

To My Brother:

by Cayleigh Jackson¹

My brother was the strongest person I ever knew.

In retrospect, this statement almost seems like a cop-out. It seems overly sentimental, like I'm trying to sugarcoat a long road, or lie to myself about it to make myself feel better. There were a lot of things I felt about my brother and his addicted mind. Frustration, anger, exhaustion, tiredness, fear. I didn't feel admiration. I never once told him he was brave for fighting his fight. I don't know if I ever even really believed it, or noticed it.

But it hit me in the face the moment he was gone. Like any artist never recognized until after they're dead, I never noticed my brother was incredible until it was too late. I never told him. I don't think it would have made a difference.

He fought every day. He never stopped fighting. He failed and failed again and the reason he could fail again in the first place was because he got back up. He tried so hard. It didn't work, but he tried. There's something to be said for that, I think.

I don't want to remember him as an addict. I want to remember him as he was with his loud friends eating salsa in the media room, how he was when he stole my Barbie dolls from me and destroyed them for fun, how he was when he taught me how to do a front flip on the trampoline. I want to remember him when he drove too fast in a car too low to the ground with the windows down and his radio playing rock music so loud I was embarrassed just to be near him. I want to remember him with his stupid beanies and skateboards and electronica music and gages in his ears, the absolute definition of teenage punk, but somehow still down to earth. I want to remember him as he was on the visit to the Naval Academy, head shaved and full of hilarious stories that I could never tell the way he could. I want to remember him catapulting himself off of a tower three stories high, managing flips that I couldn't count before he hit the water.

I used to think he was fearless.

I want to remember him in the way my fifth grade teacher described him—good at being a

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smart-aleck, terrible at poetry. I want to remember him as he looked when I hid in the corner of the room with the piano so I could listen to him play, because he was an inspiration to me, whether he knew it or not. I want to remember him as the chill, forever-late, charismatic guy he was. His smile could light up a whole room.

It would be easy to attach this image to him and forget the other parts. It would be easy to remember him as the kid who scaled mountains in Colorado for fun and not the kid who couldn't get through the night without a sleeping pill. It would be easy to remember him as the guy who playfully debated with his girlfriend about the John Green books and not the one who threatened her because he thought she stole his stash. It would be easy to forget him being the one who stormed out of the house in hazy, medication-induced fits in the middle of the night. It'd be easy to forget the kid whose eyes never both focused at the same time at the dinner table.

But that would belittle the fight.

Of all my revelations since his passing, this is the biggest one yet—both the boy with the goofy smile and the boy with the bags under his eyes, curled into himself at the hospital, were my brother. I used to pretend like after he had become addicted that he was a stranger. I was angry at him all the time. He was exhausting, he always had issues, and I was just trying to get through high school. I wanted that guy—the addicted one—to just go away. I didn't ask for him.

But that guy was my brother. He was my brother in full combat gear and boxing gloves on, and I didn't even bother to stay and watch the fight. He wanted to get better. They always say that that's something you can't force on someone in recovery—you can't make them want it. And at first, in his first few programs, I'm sure he really didn't want it. But toward the end he did. I know he did.

It just wasn't enough.

The boy who had a seizure on the couch was fighting the same war as the boy who once let me jump on his bunk beds. I miss both of them. I miss all of him. And if I could, I would tell him that I'm sorry for demonizing him. He was sick, but he was still human.

He just was what he was—and he was an intelligent kid, an incredible friend, and a fighter. Glossing over the fact that my brother fought desperately against addiction is a disservice to him. I can't just remember the good things. I can't pretend like what he went through was shameful, or somehow all his fault, like he didn't do enough. I want to remember all of him. There's no shame in that.

People will say that he was not brave, was not strong—that he succumbed. But they will never know the truth. Like me, they just saw a good kid and a demon and never stuck around to watch the fight. But I know. And I know that despite everything, Christopher did amazing things. He touched lives everywhere he turned. He was a bright shining light in my life and the lives of many others, and he gave us so many smiles and memories and love that I am endlessly grateful

to have received. I want to return that favor. I want to keep smiling, like he would have, keep shining, like he did, and keep fighting until the very end. He gave us so many gifts in his short time with us here. I'm not going to let go of them.

Even now, I'm still just the same. I'm still the kid in the corner of the room, watching what he did, looking up to him. And one day, I hope to have half the strength that he had to use to fight his war. And I hope he can see me put it to good use.

Just watch, Christopher.