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After dedicating so much time to school, I was beyond excited to be only a week away from graduation. Ready to be finished with college and start the next chapter, but realizing how fast these years had gone by was making me anxious for what was next. It felt like time was going by too quickly, and I was closer to the end than I thought. Then I remembered how graduating isn't the end, it's the first step to the rest of my life.

A few days before graduation, I was with a few friends, making celebratory plans to get drinks for the night of graduation. A few of us wanted to grab dinner at a restaurant close by, while the rest of the group preferred to go to a club downtown. I was worried about someone ending up driving home drunk, but my friend Leah said that she wouldn't care to drink and happily offered to be a designated driver for us. I was always much closer to her than I was with any of the other girls, and I was surprised by her response. Leah had been a party girl since the day I met her, she never passed on anything, and the last thing she would want is to go out and not drink.

Even though I was overthinking, it wasn't enough to make me say anything, and everyone felt good about that plan, so I hoped for the best and let it go. We made our plan to go to the club, but I just couldn't shake this strange feeling about it. I wasn't able to put my finger on why, but an unsettling sense lingered as I left. Maybe it was just stress from graduation, or maybe it was something bigger I couldn't see coming. I ignored it and tried to move forward with my day.

While I was driving home, I heard my phone ringing. I looked over to see my phone on the floor of the passenger side. I could see that it was my mom calling, but I couldn't lean over to get it

while I was driving. I ignored the call, thinking she'd call back if it was urgent. Seconds later, she did.

I waited until I was stopped at the light to try and grab my phone. I reached down but couldn't quite grab it. I took off my seatbelt so I could reach the floor, and I managed to pick it up. I answered the phone and heard how her voice shook as she frantically asked, "Where are you? Are you okay? Are you safe?" I replied calmly, "Yes, I'm on the way back to my apartment. What's going on?" She told me there had been a pileup car accident just down the street from my college campus. I asked how bad the accident was and if they had released more information. She said she had no idea but was worried because she thought I was in the area. I told her I was nowhere near the area where it happened. I said everything was fine, that I was safe, and that I loved her. I hung up the phone and continued heading home.

A couple minutes later, she sent me a text, so I picked up my phone to read what she had sent me, along with some other unread messages and ignored notifications. As I glanced down to check my phone, I looked up just in time to see I was about to run a red light at a busy intersection. Cars were speeding towards me from both directions. I didn't have time to hit my brakes, so I held my breath as I flew through the intersection and feared for my life. Thankfully, no one was hit, and all was okay. Somehow, I made it out, but I was startled by the situation. I pulled off to a nearby street to collect my thoughts and calm down. It felt unreal. How had I let myself get distracted so easily? What I thought was just a simple look down at my phone turned out to be what could have possibly cost me my life and many others.

I immediately put my seatbelt on, turned my phone off, and took another breath before driving back in shock. I arrived home to tell my roommates all about what had just happened while we settled in for the night. As I was lying in bed trying to fall asleep, this unbearable feeling kept

creeping in, as if something awful was about to happen. I told myself again, that maybe it's just stress, especially from what happened today. I considered canceling the after party plans, but I feared I'd regret my choice not to go. I reassured myself that everything would be fine and eventually fell asleep.

About an hour after graduation, I headed back to my apartment. Later in the evening, my sister Liv stopped by while I was getting ready. I explained my doubts about going to the club, sharing how the events from the other day had added to my anxiety. She reassured me that I was overthinking and stressing over nothing, insisting it was a coincidence. As she left, she jokingly said, 'See you later, but never goodbye!'. I smiled and laughed, not knowing it was a final goodbye. Once my friends and I arrived at the club, we headed to the bar and ordered our first drinks. Leah also decided to order about one an hour later. She laughed while promising it would be her only drink of the night. She didn't seem concerned at all, and I knew she shouldn't be drinking. I wanted to say something, but by then, my own judgment was too clouded. If only I had listened to that anxious feeling and made sure we had a smarter plan, none of this would have happened.

Hours later, we were outside, making our way to the car. I noticed Leah stumbling every now and then. I asked if we should call an Uber and pick up the car tomorrow, but no one responded. I don't know if it was that no one heard me or if it was the fact that the alcohol had hit me so hard I couldn't tell whether I was talking out loud or in my head. My awareness faded, and the exhaustion weighed on me. By the time I made it to the car, everything was a blur, and before I knew it, I blacked out.

I woke up in the hospital a week later, and at first had no memory of what had happened. The only part of graduation night that played in my head over and over again was the numb and

lifeless feeling I had while lying on the hood of the car. The memory is foggy, but I recall opening my eyes to find shards of glass surrounding me. I could hear the sound of the car alarm ringing in my ears while not being able to move a muscle. I wished I could close my eyes and make the pain disappear, this instant regret of everything was unbearable to feel while being unable to move or speak.

While lying in the hospital bed, the memory of what happened before the crash started coming back to me in flashes. I began to replay each event that led up to the crash. How had I gone from the most exhilarating moment of my life to the near end of it?. How did I fail so miserably at noticing the signs I was receiving? That lingering sense of fear had turned into pure anger. I was mad at myself for ignoring the signs. I stayed there in disbelief as my mom walked in to update me on the condition of my friends. I had no words left to speak when she very calmly explained to me how I was the only one to survive the accident.

As the tears rolled down my face, I kept wishing I hadn't survived, having to live the rest of my life replaying the choices I made. I knew I had to go home from the hospital at some point, but I was terrified to step out into the world feeling so alone. The girls I was closest to had been taken from my life and from their families' lives at such a young age.

I had my whole life ahead of me, but because of my decisions and fear of speaking up, I have to live every day with the thought in my mind that I am the one to blame for this. I am to blame for the death of my friends and for ruining my future. One reckless choice to drink and drive was all it took to tear down the future of 5 college graduates, including my own.

Staying silent has its risks, but speaking up never kills. Choose your voice over your silence, and arrive alive.