

CHANCES

A Teen Reshapes His Life After
the Death of a Parent

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A Harsh Beginning

It's often said that a single moment can change a life forever. For most of us, these words often slip out of our minds so we may enjoy the present. It is this comforting ignorance that allows us to enjoy the present and find happiness with what is, rather than worry about what could be.

I found myself having the same carefree attitude towards my own life. Like most ten year-old boys, it was the images on the television, playing tag on the playground, or teasing the "new kid" that were important to me. Words like death, poverty, or injustice seemed foreign and unwelcome to the sheltered world that was my childhood. In all honesty, I was just like any other ten year old kid, thinking the world was my playground, ready for me to explore play and enjoy myself. Unfortunately, what I could have never known, was that my simple childhood within me would be faced with sudden adversity.

For all I knew, Saturday, March 27th 2004 was just another average day. As I woke, the summer sun shone brightly in my and, I could see the skies were clear. To me, the scene outside was just as another ordinary day of summer. Resisting the urge to go back to bed, I stepped out from my room and dragged my feet towards my mother's bedroom to say my usual "good morning." As I opened the door, I saw her propped up against the wall reading on her bed. My mother spent most of her time in bed, giving me instruction here and there and reminding me of the odd chore I always seemed to overlook. Still, I never knew why Mother was confined to her bedroom lately and whenever I had posed the question, she would smile and remind me to do my homework or ask me if we had enough milk left in the fridge. Today, like so many other days, my curiosity got the better of me and I posed the question again,

“Are you feeling okay, Mom?”

She smiled and said jokingly, “I’ve made you some oatmeal downstairs, and it tastes really good, Jerome. There’s some real good stuff in the kitchen and it’s best you finish the rest before I do!”

With that, I would frown and think about her response as I left the room and made my way down stairs towards the kitchen. In the back of my mind, I felt something was not right and couldn’t shake off the feeling mom was avoiding my question. Yet, as I came closer to the kitchen and the smell of breakfast wafted towards me, my troubled moment would pass as quickly as it came. Therefore, it came as no surprise to me that, as I ate, I barely noticed the extra helping of oatmeal still left in the pot, or the pain killers that filled mother’s medicine cabinet. I never knew what to make of her doctor’s notes that lay tucked between the pages of books or the hospital letters that cluttered the kitchen table. Although I should have noticed all the signs that made the day unordinary, I began the day like any other with my usual routine. Yet, despite all that I believed to be ordinary, something unexpected would happen that day.

When I finished my meal and made my way up the stairs, the phone rang. Before I could answer it, my mother had received the call and within a few short minutes the conversation had ended. I approached her and asked who had called so early in the morning. This time, my mother didn’t answer with her usual comforting response and a grimace flashed across her face.

“Dad called and you guys are going to go out to spend some time together. I asked him if he could take you to the grocery store, and he agreed, so if there’s anything you needed...”

I interrupted her, “Mom, we usually don’t get groceries this early and I thought I’m sleeping over at Dad’s tomorrow?”

“Well,” my mother said slowly, “it’s best we get a head start on the shopping now, don’t you think? Anyways, he’ll be here soon, you better get ready.”

Her response should have made perfect sense, but I began to think to myself again: Why had our plans been changed? Was something wrong? I didn’t know why this morning’s events hadn’t followed the usual routine, and this change worried me. Nonetheless, I was excited to spend some extra time with my dad before school began again, and I decided to put my questions to rest as I got dressed and waited expectantly for dad’s arrival.

Finally, when I saw the small, white car pull up on the driveway, I kissed my mother goodbye and bolted out of the front door to meet Dad for what I hoped to be a day of fun. My father rolled down the car window and when he saw me, he beamed as I sprung open the car door to join him.

“Hey there,” he said with a smile, “your mother gave us a job today, right?”

“Yes, mom said we had to go to the grocery store and pick up a few things.”

My father pulled out a small sheet of paper and handed it to me, “I wrote it all down so we should be okay.” With a grin he added, “maybe we can drop by the mall if we get the shopping done quickly.”

“That would be great, dad,” I smiled. “There’s this new game out I wanted to see!”

