

Piggyback

Vincent Gallagher



Between routines, silence, and a body
that feels trully heavy, Sally learns that
grief is not overcome – it transforms.

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March, 2026

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PRODUCTION



SUPPORT



FUNDING



1 INT. APARTMENT. DAY.

1

Close on a doorknob. A hand lingers.

SALLY (V.O.)

At first... it's like you're
underwater. You move through the
days, but nothing really touches
you.

The hand hesitates, reaches for the doorknob.

CUT TO:

TITLE: PIGGYBACK

2 INT. GRIEF COUNSELLING ROOM - EVENING

2

A circle of chairs. Fluorescent lights buzz above a modest
community centre room. A small table of untouched tea and
biscuits sits in the corner.

A middle-aged WOMAN (50s) speaks softly to the group, her
voice tinged with pain.

WOMAN

I still feel like she's just
going to walk through the door.
Like any second now, she'll be
here and I'll laugh for ever
doubting it.

Muted nods from the group. A quiet, respectful silence.

CAMERA MOVES to SALLY (30s), pale, withdrawn. She stares at
the carpet, her mouth slightly open, like words once lived
there.

Then: WIDER SHOT.

We now see MARCUS (30s), her late fiancé, clinging to her
back. Legs wrapped around her waist, arms around her
shoulders. Expression blank. Not ghostly. Not ethereal. Just
there.

No one else notices. No one reacts.

Sally shifts slightly under the weight. She exhales, barely
audible, like it's the only breath she can afford.

GROUP LEADER(O.S.)

Sally, would you like to share
tonight?

SALLY

(after a beat, softly)
No. Not tonight.

Marcus doesn't move. Doesn't speak. But his weight is
unmistakable.

MATCH CUT TO:

3 INT. SALLY'S APARTMENT - NIGHT**3**

The front door creaks open.

Sally enters, a tote bag full of groceries in her arms, Marcus still wrapped around her back like an old coat she can't take off. She moves with practiced effort, not quite graceful, but accustomed.

She kicks the door shut with her foot. The bag shifts awkwardly in her arms. A few apples tumble out and roll across the floor. She doesn't chase them.

The apartment is cluttered: boxes half-packed, a dusty bicycle leaning against the wall. Photos of Sally and Marcus hiking hang on the walls. One frame is turned face down.

Sally spills her groceries, keys, phone down on the counter. Marcus remains.

She plays a voice note on speaker. The fuzzy voicemail fills the room as she unpacks.

DONNA(V.O.)

Hey, it's me. The anniversary's next week... I know it's hard, but it's what he wanted. We'll be there. I hope you will too.

Sally doesn't respond. She moves to a terrarium in the corner and plucks a leaf of lettuce from the bag.

She crouches and drops the lettuce into the tank. Inside, LEO, a small turtle, inches toward it lazily.

SALLY

Everyone's moving on, huh?

She watches Leo chew.

Behind her, Marcus still clings. His chin rests gently on her shoulder. Her eyes flick toward his, but he doesn't meet her gaze.

She switches off the light.

CUT TO:

4 INT. SALLY'S BEDROOM - EARLY MORNING**4**

Dim blue light filters through the curtains. The room is still.

SALLY lies on her side, eyes open. Awake, but unmoving.

The camera pulls back.

We see Marcus, wrapped around her from behind, his body pressed against hers like a lover's embrace, but his eyes are open, blank, distant.

She lies there in silence for several moments, trapped between memory and mourning.

5 INT. SALLY'S APARTMENT - BATHROOM - MORNING**5**

Sally brushes her teeth. Marcus is still on her back, head slumped over her shoulder like a sleeping child.

She tries to rinse her mouth, awkwardly bending sideways with his weight. Water splashes onto her shirt. She doesn't react.

6 INT. KITCHEN - MOMENTS LATER**6**

Sally eats cereal at the counter. Marcus leans forward, arms wrapped lazily around her shoulders. Her spoon hand trembles slightly from the strain, but she keeps eating.

7 INT. ELEVATOR - LATER**7**

The elevator rumbles. Sally stands rigid, eyes forward. Two NEIGHBORS (40s, earbuds in) stand beside her, completely unaware of Marcus draped over her like a human backpack.

NEIGHBOR #1

You going to the building BBQ this weekend?

NEIGHBOR #2

Nah. Too many dads with ukuleles.

Sally says nothing. The elevator dings.

8 EXT. CITY STREET - MORNING**8**

Sally walks to the bus stop, Marcus still holding her. The weight causes her to limp slightly, but she presses on. People pass by, she doesn't pay them any attention. Her shadow stretches long and narrow, Marcus's shape merged with hers.

