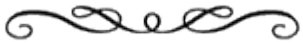
Not Everything That Happens Is an Accident

St. Michael's Hospital Scholarship Submission

By: Paula Resende

Have you ever experienced the thought: *that could never happen to me*? It is simple enough to believe. You subconsciously push the thought out of your mind so that you never have to worry about the possibility of a life-altering event ever actually happening to you. I used to think that too, but it was not only my life that changed.



My name is Emily Carter; plain, with brown hair, brown eyes, and a friendly smile. I am a typical seventeen year old girl in my last year of high school with my entire life out in front of me, even though I still am unaware what field I want to get into when I am older.

Every teenager experiences thoughts about how their life is over. For the most part, teenagers typically have a flair for the dramatics and as sad as it is to admit, I am no different. However, at least I can calmly admit that my life has not been awful. Sure, I had to go through my parents' separation, and later their decision to reunite after a whole year of not being together, and I broke up with my boyfriend for the third time last week, but in the grand scheme of life, these bumps in the road are trivial. It is necessary to remind oneself that our lives could be much worse, although in times of turmoil, we tend to lose sight of this.

I used to have a best friend all throughout elementary school, who is probably worth mentioning; Katherine Sullivan. Kate and I were incredibly close, as in paint-each-other's-nails-and-braid-each-other's-hair-close. I do not know if you noticed, but the use of past tense was intentional. When it came time for high school, Kate and I began to drift apart. It was not so bad at first, as we started to get lost in other interests and our friendship was pushed off to the side. The only times we got to see one another became the polite smiles we would exchange passing each other in the hallway. Kate, in all her admiration, was beautiful; tall, with blonde, long, wavy hair and light ocean blue eyes. To say I was a little jealous of her good looks was an understatement. The only problem was that you could not hate Kate. Not only was she beautiful, intelligent, and talented, but she was also endearingly nice. Her parents were well-off and the nicest people you would ever have the pleasure of meeting. Her ninety-five percent average meant that plenty of universities wanted her and her hot, perfect boyfriend made sure that every girl wanted to be her.

Lost in my thoughts, I had not paid attention to where I was going and unceremoniously bumped into someone on my way to my next class.

"Oh! I'm so sorry, I wasn't paying attention," I spoke up with embarrassment.

"No worries," said a familiar voice.

I looked up to see none other than Kate's boyfriend himself, Nathaniel Grayson. Nate, like his girlfriend, was also sweet to everyone so naturally, it was no wonder that the entirety of the female population in my school wished they were Kate.

"I haven't seen you around in a while," Nate continued.

"Yeah, I've been busy lately with university applications and stuff," I replied.

"Same with me"

We stood there for a second not knowing what else to say. Just as I was about to bid him goodbye, he asked a much unexpected question, "It's been so long since we've hung out. Kate and I are going out tonight, why don't you join us? And before you say no, I'm sure Kate would love to catch up. You won't be a third wheel, we'll do something fun, I promise,"

To say I was surprised was an understatement, "Come on Nate, I haven't hung out with Kate in practically four years. Plus, I don't want to intrude on your evening".

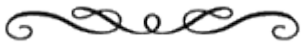
"Em, we've been going out since ninth grade. One night not being spent alone won't kill us. Plus I want to spend time with you and I know Kate will too"

I thought it over. Surely, it wouldn't be so bad and I still liked Kate, it wasn't as if we were enemies. We just hadn't talked in a while is all. Moreover, being so stressed with final grade twelve assignments and in preparing for next year, I could use a much deserved night out.

"Okay sure, why not?" I told him, a little diffidently.

"Great! Why don't you meet us at the movies?"

"Okay, see you there."



I continued going through my day with an upbeat attitude. It had been years since I got to really have a great time like I used to have with Kate. Of course, I had my other friends now but I'd never had a best friend as close as Kate. I hoped I would have fun tonight.

When the conclusion of the school day came, I went home to get ready. Once my homework was completed, I picked what I was going to wear. I would be meeting Kate and Nate at 10:00pm, where we would watch a movie, and possibly grab something to eat. I was startled by the sudden ringing of my cell phone.

