

A little over eighty hours ago my big brother died.

He was twenty years old.

Humans have a habit of dousing coffins in superlatives. *He was the greatest guy I ever met. He was the best friend I've ever had. He always had the biggest smile on his face.*

Personally I find this a bit impersonal and frankly, a bit lazy. However, superlatives were the only way I knew how to describe my brother in life and I am still formulating a language to describe him post mortem, so for now I'll rely on what I know.

My brother was the most important person in my life. He was the person I have always been closest to and who knows me better than anyone else ever has or ever could. His friends described our relationship as telepathic. We would all be sitting in a room and no one would say or do anything but we would both simultaneously burst out laughing. We joked that we were the same person right down to the star shaped scars on our knuckles. We planned on making sure that we lived in the same area code when we grew up. There was nothing I kept from him. No secrets. We shared everything. Party stories and awkward silences at family dinners and inside jokes and fifty percent of our DNA and our favorite songs and our deepest fears and screenshots of Chief Keef's best Instagrams. We shared growing up. He was my best friend for seventeen years. He's gone.

I woke up on Saturday morning. He did not. I rolled over and began scrolling through my Facebook feed. A little chat bubble popped up with a stranger's face floating in it I instinctually hovered over it so I wouldn't show a read receipt if I didn't feel like responding. *Hey this is Ben's friend...* I clicked on the bubble immediately. I wasn't worried. I expected another crazy story like the one involving baby pigs and broken glass. Worst-case scenario: he had been picked up by campus police for doing something equally stupid and brilliant. Something that he and I would be laughing at within the hour. Ben could get out of anything. I had seen it with my own eyes. No matter how deep he had dug himself he could always pop right through the soil with one of his big-lipped smiles and a few candidly eloquent words. My brother was invincible. *Hey this is Ben's friend. I'm in the hospital with him right now. He hurt his head pretty badly. Could you give me a call as soon as possible?* I typed in the digits. I noticed my fingers were shaking. What if he got a concussion? What if he needed staples in his head again like that time when his swing hit the pillar of our grandparents' back porch?

This was me preparing for the worst.

"Hello?" Ben's voice crackled through the static of my cell phone and I felt air rush to my lungs for the first time that morning.

"Hello?" He repeated. His voice sounded different... higher?

"Hey." I whispered. There was a silence. I waited for him to recognize my voice. To shout out "Chuck! What's Gucci?" and explain the whole thing. To apologize for scaring me. I waited for him to tell me that everything was okay. That he was okay.

"I'm sorry who is this?"

My mouth filled with the taste of pennies and rust as realization lodged itself somewhere deep in my gut. I felt tears prick at the corners of my eyes. I brushed them away quickly. Angry at my childish optimism. Angry at my tears.

"It's Charley."

Silence.

"Ben's sister." I could hear the metallic rage in my voice. It startled me.

"Oh." The stranger's voice was weak. Distant.

"Where is he? Is he okay?"

Silence.  
“...No.”

I don't remember if I said anything. I don't remember if I screamed or if I asked any more questions or if it became clear to him how hard I was crying. I do remember the stranger's frantic pleas of *'I don't think I should be the one to talk to you about this. I think you should talk to your parents are your parents there? No? Call your parents. Call them now.'* before the line went dead. His voice sounded so young. So panicked. So wildly out of his realm of reality.

(415) 435-6878

Voicemail.

(415) 359-6193

Voicemail.

(415)386-0169

Voicemail.

*Please somebody pick up. Somebody tell me everything is okay.*

My dad's voice was slow and cautious as though he were talking to a small child on the brink of a tantrum. Or a suicide bomber. I could tell he was picking his words carefully. I could tell he was scared.

“Ben's in the hospital.” I could hear his breath through the static. “He might not make it.”

I let out a sharp sob but I could feel my stomach slightly relax. My dad was a big believer in preparing for the worst even when it was nearly impossible. He is the type to remind someone going in to get their wisdom teeth out that 11,000 people a year get permanent nerve damage following the procedure.<sup>1</sup> A few years after 9/11 he bought our whole family apocalyptic survival sets complete with gas masks, powdered food and waste sanitation kits. He even got sets for our dogs. “Might” was a word I had learned not to fear in my father's voice. “Might” was a word I used to delegitimize the four others that made up that sentence. I desperately dissected his words in the hopes of finding some sliver of buoyancy amongst the carnage. Some life preserver that I could cling to so I wouldn't have to acknowledge the water rising rapidly around me.