9 INT. CITY BUS - MINUTES LATER**9**

Sally sits near the back. A MOTHER boards, struggling with a BABY strapped to her chest. The child gurgles.

Sally watches the baby, her expression softens.

She adjusts Marcus on her back, gently repositioning his arms. The movement is so instinctual, so practiced, it's like she doesn't even know she's doing it.

10 INT. COFFEE SHOP - DAY 10

Sally behind the counter, apron on. Marcus still on her back.
She prepares drinks mechanically. A CUSTOMER chats brightly.

CUSTOMER
And then she said, "That's not
oat milk!" I nearly died.

SALLY
(flatly)
Medium latte, extra hot?

The customer grabs the drink and walks off.

Sally turns to the espresso machine. Her back arches
slightly. The weight is starting to show.

She exhales. Long and quiet. And keeps working.

CUT TO:

11 INT. SALLY'S APARTMENT - EVENING 11

The door clicks open.

Sally enters, weary. Marcus is still there, arms draped
around her shoulders. She drops her bag, steps out of her
shoes without untying them.

She moves to the terrarium, instinctively tears a piece of
lettuce from a bag.

SALLY
Alright Leo, dinner ti-

She stops. Stares.

The tank is empty. No turtle.

SALLY (CONT'D)
...Leo?

Her body stiffens. She checks behind the terrarium. Nothing.

12 INT. APARTMENT - MINUTES LATER 12

A whirlwind.

Sally is tearing through the apartment, looking under the
couch, behind the radiator, inside shoes.

SALLY
Leo? Come on, buddy. Seriously?

She drops to her knees and forces herself to look under the
sofa. Clearly a painful task with Marcus still clinging to
her.

She groans under the strain but does it anyway.

Nothing.

A KNOCK at the door. She freezes.

DONNA (O.S.)
Sally? It's me.

The door opens to reveal DONNA (30s), warm but guarded. She
holds a cardboard box and a set of keys.

DONNA
Hey.

SALLY
He's gone.

DONNA
What?

SALLY
Leo. He's not in his tank.

Donna sets the box down, looks around.

DONNA
He escapes all the time. It's
what he does.

SALLY
Yeah, well, I looked everywhere.

DONNA
You were supposed to be packing.

SALLY
I can't leave until I find him.

DONNA
Sally...

She sighs. Her tone softens, but there's an edge.

DONNA (CONT'D)
He was a dumb joke my brother
brought home because he thought
it was funny.

SALLY
(flat)
Because I take too long to get
ready?

DONNA
 "At least a turtle moves eventually," he said. Thought he was hilarious.

SALLY
 He wasn't.

DONNA
 (smirking)
 He was such an eejit.

They share a fragile smile. A beat.

DONNA (CONT'D)
 I brought more boxes. If you want.

SALLY
 I can't pack until I find him.

DONNA
 (gently)
 You know he doesn't mean anything, right?

Sally doesn't answer. She sits down slowly, Marcus dragging heavier with her, arms cinched tight.

DONNA (CONT'D)
 You don't have to do this alone, Sal.

Silence. Donna watches her a moment, then quietly lets herself out.

Sally sits alone. She glances toward the empty terrarium.

Marcus shifts slightly on her back: a reminder.

CUT TO:

13 INT. COFFEE SHOP - DAY 13

Sally tapes a crude flyer to the front window: MISSING TURTLE : a blurry photo of Leo mid-escape.

She stares at it for a second, then smooths the edges. Her hands linger there, unsure, reluctant to let go.

14 EXT. CITY STREET - LATER 14

Sally moves along a row of lampposts and fences, taping up flyers.

Marcus clings to her back. The strain is more visible now, her shoulders sag, her steps slower.

She leans against a post, breath catching.

15 EXT. PARK BENCH - MINUTES LATER 15

Sally sits, drained. She shifts her body forward to relieve the pressure of Marcus, but his arms only cinch tighter.

A few feet away, a MAN in his 40s collapses a camping tent. He packs it methodically, then hoists an enormous backpack onto his shoulders.

He pauses, meets Sally's gaze.

Just a beat, an understanding.

He nods, just slightly, and walks off.

Sally watches him go, something in her softening.

Her phone BUZZES.

INSERT - TEXT FROM DONNA:
 "Weather looks good. We'll all be there. Hopefully you too."

She stares at it. Doesn't respond.

Marcus leans heavier on her back.

SALLY
 (quietly)
 I'm trying.

She puts the phone away and watches a flock of birds scatter into the sky.

CUT TO:

16 INT. GRIEF COUNSELLING ROOM - NIGHT 16

The circle again. Same chairs. Same buzzing lights.

Sally sits in the same spot. Still. Marcus draped over her like a soaked coat. His arms more rigid now, his fingers clutched tight over her shoulders.

