

## Going Viral

“Do you wanna get some hot chocolate?” My mom asked as I noticed her shiver as we walked through Central Park. It was December 1st, and the day after my birthday and although the sky was cold and gray, I felt good being with my mom. It was my first time experiencing the harsh New York winter and just happened to be the most festive time of the year. As we walked along 59th street, my mom ran to get us hot chocolate and I stayed back to enjoy watching the people in the park. I noticed the kids playing and laughing by the playground and a couple embracing each other. There was a certain liveliness being here that I had never seen before. I even wondered what it would be like if I moved here and could see this everyday. Red and green lights flashed in front of the different vendors selling all kinds of knick knacks and souvenirs caught my eye.

As I stood there alone just admiring everything, I was approached by a young man close to my age. He had a friendly demeanor and asked how my day was going. He then asked, “Can I interview you for a video I’m doing?”

I didn’t see the problem and replied immediately, “Sure.” He then asked if I was okay being on camera and I nodded in consent. I wondered what all this was about and figured maybe this was his homework or something. He then proceeded to ask me a few questions along the lines of how old I was, how old I felt, and whether I was happy or not and why.

Right off the bat, I told him, "I just turned twenty-one yesterday."

Then he asked me, "how old do you feel?" I'm not sure how or why but I knew exactly how to answer this. "Fifteen," I said.

He asked me, "how come?"

At that point, something changed and I didn't like him putting me on the spot and being asked such personal questions. Still a door had been opened and I knew I had to be completely honest with him. I continued and said, "I lost somebody very special to me at that age and have felt stuck since."

I didn't think I would be sharing this information with anyone, especially a complete stranger. Talking about this stirred many emotions I kept buried for a long time. But it was true. For the past five years, I had been stuck from the trauma of losing my brother. I felt like a child clinging on to the past through childhood memories and not wanting to let go. I missed out on big opportunities and being present during my high school years. I was hanging on to this past version of myself because that was the last time I had seen my brother. I had felt like I had been stuck in the year 2016 and it was almost the end of 2021. I couldn't describe it, it was just something unsaid and private to me and only to me.

I was brought back into the conversation when the young man asked me if I was comfortable sharing whom I had lost. I had no problem telling him it was "My brother, he was my best friend."

He apologized for my loss and then stopped filming. With confidence, he said, "Your video is going to go viral."

With that I was confused and surprised by his comment as we said goodbye. That's when my mom walked up handing me a hot chocolate and asked what that was about. I did not know what to think of what he just said, it was such a quick interaction and I had been honest and vulnerable with a stranger on camera. The word, "viral" filled me with anxiety, but I had to shake it off because I had no idea what he even meant by that "How will that go viral?" I pondered to myself. I had to tell myself to forget about what had happened in Central Park and just be as present as possible with my mom, so that's what I did. I had to completely forget about it.

A month goes by as I am back home in Austin, shopping at one of my favorite clothing stores. I receive a text from my friends sending me a video and asking, "Is this you, Jenna?" Sure enough, glancing at my phone for a second, I realized it was in fact me. That young man had posted a video of me in Central Park to social media and the video had well over a million views, with several comments coming in by the minute. My heart then sank. I was filled with anxiety for so many reasons. It brought back that day in the park being vulnerable with a stranger but also was about my brother. Now people were commenting about me, my grief and how they felt for me. This was bizarre to me because it was so private and something I was currently dealing with. The fact these people were commenting so easily and flippantly over my situation and my pain was unsettling.

Some people were making assumptions about how I felt when I didn't feel this way at all. It was all very strange. I had to put my phone away and not think about anything. "Deep breaths," I told myself. I needed to leave my favorite clothing store immediately, I just needed to be alone and process what I was experiencing. My hands

were starting to shake, my heart beating faster and I couldn't walk to my car fast enough.

When I sat down and I was alone, I was able to compose myself and looked at this video again. After watching the video again and again, I went to the comments and actually read what was being said. It was overwhelming to read from people that did not know me or even my brother. The thoughts that came to mind and what sadness these strangers felt for me. They did not know my situation but were so quick to offer their kindness and share how they felt similar. Strangers who felt bad for me and wanted to give me a hug, to strangers that could relate to what I was going through. Comments like, "This is exactly what happened to me, I never realized I was stuck" and other comments about me being so courageous to share my feelings.

This opened another door for me, helping me to realize that I was not alone. My video had touched so many people and it even made me start to question my thinking and change my perspective. It's incredible to think that a twenty second video and a couple of questions could change my life and help me to accept and embrace the trauma from losing my brother. It was from that point on, that I no longer felt stuck and fifteen. I finally felt twenty-one.