, and when he was he would only stare coolly into her eyes until she had to look away.

"Oh honestly! He's off in his own little world... No, anyway, I have to go straight home actually, my gran's coming for tea." Kirsty fiddled with the hairslides placed at random in her short red and black hair, snapping one of them open and shut again until she accidentally thwacked the side of her head with it and stopped, joining in as Pete laughed at her. Hunter glanced across at them, though neither of them noticed, then returned to his contemplation of the opposite pavement.

"What are you sad bastards doing?" asked Gordon as he joined them.

"Waiting for the final sad bastard to complete our merry band," replied Pete. Gordon placed his hand on his chest and inclined his head in acknowledgement.

"And what are you doing then?" he asked.

"I'm going home," said Kirsty, looking at her watch and shouldering her schoolbag. "I'll see you all tomorrow. Bye Hunter." She singled him out as ever, and was rewarded with a quick glance in her direction. Grinning, she headed off homewards.

"And you?" Gordon asked Pete. Pete shrugged, at a loss without Kirsty; he needed someone to suggest a plan for him to agree with, rather than having to come up with one of his own. Ignoring Hunter, Gordon thought for a few moments: "I'm hungry; let's get some chips." He set off in the direction of the nearest chip-shop; Pete dutifully ambled at his side, Hunter trailing behind them, lost in thought.
"Sure you don't want any?" asked Gordon as they stepped outside to the pavement, holding the tray of chips out to Hunter. Hunter shook his head, trying to ignore the tantalizing smell of vinegar-soaked potato that was making his mouth water.

"More for us," said Pete, sounding satisfied. The pair tucked into their chips as though they hadn't eaten all day, despite it being only a few hours since their substantial lunch. Hunter hadn't eaten all day, but he was saving himself for the evening meal his dad would prepare later.

"I should go home soon," announced Gordon as he stuffed the final chip into his mouth, licking his greasy fingers and tossing the empty container to the ground, despite being mere feet away from a bin. Hunter looked down at the tray, then at Gordon and Pete beginning to walk down the street. He picked up their discarded litter and threw it into the nearby bin as he set off in the opposite direction. Gordon turned round to check Hunter was following, and saw his tall dark figure receding into the distance.

"What is his problem?" he asked Pete, who shrugged and shook his head in reply. Dismissing Hunter, they continued along the street discussing their day at school, reliving the innocent mistake of one boy in a geography lesson, which had caused the entire class to howl with laughter.
On the Friday, Hunter left school alone. The others barely noticed that he wasn't with them and didn't question his absence.

He was meeting Catherine off the train from Aberdeen, and didn't want to do so wearing his school uniform.

He rushed home to change, planning and revising his outfit at every step, thinking of it as a special occasion, beginning to feel excitement swirl in the pit of his stomach.
Where's Dad?

He wasn't sure he'd get here in time, he's going straight home.

That night as Hunter lay in bed, staring at the darkened ceiling, he smiled to himself, thinking about how easily he and Catherine had slipped into their old teasing ways.

It was nice to have her around, it made him feel lighter inside, and he wondered as he clutched the jade horse under his pillow, if it might even be safe to sleep.
What's the matter?

I wanted to talk to you.

Gregory Grant,

it is four in the morning!
The cold night air of the New Town hit Hunter like a handful of invisible daggers as he stepped out onto the front steps and pulled his coat tightly around him. A lone taxi sped across the junction further up the street as Hunter stood on the pavement wondering where to walk to, his black-gloved hands deep in his coat pockets. After a few freezing moments of hesitation, he crossed the street and turned right, intending on a long and convoluted circuit of the neatly gridded streets surrounding his home.

