The Things I Have to Say

I used to write you letters.

Every single day, I would imagine pulling out a notebook and flopping down on my bed, filling page after page. I would leave those letters in your room, around the house, by your school bag, wherever you would find them. I used to pretend you'd write back, you'd leave them way up high, taped to the ceiling or resting on my favorite stuffed bear. I used to wait for them to appear, but then I'd realize the letters were all in my head, that you never actually read any of them, that there would be no notes waiting for me.

But I'm writing this one for you. Because I need to remember. Because I need you to know that I care. That I still do.

Doctor Zucher said I should just start writing, that I shouldn't think too much about it. But that's so hard because all of those letters stored up in my head want to come out, pieces of good memories and even parts of birthday cards - they all want you to read them. So anyway, here goes.

June fourteenth, a Wednesday. Mom and you were driving to the dentist's, remember? You were getting your wisdom teeth out. I wanted to come, to support you, and, since I'm being honest, to see what you would say under the influence of anesthesia. How supportive I was, huh?

Anyway, you were out of school that day, and the rest of the week, too. You didn't drive me to school, and I had to take the bus. I was okay with that, though, because I knew you weren't feeling well. Much to my disappointment, you didn't say anything humorous; you were just really quiet. I was kind of scared because I thought something was seriously wrong. I mean, usually, no one can wipe that goofy smile off your face. But you didn't smile at all those three days. By Sunday, you were better. I was relieved. You drove me out to Dairy Queen, and you paid for both of our blueberry cheesecake milkshakes. I remember you spilled most of yours down your left leg because you tripped over your own two feet. You were so uncoordinated.

Then, on Monday, I had a panic attack. You were always so good about them. You always seemed to know exactly what to do. It was early in the morning. Almost two o'clock. I woke up nauseous and shaky. I had a nightmare about a test I knew I was supposed to have during algebra. It was still on my mind when I woke up, and it all began to snowball. I couldn't breathe, couldn't see straight. My heart was beating heavily, and I could have sworn I was going to die. I felt like the world was closing in on me, like it was tilting endlessly to the right. I was sliding, and there was nothing I could grasp on to. But then you walked into my room.

I must have whimpered pretty loudly for you to have heard me. I suppose you were always a light sleeper, though, weren't you? As you walked calmly towards me, I forced myself to focus on your face, and soon after, the world stopped spinning.

You know, the other day, Mom and I were walking past one of your favorite stores in the mall. It had a huge display on, with a little flashing sign and everything. I couldn't help but look at it. And then, just like that Monday morning, the ceiling closed in on me, people crowded me, the world spun, and my heart trembled. I looked for your face in that crowd, but I guess I was too "emotionally distraught" to remember that it wouldn't be there.

Can you imagine? Good old Doctor Zucher. Says my senses were too heightened, that I was overwhelmed. Something about not being able to process it all. What a load of psychoanalytic bull.

Anyway, it took me forever to calm down. Mom almost called an ER to come and get me, but what would they have done? Given me some kind of sedative? The only thing I needed was you, and they certainly couldn't give me you. If they could - well, I wouldn't be writing you this dumb letter, now would I?

I just brought up the whole wisdom teeth event because that was the last time I really pitched in to take care of you. I did some of your chores, even fetched snacks and ice for you. Actually, that's not true. You did come home entirely too late that one Friday night a couple of weeks after that because you stopped by the store to buy a doughnut. Mom and Dad thought you went out partying or something illegal like that, but I managed to convince them otherwise. I told them that you needed help with problem number twenty-eight on your calculus homework, so you went to Thomas's house to work it out. They bought it. Of course. Good old number twenty-eight. I must have been a better debater than I thought because there were only twenty-four questions on that assignment.

I guess they bought it because you weren't very good at calculus.

Anyway, on that Monday that I had that panic attack, you met me by my algebra class and waited for me. Before I entered, you pulled me aside and told me it would all be fine, that I knew what I was doing. You prayed with me, and you gave me a hug. You were late to your class, but your words stayed with me during the entire test. And you were right because I ended up getting a perfect score on it. But I still believe that it was because of you, your own faith in me that kept me calm. I know you've never been one for mushy-gushy feelings and stuff, so brace for some sentimentality here. I couldn't have done it without you. I swear I couldn't.

Hey, remember that day in the park? I must have been around five or six. Remember Mom left us there for a short while to grab something from the car? I wanted to go swimming so bad, but you told me to wait for Mom. I tried, but the sun glinting off the lake's surface was just so tempting. So I went.

As it turned out, I was an even crappier swimmer than I thought, because, before I even knew what was happening, you were dragging me back to the shallow water. You called for Mom while I coughed up a lungful of dingy lakewater.

You were always there for me, you know that? I can't ever remember a time when I needed you that you weren't there. Heck, even if you were in the middle of a life-or-death situation, you'd find a way to get to me. You have always been my protector, shielding me from the snares and corruption of the world.

Now what am I supposed to do?

How on earth am I supposed to go from being loved and sheltered and encompassed by laughter to being invisible? And how am I supposed to deal with this brutal, unforgiving world? The inequities of barbaric people? The weight of the solitude I bear now that you are overwhelmingly gone?

Even Mouse has noticed that the house has gone stale.