"Hello?" I spoke into the phone.

"Hey Emily, its Kate"

"Oh um hi" I didn't know what else to say. It had been so long that it felt awkward between us.

"So, I know it's been a while but Nate and I were thinking that we would just pick you up so none of us have to wait by ourselves when we get there, is that okay with you?"

"Yeah that's perfect, thank you"

"No problem"

"Um so how is university prep going with you?"

"Oh crazy busy, but I've managed thus far"

"Same with me, I can't wait until next year"

"Do you remember when we were little; we used to dream about living together and going to the same school forever?"

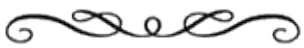
I laughed at that, "Yeah, but now I don't know if I quite feel the same way about being in school forever"

Our conversion continued. We spent twenty minutes reminiscing about the past and talking about our future plans. It was nice to have a long conversation with her after not talking to one another in years. Although, I am not saying that there was no awkwardness between us either.

Right on time, Nate texted me telling me they were here. I went outside to find Nate's car sitting idle in my driveway. After exchanges of "heys" we were on our way to the movies. We would be watching a horror film as they had always been a favourite of Kate and I's. I even remember Nate tagging along with us when he and Kate started dating and I suggested she invite him along.

The movie was great and we even screamed quite a few times. We found a Harvey's where we stopped to eat. I don't think I have laughed as hard as I did then in a long time. I remember when Kate started to never have time for me. It felt awful, losing your best friend. Mind you, she was not the only one at fault. After all, I joined other clubs and sports teams too that prevented us from finding time in our conflicting schedules to hang out together.

Laughing and singing our hearts out to a song on the radio took up the majority of the car ride home. Naturally, I was dropped off first and I waved goodbye, thanked them for the evening, and headed inside my home. I fell asleep content and more light-hearted than I had been for what felt like the past three years. There was nothing like getting your best friend back.



The next morning, the unthinkable happened. My mother awoke me shouting that I had to come downstairs. For a panicked moment, I thought I was late for school, until I realized it was Saturday. Except that would have been a non-existent issue in comparison to what I faced when I got downstairs.

The television in our living room was turned on to the local news channel, but it was not the weather that had me and the rest of my family so painfully shocked. A picture of Kate was displayed on

the screen and under that picture was the caption; “Local girl severely injured in an oncoming collision.” I listened to the news broadcaster speak to ensure I heard the full story;

While driving home last night, Katherine Sullivan and boyfriend, Nathaniel Grayson, were hit high impact on the passenger side of their car where Katherine had been seated. The driver in question, who initiated the crash, had been highly inebriated, well above the legal limit, measuring a 0.15 BAC reading on the breathalyser. The drunk driver, a Mr. Samuel Martinez, ran through a red light at a speed of approximately 115 km/hr in a 60km/hr zone. The man was arrested on sight after Nathaniel Grayson called in the collision to 9-1-1. Although Nathaniel only suffered some injuries, Katherine Sullivan is being treated in the trauma ward in hospital and is considered to be in critical condition.

“Oh my God,” I quietly mumbled through my hand that had gone immediately to my mouth upon seeing Kate’s picture plastered on my television screen.

I could not think straight. My heart instantly shattered. *Was she going to be okay?!?* I could not believe that shortly after dropping me off, my friends had gotten into such a severe crash that it could bring an end to Kate’s life.

Immediately after I regained some of my composure, I ran upstairs to get dressed. It was silently understood by my parents and I that our next move would be to go to the hospital. This is clearly an absolutely horrible time for Kate and her loved ones, and at one time, my parents and I had been at the top of that list. I silently prayed that Kate would be fine. No one could ever be totally fine after a crash like that, but I prayed with all sincerity that I could get another chance to talk to her about it. I chanted “Kate will be okay” over and over an innumerable amount of times while on our way to the hospital. Our drive there had been quiet and nerve-wracking. Not helping matters at all, all the stress and worry I felt for Kate was reflected on my parents faces.

