The Text That Saved My Life

By: Jackie Boratyn

I was 16…he was 16…this had to be a dream. There I was sitting in the theater of Illinois State University watching the all-state theater performance of some musical; a show that even to this day I can’t name the title of, but do remember the very moment in which a character was about to be hung. I looked down at my cell phone. There it was on the screen, an unread text message from a girl I hadn’t spoken to in several years. Shocked that she even still had my number I opened the text that read, “Connor Ryan is dead.” Not sure whether this was a sick prank or if it was a threat, I immediately jumped out of my seat and ran to the lobby. Who should I call? I felt myself getting cold as a tear fell from my eye. I had a wrench in my gut that something was wrong; why else would she have texted me? Instantly I dialed Connor’s number. Within seconds I heard his voicemail. Hearing his voice telling me to leave a message was almost comforting, but my gut was still convinced something was wrong. As I looked at my phone once more, suddenly texts started rolling in: “RIP Connor” “You’re never going to believe what happened.” “Are you at home? We need to talk.”

That was it. Right then and there I knew that the text I had received from my childhood classmate was telling the truth. I dropped my phone and started bawling. Somehow I knew that at this very moment my life would change and that nothing I did or said could change the feeling of this tight knot that had formed in my stomach. I started thinking back to the last time I had spoken with Connor; this texting all had to be a dream…there’s no way my best friend was gone…there was no way that the last words my best friend Connor would ever hear me speak were, “Leave me alone, I hate you.” Sure, he knows (or at least I would hope) that I didn’t truly mean it, but that wasn’t the principle of the matter. Suddenly I began to think back and realize
that there was no way this kind hearted, fun loving guy was gone…in the hospital, hurt…okay maybe, but dead?...absolutely not…I had just spoken with him a few days prior.

Little did I know how much the words I hate you would haunt me for years to come. The value of words take on a whole new meaning when the last thing a person who meant the world to you hears you say something negative as your final words to him. Why couldn’t I have said ‘We’ll talk later’ or ‘I’m upset right now, but we will talk about this later’ or ‘I’m disappointed but I still care’? All of these sound like much better choices, but no, in the heat of the moment, I had to tell someone that I could never truly hate that I did in fact hate him. Since that day I can now say I never use the word hate. The lingering guilt of that word bothers me, and I cringe when others use it. Hate is so strong and powerful; something downright ugly. It’s okay to dislike people or be angry, but I’ve learned the value of not making a permanent mistake just because I am temporarily upset. Never by any means would I wish upon anyone the thought of having to live your entire life with this indescribable feeling of having said something terrible to your best friend before his death, but I promise that anyone who has experienced this situation can attest to saying that human beings often don’t put enough value on the choice of words they use.

Before I knew it I had built up the courage to call one of my other best friends who was gasping for air on the other line. “How did it happen?” I muttered quietly hoping that by some strange twist of fate he didn’t die in a painful manner. Little did I know I was in for the shock of my life. “He hung himself.” What were once tears of sadness suddenly turned into waterfalls of disappointment, guilt, anger, and sorrow. I found myself tucked in a corner gasping for air as my body turned from cold to boiling hot and more water left my eyes than I ever knew existed. I couldn’t help but think it was my fault; here was my best friend crying out for help, and I turned
around and told him I hated him…of all the things I had the choice to lose my temper over it was over something so minute that to this day I don’t even know what we had been arguing about.

Four years later and I still sit and think back to the day when I found out Connor had taken his life. The moment where I could have been that one person who saved a life…if only I had chosen my words wisely. Relationships are more than just knowing someone. Relationships are about time and commitment, about being there for someone when whether they need you or not. For me, I still think back to my days hanging out with Connor, the boy who always had nothing less than a smile on his face; the guy I would go to for comfort over a break up or a fight with my parents, or who would find me every day after school just to see how my day was. I think about all the laughs we shared and how, whether he knew you for 30 seconds or several years, he always made you feel important, feel like you were part of something special just by being around him. I’ll never forget about the day when a new student came into our 6th grade classroom. Everyone thought she was weird, and Connor, having overheard someone call her weird, stood up, looked at the me, and said, “I’m weird too, she must be pretty cool” and proceeded to go sit with her. This ‘new girl’ is now one of my best friends.