Every room feels stiff and brittle, like just walking in it or breathing too hard could shatter this new reality. The entire house is enveloped in an incessant cloud of utter emptiness. The gaping abyss you left that day.

When I came home from school today, Mouse padded over to where I had collapsed on the old leather couch. She looked up at me, her normally black eyes looked hollow and dull. I won't pretend to be some dog-whisperer or something, but I would be ignorant if I hadn't noticed that question in her eyes: Where?

That broke me. My knees were pulled to my chest automatically - I had developed that position over the past few months, and it is now natural through muscle memory. I shut my eyes and my head drooped forward. I was past the point of anger, of hatred. I was past the point of sobbing in hopes Mommy would come running and kiss the pain away. I was done with the outward pain, with the force of the hurt. I cried the most excruciating cry known to brokenhearted man; I wept. Silently, without effort, the tears fell, staining my cheeks and compounding with the musty scent of previous heartaches. I felt my heart burning as the last strings holding it together were being tugged at in knowing that I could not explain to Mouse that you were gone.

How does one explain to man's best friend that man is gone?

Where does that leave her?

Mouse and I shared our pain together, right there on your favorite couch. She rested her fragile head on my foot, and I could feel from the weight of it that she was just as exhausted as I was. As I am.

I know it's not your fault. And it's not mine either.

In fact, the first thing Dr. Zucher did for our family was to make sure we understood that we had no impact on what happened to you. It wasn't our fault, he drilled into us, there was nothing we could have done.

But that's just what pains me the most. After all you have done for me, there was *nothing* I could have done. I couldn't have prepared you for what was going to happen, couldn't have stopped it from happening. I couldn't have even been there with you, holding your hand as you were welcomed Home. I couldn't do anything then, and I can't do anything now.

Dr. Zucher said I should take my time, I should be patient with myself through this interminable healing process. But I need to tell you exactly what happened. I need to, or I just might lose the last of what I have left.

That day, however many months ago it was, you drove me into school like every other day that year. We parted ways, each of us being pushed in the sea of students in separate directions to our own classes. I turned to look back at you. I could just barely make out the crazy cowlick that lived perpetually on your head. You were talking with someone, and I just caught a glimpse of the right side of your face as you turned to look at them. I had the sudden urge to run and give you a hug, just then, like old times. Back when we were in elementary school together, or when you started leaving the house early to catch the middle school bus, or when you pulled me out of the lakewater, or held me still while the world spun and shrunk around me. I felt the need to give you a hug, those bear hugs you gave when you really meant it. Those bear hugs you gave when it was not okay, but it was because you were there, because I was with you. Because you had me, safeguarded, away from danger, and I was alright.

I never did give you that hug. I never fought my way upstream and pushed myself into your arms. Even if it would have embarrassed you to an even earlier death, you would have complied. Because you loved me.

I can't stop rewatching that last hug, the one that never happened, in my mind's eye. I don't think I ever will.

And then I came home on the bus because you said you had to make a stop. You never told me where you were going. You always have before, and I suppose that should have sent a red flag out right away. But I trusted you, just as you did me.

When I sat down to start my homework, I spread out my books at the foot of your couch to bother you when you wanted to relax for an hour after a long day, before you would go to work that evening.

And then

the phone rang

The phone rang and I reluctantly hoisted myself off the ground and wandered into the kitchen and picked it up. And I couldn't put it down. I couldn't do anything because nothing was real anymore. Suddenly, everything was just an imaginary element of an imaginary world I created in my head. The counter wasn't real. The kitchen you and I had grown up eating afternoon snacks in wasn't real. Even my own body wasn't real. Everything was distant. The phone in my hand felt heavier than a bag of sand, but I couldn't let go.

I had to call Mom and Dad.

I called your boss, too.

I called your best friend.

I even tried to call your cell. You didn't pick up.

Mouse was there that day. Her nails clicked against the wood flooring before she stopped at my feet and looked up at me. I stared back at her, unable to do anything but hold the phone in my hand and lean against the counter. She knew. Thankfully, she knew, because I wouldn't have been able to tell her. I wouldn't have been able to shatter another world.

I came home that day, and you didn't. I returned home, and you vanished. I was left here, and you . . . you went Home.

How can you just be gone? Just like that? Just leave us here as simply as flicking off a switch?

It's going to be okay. I know it will, I just don't know if I can believe it. Everything just feels so awful - the pain runs so *deep*. But someday, a few years down the road, maybe, I will look at your picture and feel the first bubble of laughter since the joke you told on the ride into school that morning. Maybe I'll move on. Maybe I'll start up the business we always dreamed of running together. Maybe I'll save you a seat at my graduation, or I'll accept the diploma you never received. Maybe this heart of mine will heal.

Despite all these uncertainties, I know without a doubt I'll see you someday. It just feels so far away. So impossible. As for now, I'll do what that lunatic Dr. Zucher says and keep telling myself that I'll see you soon until I believe it. Or until I'm able to give you what's rightfully yours: a bearhug of my own.

I miss you, brother. And I have to be honest, so I have to say that this sucks. It really does. I never knew you could cause me so much pain, but here I am, and somehow you have.

Just enjoy life up there, okay? Enjoy it because I don't know how long it will be until I can enjoy mine down here.

I love you.

Goodbye.

Forever your little sister