Once we got to the hospital, the worry we felt increased one hundred fold. Immediately upon our arrival, I saw Nate pacing within the waiting room just outside the trauma ward. With close examination, you could see the cast surrounding his left arm, the several long cuts and bruises on his skin and all over his face.

“Nate!” I called out to him.

He suddenly turned around and after seeing me some relief washed over his face. We gave each other a light hug, so as not to hurt him as apparently he bruised his ribs, and I looked at him carefully.

“How are you feeling? Does it really hurt?” I asked him almost scared to hear the answer.

“Me? No, I’m fine. It was Kate that got the brunt of it.”

“Oh Nate I’m so sorry. I want you to know that I’m here if you need anything at all”

“Thanks,” he said but it was nearly inaudible. His entire body was stiff and tense. Every muscle was rigid.

"How is she?" I asked just as quietly, though I'd been dying to know the answer since I saw Kate's face this morning on the news.

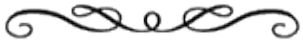
"I don't know. I remember them carrying her away on a stretcher after getting her out of the car with the Jaws of Life…" His voice broke and the poor boy looked near to a nervous breakdown.

"Nate. Look at me," I said to him taking him by the shoulders. "This is not easy for any of us, but can you just tell me if the doctors have given you any updates? If her condition is worsening? Is she stable? Anything at all?

Taking a deep breath he said; "No. She's been in surgery since we've arrived. Not too long ago though her parents were called to talk to one of the nurses."

It is not good news but it could be worse. "Let's go sit down, there's no sense wearing a trench through the floor".

I took his arm and led him to the chairs grouped together in the waiting area. I had been so consumed with thoughts about Kate that I had not even realized Nate's parents were here as well. *Of course they would be*, I thought, *directly after Nate called 9-1-1 they would have been informed.* Along with Nate's parents, was also Kate's grandparents and her eleven year old little brother, Michael. My parents were talking to Nate's, for some time ago, they had all been fairly close. I went to each of them to say hello, Michael hugged me a little longer than what constitutes a normal hug but I was relieved he still felt comfort in my presence after all this time.



It was a long and uncomfortable wait for news of Kate. We waited another three hours, filled with lots of coffee and even nervous shaking on my part. Throughout the duration of our wait, my heart was racing, my foot was incessantly tapping, and my worry only increased as time continued to pass excruciatingly slowly.

"Excuse me," suddenly the silence was interrupted by the stiff voice of a doctor. He did not sound happy, but rather exhausted and his voice was rough with emotion. "You may go and see Katherine now. However, I'm deeply sorry to inform you that it will be for the last time. We did everything we could and right now she is heavily sedated to ebb the pain, but only long enough for you to say your goodbyes".

I nearly broke down right there; my breathing began coming fast, my palms were sweaty, and tears started flowing freely down my cheeks. I imagine everyone felt the same as I did right at this time, but I was too focused on controlling my breathing to look.

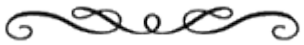
At that moment Michael spoke up, "What do you mean? What's wrong with my sister?"

The doctor looked hesitant, but said, "If I could have a moment with Katherine's parents before you all go in?"

We waited until Kate's parents returned, their faces grave and new tears shining bright on their faces.

"What did the doctor say?" Kate's grandmother asked chocking on tears.

Voice cracking, Kate's father answered, "Katherine's injuries were too severe. In addition to immense blood loss and several broken bones, her head went through the passenger side window, damaging her parietal, occipital, and temporal lobe. The brain damage she suffered is extensive. She also ruptured as many as six disks between her vertebras, most being from the cervical vertebra. Even if she had enough strength to continue living, she would remain quadriplegic for the rest of her life."



