

To My (Late) Brother On His Birthday

Here we are again. It's your birthday, and you're not here. For the second time since you were taken too soon from this earth because of a chance encounter with a drunk driver, your birthday has come around.

See, this situation is new to me, and I'm still adjusting. For all but the last two years of my life, your birthday was one of those bright days of the year that made me smile just to see it show up on the calendar. It was a day when I had a job to do — find you and wish you a happy birthday and maybe even celebrate with you. When we were young this meant a cake and candles, adoring parents and grandparents, hugs and presents. As we grew older the cake and candles shifted to celebratory drinks, since as it turned out you hadn't inherited the sweet tooth I did, and you were not really a fan of cake unless perhaps it was angel food. (I still included the hugs, being a lot like our hug-happy grandmother, more than you were. Did that drive you crazy? I always wondered if it did, but I can't know for sure, because I have lost the opportunity to ask you about it.) Later still, when you lived far away, commemorating the day usually meant calling you on the phone.

Thinking about it, that was probably the last real-time conversation I ever had with you. The birthday call I made to you ten days before you died. I wish I could recall what we talked about. I know it was a nice conversation. Maybe it didn't burn itself into the memory section of my brain because, back then, it was so ordinary. So completely ordinary.

With you gone, your birthday mostly confuses me. The day that used to brim with happiness and purpose now brings sadness and inertia. I cannot call you. I cannot visit you. I cannot annoy you with bone-crushing Grandmother-strength hugs. Honestly, I don't know what to do. Do I sit in a fog and look at photographs? Do I tell funny stories to my kids? Do I call my parents on the phone and fumble over what to say? Do we all avoid each other and sidestep the pain? Do we all gather and face the day together, welcoming whatever jumble of grief and joy comes up?

Your birth is a fact, so this day is still your birthday. It will always be your birthday. No one can take it away from you or from all of us who love you. But the day has irrevocably changed for us.

I still want to celebrate you, and I will, in whatever way feels right. We all will. We might eat something you liked, share photographs, tell stories that help us keep you alive in our minds and our hearts. But there is a deep ocean of loss underneath our celebration. We float on top of it, sitting on a raft cobbled together from the things we know about you, the moments and events we recall, the ideas of yours that we live by. It's a makeshift craft, and the salt water soaks through in places, but it has held up for a couple of years now so I guess it is seaworthy. We patch it up when we need to and hold on, bracing ourselves, wondering where the current will send us.

This much I can do: I send love to you on your birthday. I hope it makes its way to you. And from my corner of the raft I'll raise a glass of pinot noir and a plate of strawberry shortcake.

Cheers.
Love always,
Your sister

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