And with that, we backed out of the drive way and made our way into town. We stopped by the grocery store and perused the aisles, checking off items on our list. I dodged shoppers left and right, with cartons of milk, fruits, and cans in my hands, eager to get to the mall as quick as we could. When we had finished our shopping, we sped off for the mall.

“Mom wanted you back at home before dinner, so we’ve got tons of time,” my Dad had said as we pulled into the mall parking lot.

I nodded and, in my excitement, ran ahead of my father as I thought of all the stores I wanted to visit. I passed crowds of people on the way to my destination, and nothing else seemed to matter. Like all the other children who crowded the video game store that day, I was ecstatic at the thought of being the first to buy a new game. Needless to say, I begged and pleaded with my father to buy that one game I didn’t have, so I could show off to my friends at school and claim my title as the new “cool” kid on the playground. Shaking his head, my father handed me the video game and smiled at the look of glee on my face as I pocketed the new video game.

As the evening began to fall, we left the mall and walked towards the car, Dad glanced at my smiling face and joked, “Your Mom really is right, you’re one spoiled kid, Jerome.”

He grinned and put his hand on my shoulder, and I fought to suppress my wide smile. In a way, I knew my Dad was right, but I couldn’t help but laugh as I gazed at the glossy cover of my new game. Lost in thought, I felt my eyes close and I fell into a deep sleep after a busy day.

Minutes or perhaps hours later, I awoke with a start. As I drifted in and out of consciousness, I fought the temptation to return to sleep. I opened my eyes and allowed myself to adjust to my surroundings. All of a sudden, I felt the weight of a seatbelt press against my chest and realised I had fallen asleep in the car. The seat next to me was empty and the door was left wide open. As I peered through the windows, I saw that night had fallen and I was wrapped in a blanket of pitch black. Yet, in the darkness I could see lights flashing red and blue and the sound of a siren penetrate the night’s silence. As the sirens flashed, I could see faces, dozens of them, illuminated in the eerie glow of the light. Almost instinctively,

I threw myself out of the car and headed for the darkness ahead. As the night's cool air whipped past my face, memories came flooding back and I remembered kissing my Mom goodbye before I left that morning. I had left her alone in that house, and as I ran for the front door, I felt responsible for her pain. I climbed the steps to the house and reached for the front door, but felt a hand clasp my shoulder and I came to a halt.

“Hold it right there, my friend.” said a deep voice, “You can't come past here.” I didn't recognize the speaker, but his voice made me stop in my tracks. To this day, I still don't know who the man could have been. All I remember was the feeling of shock I felt as I looked over his shoulders to the separation in the crowd ahead. As people dispersed and the faces turned to me, I again saw the flashing lights of a siren and caught a glimpse of a woman being loaded onto a stretcher...

The woman I saw could only be one person, and as I slumped to the ground, I prayed the sirens would stop and the crowds would go away. I wanted my childhood back again and the feeling of joy I had savoured just a few hours ago. Still, no matter how much I hoped, I lay on the ground alone in my prayers. I didn't know how long I stayed there, nor did I care, all I wanted to do was escape the moment.

For hours I lay there, quiet as a shadow, as I closed my eyes and tried to escape to that better place. Suddenly, I heard voices in the distance. I shut my eyes and shrank into the shadows, hoping I wouldn't be noticed. Still, the voices grew louder and the sharp tap of footsteps made me open my eyes. In front of me I saw my father's face above me, glistening with sweat and eyes full of tears. He was surrounded by paramedics who had their heads hung low, some with their heads buried in their hands. Dad was shaking and opened his mouth to speak to me, but it was at that moment that I felt the ground fall out from underneath me. I didn't need to hear his words to know my mother had left this earth. I didn't need to hear his words to realise that whatever shred of childhood I still treasured, was leaving me with every tear I shed.

It's often said that a single moment can change a life forever. As I write and revisit that that night, I see the sad truth of these words. Although I could never have known it at the time, I realised that it is at these life changing moments, that the still waters of innocence are stirred within us. It is at these moments, that we may rise above these rough waters or be drowned beneath them. For the next six years, I found myself lost and struggled with the pain of losing the person who had brought me into this world, my mother.

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