Hunter looked at his watch as he approached the final turning that would take him back to his front door. He'd been out less than an hour, continually speeding up due to the cold, then slowing down again so as not to return too soon. It was still too early to go home; Catherine and their father would still be asleep, there would be no company or activity to help keep him awake. He pressed on at the junction, ignoring his own street, marching forwards into untramped territory.
Thinking of nothing but the coldness of his ears and nose, Hunter found that his feet had taken him down a familiar street and he had slowed to a standstill outside Phil and Carol's ground floor windows. Their daughter Georgina was intermediate in age between Hunter and Catherine, and the three had grown up together. Georgie had quickly learned that trying to exclude the young Gregory and keep Catherine to herself only made Gregory upset and meant Catherine spent time cheering him up, so he was allowed to join in their games as a child. More recently, Hunter had found the company of shy, quiet Georgie soothing and pleasant, second only to his sister, and he was sad that she had gone away to university this year when a friendly face would have been most welcome.

He had thought that Catherine's return would help, at the very least he should have been able to talk to her, but despite appearances something about Catherine, or about their close relationship, had changed. If Georgie hadn't been in St Andrew's he could have tried talking to her; she would comfort him, he knew, even if she couldn't help. Perhaps he should have written to her, but speaking in person was often so much easier. Scuffing the toe of his boot along the low wall in front of Georgie's home in muted frustration, Hunter set off once more on his nocturnal perambulation of his hometown.

Further traipsing brought Hunter, cold and tired in the first struggling light of the November morning, within sight of the shopping centre adjoining Waverley station. If he had been fully rested and thinking more rationally, Hunter would probably have turned around and walked home by the most direct route. Instead, Georgie's potential sympathy, and Catherine's lack of it, being uppermost in his mind, he crossed Princes Street and bounded down the long flight of steps into the station, pleased with his decisiveness.
KNOCK, KNOCK
You're up bright and early.

So's the pony, by the looks of it. Most unlike him.

Anyone'd think he didn't want to see me.
What do you mean?

Where is he?

Where do teenage goths disappear to early in the morning?

He's probably sitting in a graveyard somewhere, drinking absinthe.

What if he's been out all night, Catherine? Anything might have happened to him.
Oh he hasn't been out all night, he can't have been gone that long.

Oh? Why's that?

Because he woke me up at four o'clock to talk to me, so he was still in then.
What was so urgent that he needed to wake you up at four in the morning?

I don't know, I told him to get lost. Who wakes their sister up in the middle of the night for a chat?

That's it, I'm calling the police.
And get done for wasting police time? Hello officer, my boy’s up a wee bit early this morning, I’m worried about him.

Catherine, he’s only fifteen.

No dad, he’s already fifteen: if he was five they might help you, but a teenager?
Robert thought about how like his mother Gregory was: they were both slim and delicate, with long blonde hair, long eyelashes, a quiet and reserved temperament, and breathtaking artistic talent. Robert thought it a great shame that Gregory had given up drawing when his mother died, as though the world had suffered a double loss of beauty. The golden hair had also been hidden, but Robert hoped that was just a phase his son was going through. He also hoped that there were no further similarities between his son and his wife Marie.

He wasn't sure how much the children knew of their mother's long struggle with depression; Catherine, being older, had probably guessed more than her brother. Robert had always tried so hard to help Marie, and there were times when she had managed to face the world with a smile, travelling the world and exhibiting her paintings. She had brought back the jade horse from one of her trips. Robert smiled as he remembered how delighted Gregory had been, how he had driven them all mad with his clip-clop noises as he danced the horse across tables and bookshelves for days, then finally let himself be persuaded to leave it in place on his bedside table.

Eventually, the times when he saw Marie smile became fewer, and though she still painted, she wouldn't travel, would barely leave the house. Except that one day, she did leave the house, and caught a train across to Fife to go for a walk along the cliffs. They said it was an accident, she'd lost her footing on the path, but Robert had never known whether to believe them or not; he woke up every morning berating himself for not being more vigilant.

Robert sat up straighter, wiped his eyes and declared that he was going to look in Gregory's room.
I don’t usually come in here. I tried to make sure he had his own space... I’ve tried so hard, Catherine; I thought I was doing the right thing.

It’s not your fault, dad. If anything, it’s mine, I should have listened.

Don’t think that, Catherine.

There’s not much in here, is there.

Has he swept it all under the bed?
I thought he’d given up drawing.