The plane was almost empty. I am not someone who makes a habit of crying in public places (or private for that matter) but airplanes seem to be a strange environment where the lines between private and public are blurred. I figured that, on an airplane, crying was roughly as inappropriate as taking off my shoes. Something I would always feel slightly bended the unspoken air traveler's intimacy rules but in certain situations I was willing to override my shame in favor of comfort. I figured this was one of those situations. I was wrong. I resented the pitying back pats of my relatives when they noticed the silent tears. I resented the other passengers trying so hard to pretend not to stare. I resented feeling so weak.

Halfway through the flight I found my way to one of the empty back rows where I amassed a small arsenal of tissuey travel pillows and watched *Pirates of the Caribbean*. Ben and I had watched that movie on repeat in the hospital room the Christmas that his appendix ruptured. We had every line memorized. He might have died then too. But he didn't. This was no different. It couldn't be.

The nurse that led us to the intensive care unit looked just like Ceci from *East Los High*. I would tell him that when he woke up. It would make him laugh. Outside his room there was a

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<sup>1</sup> "Teens Keep Dying While Getting Wisdom Teeth Removed by Overzealous Oral Surgeons." *NaturalNews*. N.p., n.d. Web. 25 Nov. 2014.

screen with lots of technicolored jagged lines. Underneath them the words *brain death percentage* flashed in red font. I smirked. How morbid! I would tell him about that when he woke up too. There was a plastic window and a curtain separating us. I didn't pause before pulling it back.

To Diane Benscoter it sounded like breaking glass<sup>2</sup>. She was one of the women I had been researching before I had opened the Facebook message that morning. At seventeen she was recruited into the Unification Church or, as it's more commonly known, the Moonie Cult. At twenty-two she was forced to realize it was all a lie. The man she had dedicated the past half-decade to, severing all ties with friends and family, was not the Messiah. She was not saved. Her entire world, as she knew it, shattered and it sounded like broken glass.

To me it sounded like silence. It was not a silence I had heard before. Not a silence that fills a theater between the fall of the curtain and the rise of the lights. Not the silence that floats at the bottom of a swimming pool before exhale of bubbles scrambles towards the surface. This silence was deafening. It flooded the hospital room making everything sound muffled and distant as though I were trapped at the bottom of a well and nothing going on above concerned me. All I could hear was the rhythmic beeping of my brother's heartbeat. The whistling of his artificial breath through the thick plastic tube.

Suddenly it was all real. All the unspeakable terror that had been swelling inside me, that I had been icing for the past few hours with denial and silent coos of *he'll be fine, he always is*, splashed out of me. My knees gave out. I was sitting in a matted reclining chair. The life support machine began hysterically wailing high-pitched beeps. "Don't worry it's just a bubble" a nurse dialed a series of buttons to silence it. "Do you want to get closer to him?" *No! I can't do this. I want to leave. This isn't real.* I wanted to shout but the silence that had swallowed the room had taken my voice with it. The nurse pushed my chair closer to his bedside. *Stop!* The silence loudened. "You can't undo any of what we've done to him" she slapped a hand on his chest as proof. "Feel free to hug 'em kiss 'em all you want you can't hurt em!" My aunt said something that I didn't make out. Her face crumpled and her jaw fell open as she scampered towards the door. "Do you want to hold his hand" *No.* The nurse dug under the thin blanket and emerged with his fist.

It wasn't limp or grey. It was his. The hand that had beat me at thousands of thumb wars and games of 007. It was the hand that met mine in our elaborate, ever-changing secret handshake. The one that we have continued to build on since I was seven. It was the hand that had passed me all those little pink post it notes through the secret drawer of our dining room table and all those little orange lighters over secret conversations. It was Ben's hand. I reached for it instinctually and unquestioningly.

I have the curse of being a member of the Lily Potter generation. A generation that is taught that sheer love is a force that can stop even Death in his tracks. I had been taught that love was the most powerful force in the world. I loved my brother more than anything or anyone else in the world. I loved him more than life itself. Wasn't that enough to fend off death? A part of me much larger than I now care to admit truly believed that his eyes would flutter open the moment I wrapped my fingers around his hand. Blame J.K. Rowling. Blame afternoon T.V. Blame teenage narcissism.