I still remember that day incredibly clearly. The sounds, the sights, the feelings I was experiencing all seemed like a blur then, but now I seem to commit every fine-tuned detail to accurate memory. We all walked into the trauma ward to find Kate lying on the bed nearly unrecognizable. In turn, each of us there got the opportunity to talk to her for the final time. She could see us, although her vision was diminishing, due to the damage sustained to her occipital lobe. When it was my turn to talk to her, she barely spoke; her voice raspy whenever she did try to talk, not that she talked much in those last moments. Voices both raw with emotion and choked tears, we both said how much fun we had hanging out again the previous night and how glad I was that they had invited me to come along. She indicated a bracelet on her wrist and I placed it in the palm of my hands. I noticed it was the one she always wore ever since she was a little girl, that I recall helping her pick out one day when we had gone shopping with our mothers. I squeezed her hand and put the bracelet around my wrist, she smiled. We all cried and watched as each person she held most dear said goodbye one at a time. I do not even begin to imagine how Kate in her broken state still managed to look so strong, knowing she was too weak to continue living and yet having a light in her eyes that seemed to imply she would return soon. If watching Nate's and Kate's parents goodbyes were not hard enough, seeing Kate with Michael left me with a hard-heart; an aching feeling that only continued to spread through my body leaving it numb. At some point I remember feeling like I was barely able to breathe; the sobs that wracked my body were so immense. We were all a disaster though. Each one of us experiencing a pain more profound than anything else we have endured or never believed that we would ever have to endure.

As I think about it now though, it was sad, so sad, but also a relief. I was lucky, in many ways. There could have been all three lives lost in that collision for example. Yet, what I was most grateful for was a chance to say goodbye. Many never receive that chance and that could awaken a pain even more overwhelming than the already heart-wrenching emotions we had experienced. The guilt could only open the wound of grief further and it would leave you wishing that you could just turn back the clock more than you already wanted to for a chance to hear your loved one speak to you again.

We left Kate with her parents towards the end. Nate and I hugging each other tightly outside for what felt like an hour, both of us crying and trying to hold one another up the entire time.

My hands nervously played with the bracelet on my wrist that I never took off. Today is the first presentation I would be giving to students. It had been seven years since Kate had passed away, but the memory still hurt more than imaginable. In many ways, Kate's death changed me in a manner more acute than anything else that I could have experienced in my teenage life. That man, Samuel Martinez, the one who caused all this? I heard had ended up being admitted to a psychiatric center for mental health and depression. I would say it serves him right, for being the reason for all this pain that so many had to suffer, but that is a cruel thought and especially with him reaping the consequences of his actions and regret in a mental health institution. I recall the wake that our high school had put together in her honour, being as Kate was so beloved. Within the passing years though, it seemed like everyone had forgotten about her. No one appeared as deeply affected by her loss as I did, other than Nate and Kate's family of course, but maybe it only appeared to me that way. I always remember one important thought that comes to mind whenever I think about Kate; for a girl who had everything, how easily it could be all be taken away and leave only ruin in its wake.

I eventually continued with my plans for university after weeks of not feeling up to leaving my room following Kate's funeral. Nate did as well as I saw him occasionally seeing as we happened to attend different universities. I decided to study medicine and I am currently a hospital intern learning to become a brain surgeon. I thoroughly volunteered at the hospital where Kate was brought that night of the car crash and I even joined the hospital's program for awareness against drunk drivers. I, along with a team of other hard-working individuals, had created an in-depth program to teach students the horrendous outcome of reckless driving and the repercussions it can have on everything and everyone that are involved with the driver caught driving impaired. Nate, who had remained an ever-faithful friend, is our program's largest benefactor.

"Excuse me," a soft voice interrupted my thoughts.

"Yes?" I addressed the older woman who had spoken.

"We're ready for you, if you'd like to start?"

"Perfect, thank you"

I walked into the room and turned to face about one hundred students who were ready to listen to what I had to say. With a deep breath, I began, "Hi there everyone. I would like to formally welcome and thank you for attending our program here today. My name is Emily Carter and I will be conducting this presentation. Before we begin and get too much into the schedule, I want you to remember one thing from today. If you recollect anything at all that you will learn from this presentation, I always want you to keep this in the back of your mind because it is worth remembering. "Accident" is not a good term to define crashes because "accidents" cannot be prevented, and everything that you will see here today can be…"

THE END