

The deserted interstate was disrupted by the unnatural presence of the Kia Sorento. On that frigid and silent night, people were inside their warm homes, celebrating the holiday with loved ones. My mother could think of nothing more than her own family that awaited her at the end of the two-hour journey. The worst thing about this Christmas had been my mother's cold, but she had not let her setback squander the Christmas spirit in our house. In the empty car, my mother's hands dug for tissues under the seat. The tips of her outstretched fingers barely grazed the tissue box as her unyielding seatbelt stubbornly gripped her in the driver's seat. Her frustrated eyes glanced down for too long, searching for something she would not reach. When her gaze returned to the pavement, white, reflective eyes met her chestnut brown ones, holding her gaze for mere seconds before impact.

Her foot futilely rushed to the brake, scarcely softening the blow. The deer's muscular body held strong against the massive slab of metal, sending the car veering off in an unknown direction. The airbag overwhelmed the car, suffocating my mother with its overpowering closeness and blinding her for what seemed like an eternity. Fate snatched control from her frantic hands that tried to steer the car off the road. The never-ending moment was over in an instant, the car crawling to a stop on the edge of the asphalt. White-hot shock wrapped around my mother's heart, hands still locked on the useless wheel of the mangled vehicle. Silence slithered into the car, occupying every seat and savoring the hauntingly serene space. The darkened interstate had returned to normalcy, quiet restoring itself despite the previous scene of chaos. My mother's cold was no longer the worst thing about this Christmas.

For my entire life my mom had been my dependable chauffer, always obeying the speed limit, watching for other drivers, and maintaining unwavering focus on the road. I had never considered her a distracted driver, especially after riding with drivers that constantly gaze into a

demanding screen or consume an entire feast while holding their lives in their hands. But on that Christmas night, my mother fell into that category of careless texters and reckless navigators when she took her focus off the road, resulting in a crash that could have ended her life. She was one of the lucky ones, walking away from the accident without a scratch. This was not only a wakeup call for her, but for me as well.

Hearing about my mother's alarming experience has opened my eyes to what distracted driving really means. Before this incident, I was under the misconception that cell phone use was the only source of distracted driving. I was wrong. People are easily distracted, whether it is by cell phones, blaring radios, and even other occupants in the vehicle. Driving itself is a constant battle of focusing on the road, checking mirrors, maintaining the correct speed, reading road signs, and watching for other drivers, all while trying to reach a destination. Despite all of this, it is easy to feel in control with both hands on the wheel and a foot by the brake. It feels okay for our overconfident selves to glance at the radio for just a few seconds while coasting down the interstate. I know how it feels because I am a teenage driver and I feel this way. However, nothing about distracted driving is okay.

Putting an end to distracted driving is going to take more than one inspired individual, but this one person could be the catalyst for change and potentially save a life. Parents need to be the epitome of responsible driving, setting an example for their children every time they operate a vehicle. When teenagers see their friends checking their cell phones or wavering their focus, they need to speak up and explain why this is not okay. That voice or constant reminder could be what saves someone's life.

I am honored by the fact that this voice could be mine. I was inspired by my mother's accident to apply changes to my own driving habits. My hand does not make contact with my

phone at any point that I am behind the wheel. I do not attempt to retrieve objects that are out of my reach and I set the radio station prior to starting my trip. When I am riding with another driver, I offer to respond to cell phone messages, change the radio station, and do whatever it takes to eliminate outside distractions. I hope that my actions encourage others to not only assist other drivers, but to drive more responsibly as well.

Thankfully, today there are various ways to decrease distracted driving. It is common now to see vehicles with Bluetooth that keep drivers' hands safely on the wheel. Some cell phones have a program that prevents drivers from receiving messages until they are no longer driving. Steering wheel controls and voice commands can eliminate the need to reach for the radio or cell phone. Through more technological advances, distracted driving could be severely reduced and precious lives saved. This may seem unattainable, but in a world of three-dimensional printers, virtual reality, and advanced prosthetics, anything is possible.

I am not saying that my mother should have ignored her need for a tissue because most people would have done the same thing. Instead, she could have pulled to the side of the road and safely retrieved the package. It is crucial that all drivers, teen or adult, become aware of the responsibility that comes with operating a vehicle. Every split-second decision could determine whether a driver arrives safely to the destination or a nearby emergency room. Every driver has a choice, and in the future, I hope that the world is a place where drivers choose to eliminate distracted driving. *Now* is the time for change, and with united determination, we can change the world.