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<sup>2</sup> Camilleri, Ricky. "HuffPost Live." *HuffPost Live*. The Huffington Post, 16 Oct. 2013. Web. 12 Nov. 2014

His hand was warm, almost clammy with life. If I leaned too far into my festering optimism I could have allowed myself to believe that his fingers squeezed mine ever so slightly. They didn't of course. It was just gravity and limp joints. Physics. I looked up at his closed eyes. This was the moment where the music would swell. Maybe something by Billie Joel. His eyes would open ever so slightly at first then widen as he realized where he was. The whole room would gasp and point silently. Hands over mouths. Legs stumbling backwards in shock. He would say my name. I would cry. We would hug.

None of this happened of course. His eyes remained shut. If I could crop out all the tubes and machines it would have looked like he was sleeping, that is, apart from his eyes. Onirologists say that once someone reaches a deep level of sleep their eyes begin rapidly and randomly moving about under their lids. Eyes can reach one thousand degrees of movement per second during sleep.<sup>3</sup> My brother's did not. Not even close His eyelids were brick. He was not dreaming. He was not sleeping. He was not okay.

It was like someone had splashed water on my face. I looked around frantically for a nurse.

"You want to talk?" My vocal cords were still tied in knots. I nodded. "Here you can talk to him." She pushed me closer to the bed. I shook my head wildly.

"She wants to talk to you," my mom interjected. I nodded again. I felt like a toddler. I didn't care.

"Oh." I could hear a splinter of fear in her voice. She tweezed it out quickly. "C'mon sweetie let's go for a walk." Thank god. I wanted to ask her questions. Honest questions. Questions that I didn't want my mom to hear. I didn't want to worry her or upset her more than was necessary. I had no idea what the hell was going on. At the time I thought that I wanted to.

The nurse led me to a tiny room filled to the brim with nauseatingly yellow fluorescent light. We sat down.

"So is there any chance that he's going to...like, live?" I decided to start soft. Give her a question that I knew she could answer positively. That way it would lighten the "but" that would likely follow for both of us. *Yes, but recovery will be a slow, painful and intensive process. Yes he'll have serious physical limitations for the rest of his life. Yes but he'll neve-*

"No."

For a moment we just stared at each other. Neither of us said a word. It felt like the stillness that comes with reaching the highest point of a leap. That fragmented second when you stop ascending but haven't yet started falling. Gravity and will are at perfect equilibrium and for a single moment you are suspended, free from both. Then, of course, the inevitability of Newton's Third Law triumphs and you plummet.

"No?" The word made just as little sense coming out of my mouth as it did coming out of hers.

"Your parents told me how close you and Ben we- are. I thought a lot about how I as going to tell you this and I decided that the kindest thing to do would be to be honest with you. I think you deserve that. Your brother is dying. He is not going to recover." My head dropped to my lap as a shrill wail clawed its way out of my throat. I would have never have recognized the noise as something I was capable of emitting. I would never have recognized the noise as something a *human* was capable of emitting.

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<sup>3</sup> "What Your Eyes Do When You Sleep." *Natural Vision Improvement Eye Exercises Eye Vitamins*. N.p., n.d. Web. 01 Dec. 2014.

“I would suggest that you try and make the most of the time you have left with each other.” *The time we have left with each other? He’s unconscious. He has no idea where he is or that I am there. He can’t hear. He can’t see. He can’t think. We don’t have any time together! He’s gone.*

I spent the rest of the conversation trying to bait the nurse into dropping me some scrap false hope. She stood her ground. Distance allows me to be grateful for this. At the time I was enraged. “So you’re saying that there is no hope, whatsoever for him to wake up.”

“Not with the level that his brain has already swelled.”

“Even if they open up his skull?”

“There is nothing we can do to save him anymore.”

“So no one, ever, in the history of medicine has recovered from this?”

“I don’t like to use blanket terms like that, but frankly no.”