A different WOMAN (40s, sharp, brittle) is speaking. Her tone is raw, spitting.

WOMAN
 You know what makes me furious?
 He shut me out. Even at the end.
 Like I wasn't strong enough to handle it.

Silence. Everyone listens. Some nod. Some don't.

WOMAN (CONT'D)
 And I keep asking myself...
 What's the point of loving
 someone that much, if all they do
 is leave you behind with all of
 it?

Marcus' grip on Sally tightens. Her breath hitches, subtle
 but visible.

GROUP LEADER
 That sounds incredibly painful.
 Thank you for sharing that.

The leader glances to Sally.

GROUP LEADER (CONT'D)
 Sally?

A long beat. Sally opens her mouth.

SALLY
 (barely audible)
 I don't think I'm angry.

She looks down at her hands, then to Marcus's fingers locked
 around her shoulders.

SALLY (CONT'D)
 (quietly)
 But maybe I am.

No one responds. But it lands.

Marcus shifts, slightly, the grip stays, but his posture
 becomes more desperate, almost clinging.

Sally closes her eyes.

CUT TO:

17 INT. APARTMENT LOBBY - NIGHT

17

Sally enters the building, exhausted. Marcus clings to her
 tightly. Her steps are slow, heavy.

She presses the elevator button.

The light flickers. Nothing. A hand-written sign taped over
 the panel reads:
 "OUT OF ORDER - SORRY!"

She just stares at it.

SALLY
 (to herself)
 Of course.

18 INT. STAIRWELL - MOMENTS LATER

18

Sally begins the climb.

Her breath quickens with each step. Her feet drag. Marcus's
 limbs sway slightly with every movement, like dead weight.

FLOOR 3.

She pauses, leans on the railing.

FLOOR 5.

She stumbles. Catches herself.

Her phone BUZZES. She ignores it.

FLOOR 7.

Her breathing is shallow now. Marcus seems to press harder
 with every stair.

FLOOR 9.

Sally stops. A long beat. She looks up, just one more flight.
 Then...

She collapses, knees hitting the floor. Her palms slap the
 concrete. She gasps for air.

SALLY (CONT'D)
 (choked)
 I can't do this anymore.

She sobs, full-bodied. The first real crack. Marcus clings to
 her like he's afraid of being let go.

Her phone buzzes again. She slowly pulls it out.

INSERT - TEXT MESSAGE:
 "Hi! I think we found your turtle. Sending photo now!"

A moment later, another buzz.

INSERT - IMAGE: A LITTLE GIRL grinning, holding Leo gently in
 her hands.

Sally stares at it. Her sobbing slows.

She reaches up, touches Marcus's hand gently, not to push him
 away, but to acknowledge him.

SALLY (CONT'D)
 (whispers)
 Okay.

She closes her eyes. Breathes. Just for a moment.

FADE TO:

19 EXT. SUBURBAN STREET - DAY 19

Sally walks slowly up a quiet footpath. The homes are simple, well-kept. She approaches a house with a little black gate. A MAN (40s, tired eyes, kind) opens the door before she knocks.

MAN
You're Sally?

SALLY
Yeah. You have... Leo?

MAN
Come on in.

20 INT. FRONT GARDEN - CONTINUOUS 20

The Man leads her around the side of the house. A LITTLE GIRL (7) sits on the grass beside a plastic paddling pool, gently letting Leo the turtle crawl across her lap.

GIRL
He's not that fast, but he's tricky.

Sally crouches down. The weight of Marcus makes it awkward, but she manages.

SALLY
Yeah. He's good at getting out of things.

GIRL
(matter-of-fact)
He likes it here. I think he thought I needed him more.

Sally looks at her, surprised by the clarity.

GIRL (CONT'D)
You can have him back... if you really want.

A long pause. Sally watches Leo crawl over the girl's hand.

SALLY
(softly)
No... I think he's right.

The girl beams.

GIRL
I gave him broccoli yesterday. He didn't like it.

SALLY
Yeah, he's picky.

Sally stands, wincing slightly under Marcus's weight.

SALLY (CONT'D)
Just be careful. He escapes when you're not looking.

GIRL
I'll watch him.

Sally smiles. It's small, but real.

21 EXT. SUBURBAN STREET - MOMENTS LATER 21

She texts Donna.

INSERT - TEXT: "I'll be there."

Marcus shifts on her back. For the first time, his arms loosen just slightly.

She keeps walking.

CUT TO:

22 EXT. MOUNTAIN TRAILHEAD - DAY 22

Sally stands at the base of a dirt trail winding up a steep hill, Marcus still clinging to her back. The trail sign reads:
"Overlook Pass - 2.37 km - Strenuous Climb."

