

You never know
when



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

"Come now," her text read. That was all she needed to say. Within seconds, I was in my mom's car. As I drove, I concentrated on keeping my eyes dry, trying not to think about what I was about to do. My muscles were tense, my teeth were clenched, and the closer I got to her house, the faster the blood pumped through my body. Confusion and terror took over my thoughts, making my attention to the road unreliable. I had never had to use so much willpower to focus on my driving. The world seemed to be standing still at this very moment.

That feeling I have never felt before, of total sadness. I felt faint and dazed as if I were falling or dreaming. I expected this was going to happen, but I could never be prepared for it. I didn't know what to say, I was totally speechless. I was burning up, I felt dizzy but not much tears were coming down my face. I had to hurry and get there. I wanted to escape or runaway anything to make this feeling fade. But I knew it was time once I got the text. I just didn't want to believe it was happening after everything.

Part of me wanted to scream my heart out and the other part wanted to hit something with the anger that was raging inside of me. I was angry because I couldn't help her even though I desperately wished I could. I felt defenseless because I knew there was nothing I could do. Once her house finally appeared, I ripped the keys from the ignition. As I ran to her front door, I wondered if I should be sprinting toward this daunting event, but my trembling hands were already turning the doorknob. "She's dying," she told me a couple of weeks before.

I don't remember hearing anything after that. Maybe it was because her sobs made her words inaudible, or maybe I had stopped listening, but either way, I had not believed her. Being best friends with a straightforward girl whose mother was battling sickle-cell gave me many speechless moments. This was one of them. I held the phone to my ear as I listened to her cry painfully. Finally, I managed to whisper, " No ... " I wanted to say, " That's not true," or " It'll all get better soon," but how did I know that?

Each time I promised her that she would get better; my words were contradicted by her doctors. The hospital visits were ending with more depressing news, but I still had not believed her. I wasn't willing to accept that things like this happened to people I knew. Now here I was, standing in her laundry room. She hugged me and whispered, " Be strong. " Then she pointed to her mother's bedroom. Entering the room, my emotions escaped from me as if I had taken too big of a breath and let it loose. Insuppressible sobs shook my body as I reached for her hand.

But this wasn't the woman I knew - the lady who taught me how to speak a second language, the silly lady who sang along to " Keep It To Myself" while bringing us home from school which was three minutes away, or even the woman who became my second mother during a trip to New Orleans just six months earlier. I was holding the hand of sickle-cell. Pimples peppered her darkened face, and her skin was loose from the weight she had lost. I couldn't believe it had actually happened. The past few months had been like an incredible journey and this was now the end.

The end being she was no longer here, never to be seen again. How do you say good-bye to someone who knows she's dying? I didn't want my last moments with her to be heavy-hearted. Fighting my irregular breathing, I began to list all the nappy times we had shared. I thanked her for the vacations I went on, and for the compassionate, strong, beautiful daughter she had raised. When I finished, I said, " I will miss you. I love you. " I was no longer shaking as I gave her hand a gentle squeeze. That day shaped the way I live. I realized that no one is invincible.

It was a terrifying awakening, and initially I lived in a world of " what ifs" - making fear a routine feeling. In time, I came to a different conclusion: I need to appreciate life; I cannot allow myself to take it for granted, because I don't know when my life and the lives around me will come to an end. My continued decision to be chemical-free comes from my realization that I am lucky to have a body that sustains me. I have learned to forgive easily. We've all heard the phrase, " Our time is precious; we shouldn't waste it," but it wasn't until I held death's hand that I learned to live that way.