

## The Empty Chair

There is a chair at our kitchen table that nobody sits in anymore. It is the second one from the window, with a small chip in the wood from the time my sister Maya leaned back too far in eighth grade and almost fell. My mother used to scold her for that. Now my mother runs her thumb over the chip when she thinks no one is watching, the way some people touch a rosary.

Maya was seventeen when she died. She was not driving. She was not drunk. She was not on her phone. She was crossing a four-lane road three blocks from our house, on her way home from a shift at the smoothie place where she worked weekends. The young man who hit her was nineteen. According to the police report, he was looking down at a text that said, in full, “lol ok.” Three characters. A throwaway response to a throwaway joke. He was driving forty-one miles per hour in a thirty-five zone, which is to say, he was driving the way almost everyone drives. The only thing that made him different from the rest of us was that, for two seconds, his eyes were not on the road.

I want you to sit with that number. Two seconds. Count it out, right now, while you read this. One. Two. That is how long it took to remove my sister from the world.

I am writing this essay for a scholarship, and I know how that sounds. I know there is something almost obscene about turning the worst day of my family’s life into a personal statement. But I also know that statistics do not change behavior. If they did, none of you

would text and drive, because the numbers have been screamed at you since middle school. You have seen the crumpled cars in the gym during assemblies. You have signed the pledges. You have rolled your eyes at the commercials. And then you have picked up your phone at a red light, and kept holding it when the light turned green, because the message felt urgent, or funny, or because you were bored, or because everyone else does it, and nothing has ever happened to you.

Nothing had ever happened to that nineteen-year-old either. Until it did.

I do not hate him. I want to, some days. It would be cleaner. But hatred requires a villain, and he is not a villain. He is a kid who played varsity baseball and volunteered at an animal shelter and, on a Tuesday in October, killed a girl he had never met because he wanted to answer a text before he forgot. He pled guilty. He cried at the sentencing. His mother cried. My mother did not cry, because my mother had not cried since the hospital, and has not cried since. There is a kind of grief that goes past tears and lives somewhere underneath the skin, and I would not wish it on him, or on his family, or on anyone.

But I will wish this on you: I wish you the discomfort of imagining it. Imagine that the next text you send while driving is the last sentence a stranger ever inspires you to write. Imagine standing in a courtroom and trying to explain to a mother why her daughter is not coming home. Imagine the rest of your life — every birthday, every graduation, every quiet Sunday morning — knowing that you traded someone else's entire future for three characters on a screen.

People talk about distracted driving as if it is a habit, like biting your nails. It is not. It is a decision. Every time you unlock your phone behind the wheel, you have decided that whatever is on that screen is worth more than the life of whoever is in front of your car. You may not think of it that way. The boy who hit Maya did not think of it that way. That is exactly the problem. The decision is so small, so automatic, so socially normal, that we have stopped recognizing it as a decision at all.

So I am asking you to recognize it. The next time your phone buzzes and you are driving, I want you to picture my sister's chair. I want you to picture my mother's thumb on the chipped wood. I want you to picture the nineteen-year-old in the courtroom, who was, until a Tuesday in October, exactly the kind of person who thought this would never happen to him.

Then put the phone down. Put it in the glove box. Put it on do-not-disturb. Put it anywhere you cannot reach it. Whatever the message says, it can wait. I promise you, on everything I have left, it can wait.

Maya cannot.