

# To the Dead Bird in the Target Parking Lot

FLASH FICTION

Amanda Chen, Grade 12. Westlake High School, Austin, TX. Gold Key, 2019.

Dead Bird in the Target parking lot,

Hi. I'm not too sure how to start this . . . it's three in the morning, and I have no idea what to say to you. I'm sorry?

I can't stop thinking about how you died. A car came by; there were birds in its path. In moments like that, I always wonder if the birds are going to get away, and they always do. But you didn't.

You tried to get away, but you hit the car's bumper on your way up. I remember praying that you'd get up or army crawl out of the way or something. But you just laid there. And then the car ran over you, and you died. You didn't even twitch. It all happened in probably half a second.

You were there, and then you weren't. And then I started crying.

Don't take it personally, but looking back, I don't think I was crying just for you. The truth is you died in the same way that my six-month-old brother died: suddenly. I cried for you just as I cried for him. I cried because it wasn't fair. I cried because I hated how one moment you could be in a dirty parking lot or in an antiseptic hospital, but gone in the next. I cried because I missed him.

He was twelve years younger than me, and I loved him—still do. I took him out on walks in his blue stroller, warmed up formula, burped and bathed him, sang to him under my breath, and dressed him in outfits that matched mine. I pushed his cradle up to the piano and played Mozart's Sonata in D Major, smiling at his giggly accompaniment. And when he was hospitalized because of bird flu, I held on to his tiny hand and a desperate hope for forty-five days, humming Mozart between broken sobs. I prayed for the first time in my life. It felt like I sat there under that stupid painting of a cartoon giraffe for years just staring at him, willing him to get better. But he didn't.

I often wonder about the impact your death had on your family. Are they pacing their nest or birdhouse waiting for you to return? Do they refuse to talk to your siblings about it because it's easier to forget? Does your dad work overtime just to deal with the pain? Does your mom whisper in her sleep that she doesn't want to live anymore, knowing that her other children are only a room away and the walls are paper thin?

I want to thank you for making me cry. I know that's weird, but I've never really been able to acknowledge the pain. It's easier to fake a smile and pretend that everything's fine even when my chest aches with grief and a million unspoken words. It's easier to talk about a hard calculus test at the dinner table than about the night I spent crying into my brother's old blanket. It's easier to try to forget.

Except, somehow, the easier hurts a whole lot more, and forgetting doesn't fix anything.

I don't want to forget anymore. I don't want to hide my brother's picture in a government textbook where I know my parents won't see it. I don't want to flinch at the sight of a random six-year-old boy, the age my brother would be now if he were still alive. I don't want to cry when playing Mozart because it's so empty with the ghost of his laughter. I want to remember: you, him, the pain, all of it.

I promise. ■

## Discussion Questions

You've been asked to create a public service announcement or video for parents on how they can talk to their kids about grief. **List just three suggestions for how they can do this—what would you say in this video?**

Sometimes the most innocent situations remind us of previous losses. They are connected, the most distant and the intimate both speak to how we experience death in our lives. A helpless bird, a baby brother—no other characteristics are the same except for suddenness. **How has grief resurfaced when you least expected it?**

## Writing Prompt

Young people are incredibly observant. They can catalog all the ways death changes their lives and how others respond—what they do, what they say and most of all, how they shield, protect, and avoid talking about the loss with the surviving siblings. **Write about one time you knew much more than the adults in your home thought you knew.**