

Fault Lines

PERSONAL ESSAY & MEMOIR

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As much as I tried to hide it, I wanted none of their sympathies. Despite my evasive maneuvers, the woman wandered to the seat beside mine at my older brother's memorial. She shook her head and placed her hand on my grieving shoulder, "Bella, it's God's will, you know."

I had already stopped listening.

"Ivan had a kind heart. That wasn't him. He didn't take his life. Evil controlled his mind."

I began to listen now. I was eager to rebut. I said, "I mean, he still made mistakes and did bad things. He wasn't perfect."

She almost sounded excited to respond. "Yes, but he was a good kid."

As much as people wanted to console me, they could not imagine I had been preparing for his death for many years. They didn't know how I'd had to live with the responsibility of being his caretaker. His substance abuse made me, at 14 and 15 years old, his personal lifeguard.

I processed the grief long before his suicide, so sometimes I seemed insensitive. It's hard for people to imagine something worse than death. My anticipation of people's judgment formed a boulder resting on my throat; I dreaded wasting breath to explain why I felt this way.

I was the one who revived him after he overdosed on the weekends. Sleepless with excitement for my first debate tournament, I heard him come home, start up the stairs, and fall. His head hit the floor; banging, seizing, convulsing on the tile. My parents woke up to find me cradling him above the floor, blood pooling in my hands. He threw up a stomach full of alcohol and blood.

I was the one who cleaned off the coke from his kitchen table after school. I'm haunted by the quotidian act of wiping away the powder, rather than empty plates and glasses, to finish Algebra homework.

Grieving someone I was ashamed to say I was glad was gone felt isolating. A fault line began to form inside me. I felt unsteady and confused, but this is where I learned the importance of embracing the unpleasant.

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"Do you miss him?" my therapist inquires.

Sitting on stiff chairs in a room, she asks me in a monotone voice.

"I don't know," I said.

"Well, do you wish he were here right now?"

If he were still alive, there would have been 5 more visits to rehab, and many more years of my family's life eroded. It was more painful to imagine him living extra years and dying an even more tragic death than it had been to mourn his death over the past year.

I held my breath before a terrifying confession.

"No."

We both sat there in silence for a little bit. Soaking this in.

"I don't miss him."

She leaned back into her chair, and I looked up at her. I had just pushed a boulder to its resting place.

Finally.

Becoming strong has required sickening levels of uncomfortable honesty. I learned how to stick up for myself and be unapologetically free as I confessed my relief in his death. My core shook. My values shifted, making room for my most important value today: Change only happens when I embrace the painfully uncomfortable. When I sense a fault line form, I do not allow it to dissuade me. My resolution is worth inducing earthquakes. I no longer flinch at a presumed judgment or shocking revelation. Asking for help when it feels impossible, speaking up in class when no one else is, and confronting difficult topics with friends is how I embrace the uncomfortable. Because if it doesn't make me uncomfortable, it's not going to change me. So I let it. ■