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### Learning From Death

A phone rings, but there's just silence on the other end. Was hanging up the right option? My mother asks herself that question a lot. It was the evening of November 5th, 2015. Her phone rang. It was my brother, so she picked up. There was just silence. My mom figured it was a butt dial and hung up. Later on that day, we would get another phone call. It would change our lives. This was the day my brother was killed. This is a memory I remember clearly because it changed my life. It helped me become who I am today. It made me realize that life is short, nothing is permanent, and that life goes on.

It was a cloudy night, and I was sitting in my room. I had school in the morning, yet I was staying up late watching YouTube videos. I heard my mom's phone ring. It was followed by loud arguing and then another phone call. I didn't think it was anything serious, but then I heard someone knocking on my door and calling my name. It was my sister. She was upset. I followed her into my mom's room. I'll never forget the look on my mother's face. Her eyes were blank and filled with sadness. Gripping her cell phone tightly, she listened to someone on the other end. She was mortified and then she hung up. "It's your brother," she said. At first, she thought

that he could possibly be in jail, but then she said they asked about one of his tattoos. The woman on the phone was a detective. My brother was shot and killed. My brother and I had a very large age gap. He was 30 when I was 15, but we were still very close. He was an amazing big brother. He was a gentle giant. Justin was 6'4", and he would occasionally struggle to fit through doorways in my mother's apartment. He had shoulder length braids, and watching him get his hair done was always so funny. He's extremely tender-headed. My brother had a lot of money from his dad's side, so he was always dressed very well. His smile was so nice and warm. He was an incredible person. So when I heard about the way he was killed, it hurt. He didn't deserve that. All the memories I had of him filled my mind.

I can not remember much of the night after that. I know we went to my dad's house and told him. That was the first time I had ever seen my dad so upset. It was a very rough and quiet night. I remember going to my brother's grandparent's house. I sat in silence. The living room was bright, and it smelled like mothballs. I can still hear everyone crying and arguing.

I didn't know how to feel. It didn't feel real. I missed a whole week of school after that, and it was hard coming back. People asked a lot of questions, and some people were just obnoxiously curious. A piece of my heart was missing, and there was nothing that would help me feel better. I tried therapy, and my friends were nice, but it just wasn't enough. I began taking online classes and isolated myself. I barely passed my sophomore year. I passed english and math, but that was it. All my other classes were incomplete. I became a shell of myself. I felt very empty and hollowed out like someone had taken all feeling out of me.

The whole summer was filled with me traveling traveling with my family to talk to

detectives. Along with speaking to the detectives, we also had to pick up my brother's belongings. We had to travel to Atlanta, GA, which was his death place. The drive was aggravatingly long, and I sat in the backseat of our rusty 2003 Subaru and slept the whole time. Then we arrived at a very boring, brick building. The inside was the worst. The walls, tile, and even the desks were all painted in a boring gray color. Everyone in the building looked so unhappy, especially the workers. My sister and mother waited in a long line, while I sat in one of the many chairs. The room and chairs were so cold. Everything was so melancholy. I sat on my phone, trying to cheer myself up. Nothing was helping, and then my mom walked up to me with my brother's suitcase. The wait was over. We packed it into the car and headed back towards home.

After that day, all the legal stuff was over. The following week was his funeral. It was like most funerals. A lot of crying and sadness. The number of people that came was astounding. It filled the whole building. People whom I had never met told me about their experiences. It made me happy to know that my kind-hearted brother had touched so many people. The room felt very tense and so many people were dressed in black, but after hearing all the stories, I felt a little better. Not too long after the funeral, we moved into this small house with a giant yard, and I transferred schools. The house was in a neighborhood filled with quiet people and it wasn't in the best area, but we were starting over. We were trying again. There were still a lot of times where it felt empty without him, but we would talk it out. I was making friends again and getting good grades. Things were getting better.

Today, I still think of my brother all the time. Every time I smell a Black & Mild cigar. Every time I see a person with braids. Every time I hear someone say his name. Losing someone close to you is something I would never wish upon anyone. However, his death has taught me so much. Life is short. I spent my whole life staying inside when he was alive. I was so shy, and I stayed inside my shell. After he passed, I've become more outgoing and lively. I go to parties, try new things, and meet new people! I've learned that holding grudges and staying sad isn't worth it. Sadly, the death of someone I love taught me how to live.