I couldn’t go back to the room knowing what I did. Not right away at first. The nurse led me to the chapel instead. I had never believed in a God before. I was somewhat proud of this. I was raised in a culture that groups religion with ignorance like the Fourth of July and Fireworks. I had valued my self-proclaimed intellect second only to my self-proclaimed resilience. I realized then how easy it is to preach atheism from the comfort of stability. There is no God without desperation. I had heard what the nurse had said. I had heard her try empathetically and wholeheartedly to extinguish the false hope that was cooking me from the inside out. But I had also heard stories of benediction. They frequented tabloids and daytime talk shows. *Patient miraculously makes full recovery despite doctor encouraging parents to surrender hope.* They made for great news. America has always been fascinated with the blessed. The underdogs that rise up despite all odds. The exceptions. It would sell far fewer papers to say *Doctor’s Correctly Predict Patient’s Death Yet Again!* No one ever hears about the norm so it’s easy to pretend that it doesn’t exist. Or at least only exists for the majority. Those nameless masses of Others that exist only to make the stories of hope even more inspiring. Not for me. I’m special. I’ve been told it since kindergarten so it must be true. I am the exception just like everybody else.

My mother and I slept in his hospital room that night. It was brutal. I don’t regret it.

At six the next morning a new nurse came in to inform us that visiting hours were over but that we could return in two hours. We did. The doctor took my mother aside and told her that Ben had officially gone brain dead.

I don’t understand death but I understand neurons. I understand that he had irreversibly lost all neurological function.<sup>4</sup> I understand our brains are us. Entirely. Whether someone dies of a gunshot wound, a stroke, or a traumatic brain injury the diagnosis is the same.<sup>4</sup> Brain death means death.

They were telling me he was dead but he was still breathing. His chest rose and fell rhythmically and naturally as though he were just sleeping in. As though the he could be woken up with a mere shake to the shoulder, or rather, knowing my brother, it might take a few clanging pans or some blaring gangster rap to do the trick. Regardless, it seemed possible. They were telling me that he was dead but his hands were still warm. They felt exactly the same as they had when I clung to them the day before. Or even when I had clung to them squealing as he dangled me over the edge of a dock last summer when I was too nervous to jump in on my own. They were almost glowing with life. I wanted to get closer to him. I flipped over his hand so I could

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<sup>4</sup> Olson, Leslie C. "What Is Brain Death." *HowStuffWorks*. HowStuffWorks.com, n.d. Web. 02 Dec. 2014.

rest my palm against his like we used to when we were imitating that scene from Tarzan. Under his palm I noticed a burning bright light attached to his finger. I felt cheated. As though they were lighting up and heating the hand of a corpse.

When I got back to the hotel that night my brother's previously static facebook wall erupted with encouragements to get well soon. "Push through this like you pushed through all those bench presses this summer man!" one of the wall posts read. I wanted to type in all caps HE'S DEAD. HE'S NOT GOING TO GET BETTER. NOW CAN YOU ALL SHUT UP ALREADY but I didn't. I told no one that he died. Not any of my friends. Not any of his. No one. Within twelve hours news had gotten out regardless. People began posting "RIP" on his wall complete with a 'shocked' emoji and a heart. Kids from his high school began finding photos of them standing next to each other and made them their profile pictures. One kid must have realized that they had no photos together so he settled on proofing a random shot of my brother throwing up the deuces his sophomore year. There were people who were close to him too. People that posted heart felt paragraphs and links to his obituary and graduation speech. Many messaged me offering their condolences and support. At the time I resented most of these messages but as they slowly became less frequent and, finally, nonexistent I began to miss them. The last post on his wall was four days ago. They're coming in around this rate now. Sometimes more often. Sometimes less. I know that soon they will stop entirely. I hated the posting when it started. It felt like people were parading my brother's death as a means of getting attention or likes on a social network but now that it's stopped it feels like he's been forgotten. Like everyone's gotten over it. Everyone but me.

People say that everything gets better with time but every day that passes is another day since I've seen my brother. Another day since he's been alive. Everyday makes his death feel more real. I resent my self-pity and feel guilty for wallowing in my sadness. I feel guilty for not. I feel guilty for laughing. I feel guilty for not getting out of bed. I feel guilty for not being able to get over it. I feel guilty for trying to.