Why’s it all hidden away like this?
They’re beautiful.
The biting wind was gnawing away at Hunter's powers of reasoning; he couldn't stay perched on the wall by the ruined cathedral any longer, and he forced himself upright, fighting the feeling of exhaustion that was threatening to overwhelm him. He had remembered the name of the hall Georgie was staying in, but had no idea where to find it or what to do once he arrived; he wasn't sure if the doors might be locked, or if he would have to persuade someone to let him in to find her.

Heading back up the quiet main street, Hunter looked around for someone to ask directions of. He tried to ask an elderly lady carrying a shopping basket, but she hurried past him and pretended not to hear. He contemplated going into one of the small shops and asking whoever was behind the counter, but since he had no money to buy anything he thought that might be awkward. Finally as he was reaching the far end of the street, a couple of girls of about Catherine's age were heading towards him, and he asked them how to get to Georgie's hall.

"Oh, right, well there's a bus-stop just across there," began one of the girls, pointing. Hunter stopped her, and asked how to get there on foot, having neither the cash nor the inclination for another bus-ride. The girl frowned slightly, and shrugged.

"It's quite a walk, but if that's what you want..." Hunter thanked her for the directions and set off in the way she had indicated.

It was indeed a long way, but the brisk walk in the fresh coastal air helped Hunter's fractured mental faculties to regroup somewhat before he arrived. The building was large and imposing, designed to look like a ship, complete with portholes. Hunter barely noticed the architecture, however, being too preoccupied with what was to come. With some trepidation he entered through the main door.
Hunter's long contemplation by the cathedral followed by the walk out to the hall where Georgie lived had served to kill some time at least, and by the time he arrived in the lobby a handful of students were wandering through the corridors. He wondered whether he should ask one of them where Georgie's room was, but in a building this size the chances of a random passer-by knowing Georgie were quite slim. Hunter hesitated in the doorway for a few moments, and a porter approached him with an air of authority.

"Can I help you, son?"

"I need to find my sister," said Hunter, without thinking, "I don't know her room number." The porter looked Hunter over, naturally suspicious but also the father of an adolescent boy and thus prepared to overlook outward appearance in a lad of that age. He strode across to the reception and beckoned Hunter after him.

Georgie's room number having been discovered, the porter offered to take Hunter there personally, ostensibly to avoid Hunter becoming lost in the building, but Hunter knew very well that the man was simply keeping an eye on this early-morning visitor. It occurred to Hunter that if he usually looked haggard, this morning he must look more like he'd crawled from a grave, and he also realised that younger brothers did not turn up unexpectedly at such an early hour on a Saturday just for a casual visit. Hunter's guide attempted some small-talk as they paced along corridors and up stairs, but Hunter was never in the mood for such trivialities, and the older man eventually gave up. As they reached Georgie's door, fear gripped Hunter and he wanted to turn and run all the way back to Edinburgh, not wanting to find that Georgie was away, or irritated to have him turn up unannounced like this. Instead he swallowed, thanked the porter, and knocked.

Hunter could feel the porter's eyes on his back from further down the corridor, and he felt like his knees would give way at any second. Why was Georgie not opening her door? He could see a glint of light between the door and its frame; what if she wasn't alone? The door opened suddenly and Hunter held his breath, bracing himself for her reaction.
KNOCK

Hunter!
Whatever's happened?

Is everyone OK at home?
I should go, I shouldn't have come, I don't know why I...

Sorry to disturb you.

No you don’t.

Shut the door and sit down.
God knows what time you
must’ve got the train.
Does your dad know
where you are?

You look like
death warmed
up.

When did
you last
get some
sleep?

August.
"You could've phoned," she said, quietly. "If you needed someone to talk to once you started school."

Hunter continued to look into Georgie's peaceful face, noting the hurt look that it wore now, and the glistening precursors to tears that hovered around her lower lids. He opened his mouth to tell her that he hadn't known what to say, and that he couldn't have said it over the phone anyway, and that until a few hours ago he hadn't realised it was Georgie that he needed to say it to, but none of it came out because his face crumpled and his tired body sagged, and Georgie held his heavy head in her lap and cried with him and over him until at last, exhausted, Hunter drifted into a dreamless sleep.
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