She looks up. The peak seems impossibly far.

She shifts under Marcus. His arms are clenched tight. The sky is clear. Wind rustles the trees.

She takes her first step.

23 EXT. TRAIL - CONTINUOUS 23

The incline begins immediately.

With every step, Sally grunts under Marcus' weight. Her breathing grows louder. She slips on loose dirt. Catches herself. Keeps going.

Sweat drips down her face.

MONTAGE - SALLY ASCENDING:

- Her boots dragging through gravel.
- Marcus' head resting limply on her shoulder, like he's unconscious.
- Her fingers digging into tree trunks to pull herself upward.
- She stops to vomit quietly behind a bush.
- She presses on.

FLASH CUTS - MEMORY GLIMPSES BETWEEN STEPS:

- Marcus carrying Sally piggyback, both laughing, in their old apartment.
- The two of them hiking this same trail - younger, brighter, alive.
- The two of them on hands and knees looking for Leo under a couch, giggling.
- Marcus filming her as she huffs up a hill.

BACK TO:

24 EXT. TRAIL - NEAR SUMMIT - LATE DAY 24

Sally stumbles to her knees. She's shaking. Tears and sweat mix on her face.

SALLY
(barely a whisper)
I can't...

Marcus doesn't answer. Just holds tighter. She breathes in. Breathes out. Then, with every last ounce of strength - she gets up.

25 EXT. MOUNTAINTOP - SUNSET 25

Sally crests the hill.

She sees them: Donna, and MARCUS'S FAMILY, standing around a small memorial, a cairn of stacked stones, a framed photo of Marcus at the summit.

They see her. Donna steps forward, tears already in her eyes.

DONNA
(softly)
We're glad you're here.

DONNA'S FATHER steps forward and places a small wooden box into Sally's hands.

She holds it. Catches her breath.

MARCUS
(gently)
You can let go now, Sal.

For the first time - Sally really looks at him. Marcus lifts his head. Eyes meet hers. He's not smiling. Just present. Loving. Real.

She unclasps the box, hands trembling, and opens it.

Ashes inside.

Sally steps forward to the edge of the cliff. The wind picks up. She lifts the box and slowly shakes the ashes into the breeze.

As they scatter:

Maarcus' grip loosens.
His hands slide from her shoulders.
His weight fades.
She exhales, but it's not relief. It's everything.
A storm of emotion crosses her face: grief, love, devastation, peace.

She watches the wind take him.

CLOSE ON HER FACE: raw, stripped, whole.

FADE TO:

26 INT. SALLY'S APARTMENT - MORNING 26

The space is now empty. Still. Sally stands at the threshold. Her hand lingers on the doorknob. A breath.

SALLY (V.O.)
At first... it's like you're underwater. You move through the days, but nothing really touches you.

She steps out, closing the door behind her.

SALLY (V.O., CONT'D)
Everyone talks about time. About healing. But no one tells you how much of grief is just... silence.

27 EXT. CITY STREET - MOMENTS LATER 27

Sally walks, a small duffel over her shoulder. The sun is low. People pass. She notices them now.

SALLY
(V.O., CONT'D)
You find ways to carry it.
You adjust your posture.
You stop noticing the weight.

28 EXT. PARK BENCH - LATER 28

Sally sits on the bench, the same one from earlier. The park still as vibrant, but now, her back is straight, her expression is open, calm.

A pause. She glances down.

Leo inches toward her from beneath the bench, cautious, deliberate.

SALLY
 (V.O., CONT'D)
 And just when you think it's
 gone... something comes back to
 remind you.

She smiles - small, amused, bittersweet.

She picks up Leo gently and sets him in her lap.

SALLY
 (V.O., CONT'D)
 But that doesn't mean you're
 starting over.

The breeze shifts.

Her fingers rest lightly on Leo's shell.

SALLY
 (V.O., CONT'D)
 I used to think grief was
 something you had to carry...

29 INT. GRIEF COUNSELLING ROOM - NIGHT 29

SAME WORDS, but now spoken aloud.

SALLY
 Now... I let it walk beside me.

Silence. The group listens.

Sally looks up. Her voice is steady.

SALLY (CONT'D)
 It's still with me. He's still
 with me. But I can move now. I
 can breathe.

CLOSE ON SALLY - not transformed, but real. Present. No one
 on her back.

30 EXT. PARK - SUNSET 30

Sally stands up, gathering her things, she places Leo on the
 ground. Trees rustle. Sally pauses, looks again to the other
 people in the park. This time she sees it.

Each one of them carrying their own weight, a person on each
 of their backs.

Sally breathes in.

FADE TO BLACK.

Shorts

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