

## Be Careful What You Wish For

As we got closer to showtime my nerves only got worse. Even with one night of our forgettable production under my belt, I couldn't help but feel the terror grow more and more inside of me. The dark, ominous backstage only ramped up the anticipation. Our stage in reality is small and nothing special, but on that night it felt as big as a Broadway theater. The small, excited cast of Monticello High Schools production of *Be Careful What You Wish For* was ready to entertain the small community of Monticello.

I must have burned a few hundred calories from all the pacing I was doing. While I have had experience in theatrics before, having a lead role in the production was a whole new experience for my young fourteen year-old self.

Whitney, a friend, actress, and fellow freshman was a face of comfort during this stressful time. She was truly the only person who could sympathize with the uneasy emotions I was feeling. We were nearly ten minutes away from the much anticipated curtain rise when she dropped the bomb on me.

“Have you heard about Jaden?” She asked with a concerned look on her face. Having no idea what she was talking about, she showed me her phone. On the screen was a text from her friend telling her the news that one of our fellow classmates Jaden had taken his own life.

I instantly opened up my phone and texted a good friend of mine and Jaden's, Robert.

“Hey”, I texted him. “Is the news about Jaden true?”

All I got back was a simple “Yes”.

Suddenly this looming task of performing in front of everyone's parents and grandparents was pushed to the back of my brain.

With my cue to get on stage coming closer and closer I tried to get my mind in the moment and focus on the task at hand. But no matter how hard I tried, I just could not get myself to care about such a small thing in comparison to the death of a loved one. As the seconds came closer and closer to my appearance, I started to feel real panic. How the hell am I going to get through this, I thought to myself as I came striding out.

The next hour of my life went by like a blur. My hours of practicing my role had really paid off. My body went into autopilot and was able to say the right words and make the right expressions. My mindless performance was luckily sufficient enough to get by on such an awful night.

As soon as the curtain closed, I could feel my brain regain control of my body. The smile left my face as I was once again flooded with the questions concerning Jaden's choice to take his own life. It wasn't longer than five minutes after curtain call that the rest of the cast had heard the news. As tears were shed and hugs given around me, my instinct led me to find my mother, breaking the school tradition to meet the audience in the front foyer of my high school to chat.

With my mind slowly starting to regain control, I needed a comforting person to run to. I went around the curtain, hopped down the stage, and made my way to the tech booth in the back of the room. The slight incline as I went from row to row felt like a mountain. As I suspected, my mom had already heard the news. Tears were welling up in her eyes as she embraced me.

"How are you doing sweetheart?," she asked as we held each other to help try and combat the shock of the situation

Without thinking I just let out a simple "Okay". My young mind had not quite comprehended what had happened to my dear friend

With my brain back at the helm, I couldn't help but feel an overwhelming anger. Anger at Whitney for breaking the news to me at such a bad time. Anger at myself for not somehow magically knowing what Jaden was feeling and going through. Anger at Jaden for committing such a dumb, selfish act. If you were to ask me and my classmates to give one word to describe Jaden, it would undoubtedly be happy. What had happened to push my lifelong friend to take his own life?

I had yet to even shed a tear over the loss of my classmate. Besides the initial shock and few minutes after wrapping up the production, I had honestly yet to feel any emotion at all over the news. I hadn't learned how to mourn in a healthy way at that point. Not only was it difficult for me to even process such news, but I also greatly struggled with emotional expression even after the tragedy was fully accepted. I didn't fully break down until the next afternoon while sitting in my mom's classroom. As childhood memories with my dear friend Jaden flooded my brain, I couldn't help but to fall apart.

The sudden 180 degree turn of emotions felt that night was jarring to say the least. What was supposed to be an intimidating but exciting night turned into a shocking life experience. At the young age of fourteen, the death of a friend never crosses one's mind. This unpredictable act committed by Jaden would be tough enough to comprehend on its own, but to then have to try and transport viewers of the play into a different world seemed like an impossible task. While I now have a better grasp on how to deal with tragic loss, at the time the concept was foreign to me. The tragedy and the circumstances surrounding it definitely made it a night that I will never forget.

While most people deal with a suicide in their lifetime, it is definitely rare to have to go through two before the age of eighteen. Unfortunately, I am a part of that rare group. Earlier this

January, I had to experience the pain of another close friend taking their own life. Having already gone through this once before, it was interesting to see how I dealt with these tragedies differently. Similar to my experience with Jaden, my brain almost became numb. Only this time it stayed numb. Not once during this experience did I feel any extreme emotion. While it pains me to admit it, it's the truth. Experiencing such an unpredictable tragedy at such a young age numbed me to loss. You then pile on even more painful experiences like the death of uncles and grandparents, the loss of a traditional Junior and Senior year due to a pandemic all add to, and overwhelm, the normal teenage pains of growing up. Now I'm not saying that I am some emotionless, cold being, but I can't help but notice the early loss of childhood innocence that I have experienced. In our younger years we want nothing more than to grow up, and now that we've got here, the majority of us want nothing more than to be able to go back and experience the freeing feeling of being a child once again.