

My Story

A Sibling's Response to Grief

Anonymous

The water was only waist deep at the end of the dock. The young man, athletic and smart, was having such a good time in the company of his pals celebrating their 1968 high school graduation that he didn't pause to notice this before he dove in, Li'l Abner style.

The young man was my older brother, Tom. I was 16-years-old and my family's entire world changed that day. But, as my grandmother told me when I arrived home to this news, "There's no sense crying about it. He'll be fine. Life goes on." With that guidance from my loving and wise grandmother, it took me 32 years to even ask my brother what happened that day.

Prior to this accident, Tom had his sights set on being an Olympic skier, and I have no doubt he'd have accomplished this goal. He had been a multi-talented athlete and the Minnesota State Nordic Ski champion for two years in high school which earned him a full-ride college scholarship. He was so physically gifted, and these gifts were highly favored in our family, our community, our culture. I was the artist, writer, a student of languages and literature.

My brother's accident was such a significant event, but I can't remember one conversation with anyone in my family about what this meant for his future, or MY future. How should we proceed with our lives? I had no idea then that sadness and grief was a normal reaction. I did not witness anyone openly grieving. Just my grandmother's words, "It'll be fine. Life goes on." Many years later, my mother told me that my aunt had advised my parents that this tragedy should not be allowed to interfere with my senior year in high school. So I was allowed, even encouraged, to avoid the whole ordeal.

I can only recall one visit to see my brother in the hospital after several surgeries to fuse the vertebrae in his neck that he had crushed when his head hit the bottom of the lake. He was immobilized in traction for weeks, and it was expected he would be paralyzed. He needed to be fed then, which I tried to do once. It didn't go well, so I gave up. He spent months in a rehab facility where he regained some use of his extremities and proved his doctors wrong, and learned to walk – first with crutches, then a walker, then a cane – testimony to his perseverance which, in our family, is legendary. During my infrequent visits, I never heard him complain about anything.

In the months following Tom's injury, I became a raging anorexic/bulimic. There were no words at that time for those disorders. I was in college and in a relationship with one of Tom's best friends. I failed miserably at both of those. I joined some friends on a two

week ski trip ‘out west’ over the winter semester break intending to go home and salvage my 1.8 GPA. We ended up in Jackson, Wyoming, a beautiful place with amazing skiing and within four days I’d found a job and a couch to sleep on. My friends went home without me. I just couldn’t go back to my life. For several years, I rarely communicated with my family.

In Wyoming, I strived to be the athlete my brother could no longer be. I ran, cycled, climbed, skied, and leapt from one risky adventure to the next without slowing down to pay attention to the beautiful places I was living in or traveling through. My crazy relationship with food escalated to a level I will probably never describe to anyone. And, as with food, I binged on sex. It was sort of acceptable in that place, at that time. It’s unbelievable to me now to think about it. It was as though I couldn’t get comfort from anything or anyone. I would ravenously consume a meal, or a guy, and then immediately purge it, or him. Somehow, I was able to build lasting friendships and hold down a series of jobs to support myself and no one knew the anguish and guilt beneath my physical façade of happiness, health, strength, and confidence.

I met a man in 1976 who reminded me of my brother and my father and with whom I figured I’d have strong, intelligent children. That’s the only explanation I can give for why I married him six months later. In doing so, I found enough stability to stop starving myself, over-exercising, binging, and purging. But this marriage was volatile and unhappy from the start. Nonetheless, we made it work for eighteen years, and had two strong, intelligent, well-adjusted children. I think we have been good parents in spite of such a dysfunctional relationship which I feel responsible for.

As my marriage was falling apart, I went to counseling. While my dysfunctional marriage was the reason I sought help, it was my relationship with my family and the fallout of Tom’s accident that instantly became the focus of my counseling sessions. After the first session, during which I told *for the first time* what I’ve written in this story, the psychologist said with tears in her eyes, “Well...you survived.”

Meanwhile, my brother has had a good life in his own way. He went to college though not on the athletic scholarship he’d earned. He achieved bachelor’s degrees in political science and nutrition. He has worked steadily and has been successful in his chosen career. He is now 64-years-old and still able to walk short distances with a walker, but he is increasingly dependent on a wheelchair and a scooter. He lives an independent but isolated life. He drives, but not safely, and will not consider any modifications to his vehicle to make him safer on the road. This is the same legendary perseverance/STUBBORNESS that has propelled him his entire life. And I have never once heard him complain.

My relationship with my family, my parents and two brothers, has been erratic. I admitted to my parents several years ago that I hit a point after Tom's injury where I just needed to get away. I still cannot articulate what I was getting away from. They were so sad to hear me say this, and it sparked the first conversation we'd ever had with each other about the magnitude of that event in all of our lives. My mother shared her experience of being in a social situation with people from our small suburban community shortly after the accident and not one person acknowledged or spoke to her. She sat alone through a meal and some sort of ceremony and left in tears. My father revealed that he'd left a promising job interview sobbing uncontrollably. These things happened within months of Tom's accident yet none of shared them with each other until decades later. My younger brother probably got through it better than the rest of us. It's my theory that he smoked so much pot during those years that just sort of went over his head (or under it since he was 'high'). We all suffered so quietly and so separately for so long.

I'm not sure where to close this story as it is ongoing. My father died ten years ago. My mother is well and is my brother's main companion and housekeeper though they do not live together. I have tried to spend more time visiting them, and am able now to participate in anticipating the challenges that lie ahead of him.

It was emotionally exhausting for me to write this story. I pretty much wept my way through it. There is still a huge hole in my heart and a well of guilt and grief that won't be filled...but it is no longer swirling and bottomless.

One day, in tears, I mustered the courage to ask Tom about the circumstances of his injury 32 years after it occurred. He responded, dry-eyed and somewhat detached, that it was his own fault. A stupid mistake. He was showing off. He hadn't been drinking. He said he's never shed a tear over it.

And he never complains. Life goes on.