If someone were to ask me a few weeks ago who the one person I couldn't live without was I wouldn't have hesitated. I knew I needed Ben as much as I knew I needed oxygen but I'm breathing and he's not so I suppose I'll have to reevaluate who and what I can survive without. If you were to ask me a few weeks ago what my biggest fear was I would have hesitated. I would have stumbled over the list that I kept in the back of my mind. *Insanity, cancer, underachievement, having the life slowly nibbled out of me by thousands of rats.* I doubt losing my brother would have even made the list. I had lived a life that, in many ways, was controlled by fear. I had gone through every *what if* that my 100 billion neurons could formulate. I had considered what I would do if I slipped on a spilled Slushie at the mall and my hair got caught in the gears of an escalator. I had a plan for how I would respond if a helicopter crash-landed in a swimming pool full of toddlers taking their very first swim lesson. Somehow, I had no plan for what I would do if Ben died. I had never encountered death before in any form. I had never been to a funeral. I had never seen the corpse of anyone I knew. Strange the first time I should meet death it should be taking the most important person in my life. A friend of his later told me that he had leaned back to far over a low railing. He said that my brother had fallen less than eight feet. Later the papers said less than twelve. Either way his entire life was stolen from him by faulty balance and less than twice his height in vertical air. I remember once of the many times that my brother couldn't sleep and I pretended I couldn't sleep so I could stay up with him, ranting and rambling as he played PlayStation and listened. This particular time he was playing Grand Theft Auto. This level was intense so I knew not to say a word. Bullets flew by his

character's head as he jumped from rooftop to rooftop, pursued by a rival drug game armed with machine guns and the occasional grenade. My brother was leaning forward. Elbows on his knees, eyes never leaving the screen. His fingers darted rapidly across the controller. At the last second he missed the final jump. His character stumbled off the edge of the low storage building. The screen splattered to red and *wasted* pounded onto the screen in jagged block letter. My brother's ridged concentration dissolved and he leaned back into the couch. "Aaaand that's how easy it is to die" he smirked before pressing replay.

At seventeen, I realized that I had never before encountered anything that was truly permanent. Tattoos can be lasered off, marriages can end, governments can fall, cities can burn. I myself was and am impermanent. I can consistently feel the person I was turn into the person I am and, before I can even fully know her, transition into the person I will be. Death, on the other hand, is permanent. People cannot come back to life. I am old enough to know it is true but not old enough to believe it. I halfway genuinely still expect to hear his voice on the other end when I dial his number. I still knock before going into his room. I have never before lived in a world that my brother was not a part of. Not just a part of, instrumental in. He was constantly and consistently not just there but present since day one. It's been over three weeks now since his accident and I still can't get it through my head that I will never see him again. I don't know if I ever will. As I said before, I had never believed in a God before my brother died. Certainly not a heaven. The idea seemed comical to me at the time. Everyone who had ever died piled in some place between the clouds and the ozone awaiting each new arrival with open arms. Most people would agree that that wouldn't include my brother anyway. He didn't live what most would call the "Christian lifestyle". He had his own moral code that he followed more devoutly and consistently than most scripture thumpers I've encountered but it was uniquely his own. I think most non-secular communities would have a hard time understanding it, much less accepting it. Still I have the strange sensation that he exists somewhere. Somewhere where I will meet him again. Maybe I already have. Call it denial, call it faith, call it a coping mechanism. In the hours and days after he died I entertained the idea that one day when my time eventually came we would be reunited. He would be just as I left him. Six foot' four, 200 pounds, and laughing. Of course this is impossible. The 'him' that I knew no longer exists. His liver, lungs, pancreas, both kidneys and one eye are living inside of strangers. Quite possibly strangers that wouldn't be living without them. The rest of him has been reduced to dry calcium phosphates. His physical form, as I knew it is gone. I would have a hard time believing that any new life would attempt to replicate the previous so precisely. As for a form independent of his body I can't say with any shred of certainty that I know where it is but I can say with certainty I know *that* it is. Whether that be in some paradise 'watching over us' in another being here on earth I am not sure. It may just be that he lives strictly in the memories of those who knew him or in the many lives that he was able to impact in his two decades on this earth. In whatever form he exists now, if any, I know that I can feel him every second of every day. A few weeks ago I would have scoffed at the preachy-ness and cliché of that sentence but I know it's true. I can hear his laugh when I watch old episodes of *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia*. I can feel his eyes roll when I pack a kale and quinoa salad for lunch or when I ruin a perfectly good meal with a feminist rant. I can hear him talking me out of a "filthy hipster" outfit or a nervous breakdown. I know he's here. He was here long enough to help me become someone that we were both proud of. Every person I have ever been and every person I will ever be is owed to him and for that I am grateful. I am grateful for every late night phone call and every early afternoon breakfast. I am grateful for every wrong turn I made him take and every dumb song I made him listen to. I am grateful for

every time that he teased me for caring too much and every time I teased him for caring too little. I am grateful that he never knew he was dying. I am grateful he always knew how much I looked up to him. I'm grateful he was and will always be my brother.