Connor was such a positive and uplifting guy. I never saw his suicide coming. Finding out that he died was one thing but how was quite another…I expected it to be in a car accident or some sort of tragic event. Never in a million years would I think this happy-go-lucky boy would ever kill himself. Connor chose to take himself away, to leave us and never feel regret about it. He was the one who chose to end his life…so why did I feel so guilty? I should be angry, right? Ever since this heartbreaking occurrence I have grown to love the relationships I choose to take part in throughout my life. Sometimes being there for a friend or relative is more than just how
they look on the outside. Someone can be silently screaming out for help with the largest smile on their face and the most positive attitude you have ever encountered. People today spend so much time wrapped up in the world of chaos and business that they forget to slow down and appreciate the little things in life such as having coffee and catching up with a friend or calling someone just to say “hi”.

Days passed after receiving that text message, and suddenly the dreaded wait was over; it was the day of the funeral. As I called up my friends asking if they wanted to go together to the wake, I felt overwhelmingly uneasy. I lay in bed staring into my closet at the black clothes that I had picked out to say my goodbyes. My mom knocked on the door quietly, hoping that I had fallen asleep, knowing that this tragedy had turned me into an insomniac who would rather soak a pillow full of tears than eat a meal. She sat on the bed beside me brushing my hair as she told me that everything would be okay. At that very moment, this comment she had told me several times since the death felt even more unlikely than before. Why was she in my room? I wanted to be alone. I felt so alone. Before I knew it, I found out that Connor’s parents did not want us to attend the wake or funeral. My mom had received a call earlier from a relative of his asking that she keep me home from the wake and funeral, a call all of my friend’s parents had gotten as well. His mom blamed us for the death of her son. She made it clear that her son was perfectly happy and that “everyone he went to elementary school with gave him a hard time; he did this to himself because of you.” His parents were convinced that every single person in our clique-filled elementary school did nothing but picked on their son. Needless to say, I was a wreck.

Here was my best friend who had died, and I was being banned from his funeral? This news only made the ache and pain of having told him that I hated him worse. It felt like a
thousand knives had been jabbed into both my heart and my stomach. If there were ever a time I felt true agonizing pain, it was now. The two people who watched us grow up together were turning around and telling me that I was at fault, something that everyone else had previously been trying to convince me otherwise. To this day I still feel hurt by not being able to say my goodbyes to my best friend, especially after what I had said to him while he was still alive. Even when the parents apologized, they projected a feeling almost of hatred, which was ironic since it was the one feeling I never ever associated with anyone or anything after everything had happened. But not having that closure was torture. Sure, Connor was an only child and I’m sure that his parents coming home to find him hanging, blue in the face, and cold as a clam was hard, but to put the blame on people who supported him and who were always there was one of the hardest things that to this day still makes me wonder if I could have changed their minds. I’ll never know the true reason as to why I was told not to attend his funeral, but there’s something overwhelming about having the blame for something so catastrophic put on a group of high school students. Even if I had no say in the matter, part of me will always feel like I could have stopped it. People would say that his parents were simply upset and needed to put the blame on someone so that they didn’t feel guilty themselves, but either way, being able to kneel down beside Connor’s body and say a prayer and apologizing to him is something that can never be given back to me.

Thinking about Connor’s death and getting blamed by his parents has made me realize that forgiveness is hard…it’s something that takes a lot of maturity and sincerity. Blaming people, however, never makes a situation any better. My dad used to always say “every time you point a finger, you have three more pointing right back at you.” I’ve learned to accept that
everything that happened was out of my control, but no matter how much people reassure me, it doesn’t change the fact I will never be able to tell my best friend how I truly felt about him. I will never be able to apologize for the things I said and tell him how much I truly love and care about him. I will never be able to call him up to tell him about my day or ask if he would like to hang out. At a young age, I was taught to ‘think before I speak.’ If only I had lived by these words that day speaking with Connor, who knows if he would still be alive. Reality is, I can’t live in a world of “what if’s.” Nothing can change the past, nothing will ever bring him back, but my life has changed because of him.

It’s amazing how much a tragedy can teach someone. I’ve learned to live each day to the fullest, and to cherish those in my life daily. Most importantly, I’ve learned that no matter what, never go to sleep angry. When an apology is in need, give it…when an apology is given, accept it. Accepting his parent’s apology was one of the hardest things I have ever had to do. I will forever hold the pain of being blamed for my best friend’s death in my heart, but when I think about what Connor would tell me to do, I have no doubt that he would want me to forgive them. You can’t sweat the little things. Sometimes life takes a turn for the worst, but it is important to learn from events that unfold. I know that no matter what I did or didn’t do, nothing will bring Connor back, but I know that he’s up there watching me somewhere, and I’m sure he is proud of the person I have become, a person who loves with all her heart, and would rather apologize for something that isn’t her fault simply to end a fight…a person has been changed, all because of that text.