“But We Didn’t”

“He Hello, ma’am?”, said the voice on the other end on the phone. No response. A few moments later, the voice spoke out again: “Ma’am are you okay? Are you still with me?”.

I felt the cold January wind whipping against my face as I laid with my back down into frozen, snow-covered ground. Dirt, rocks, old metal, and broken trees surrounded me. No birds sang. No animals scurried about. “Where was I?”


“Shit”, I thought as I remembered the 911 operator was still on the phone. The last thing I said to her was “THE CAR IS ON FIRE” and then I, without thinking, quite literally jumped off of the side of a cliff.

Once I regained my bearings, I began to speak to the 911 operator. She asked me my location, but I could not tell her. I did not know where I was. “Damn it. You have lived in the same city for your entire life and you do not know the street names? What is wrong with you?” I kept trying to give her a description of where I was, but my mind was all over the place.

“Where was my mom and sister?”

Just then, I heard the horrid sound of metal scraping and I looked up to see the car rocking. “Shit, shit, shit. The car is coming down...WITH MY MOM AND SISTER IN IT”. I ran as far as I could while still keeping my gaze fixated on the car. I waited for the worst, but it never came. Next thing I know, my sister came barreling down the hill at top speed. She reached the bottom and I ran over to hug her. “She’s okay”, I thought as I breathed a sigh of relief.

“Where’s mom?”, I asked, but my sister was too shaken to speak. I told the 911 operator that my sister was okay. I had already explained the situation to the operator while I was still in the car. However, when I saw what looked like smoke and flames billowing out from the hood,
my instincts kicked in and I thoughtlessly jumped out of the car. My sister and I waited there for a few moments unsure what our next course of action should be.

Until we heard a voice.

“KEEP MOVING OVER”, the voice demanded. My sister and I obliged. Then, I heard the bone-chilling sound of the metal again. No emotions filled my body. My brain was so overwhelmed by the noise that I could not process what it meant.

At that moment, my mom came down the hill just like my sister. I could see her body jerking every which way as she was sliding at the mercy of the hill. Upon arrival, she was in a state of shock. She was shaking, panicking, and talking incoherently. The 911 operator heard me yell “MOM” and asked if she could speak to her. I put her on the phone, but nothing that came out of her mouth, at least not anything that made sense. She gave me back the phone and the operator asked me if my mom spoke English. That question still makes me laugh.

We waited and waited for help to arrive. We were all freezing and impatient; just waiting for this nightmare to end. However, while my sister and mom were still visibly shaken, I was not. My mind was normal. I still do not know why. Maybe my brain knew that I had to be the one in charge of the situation because no one else was mentally coherent enough to be. Perhaps my body did not know how to process the trauma yet.

Eventually, help arrived. My mom and sister were driven out of the woods by quads, but I had to be hoisted up the side of the cliff in a stretcher-type sled. I was fine, but I was shaking so badly that the EMTs thought I was in shock or had some type of neurological issue. They wrapped a blanket around me, but I felt no difference. I was still frozen solid and the trauma still had not set in. I felt empty both mentally and physically.
That night was when it all started to settle in. I could hear the sounds of us screaming as my mother tried so viciously to regain control of the car. I could still see the images of the car smashing into tree after tree. Most importantly, I could still hear that sound; the sound of the metal crunching and rocking back and forth.

I was overwhelmed with guilt. “What if the shift in weight when you jumped out of the car, caused the car to roll? What if your impulsive decision killed your family? Why didn’t you think before you jumped? Why were you so stupid?”.

These thoughts plagued my brain for months. I had horrible nightmares. Everytime I would close my eyes, I flashed back to those moments when I thought I was going to die. Or worse, my family was going to die right in front of me.

During the day, I was constantly reminded of the trauma because I had slight nerve damage from the crash. I felt “pins and needles” in my hands and feet constantly. My limbs were numb most of the time and so was I. My school made me see a therapist because it was visible that I was not “myself” since the accident. I could not feel anything, physically or mentally, anymore.

I only went to that therapist once. I did not care if she could help me. I just wanted to move on. I was sick of people showing me newspapers and news stories of me, asking me what happened, and most importantly, asking me if I was “okay”. Whenever someone did, I thought to myself, “Well, what do you think, genius?”.

After a few months almost everything subsided. The nightmares, the “pins and needles”, and the constant “are you okay” were all gone. Everything except the guilt.

Until one day, I started reflecting back on that fateful day and began to realize how many different ways that day could have ended. My family and I could have died in the crash, the car
could have rolled, we all could have crashed into trees on the way down the cliff, and we could have suffered severe injuries.

“But we didn’t”.

That three word phrase lingered in my mind for what felt like hours. I was meant to be here on this Earth for a purpose, so I needed to stop blaming myself up for things that did not occur. I had to stop asking “why did this happen to me?” and begin asking “what did this experience do for me?”. I had to move on. No, not just move on, but move forward.

Why? Because I have more to accomplish in this lifetime.