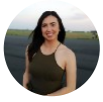
What Love Means After My Brother’s Suicide

After losing my brother, I learned to rethink love



Cindy Brzostowski

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Photo: Rika Hayashi/Getty Images

When I was five years old and on a family vacation in Hawaii, my older brother Adam and I missed our sweet Sheltie dog, Charlie, so much that we refused to leave the hotel room. We were sneaky little masterminds and we had come up with a clever way to resolve our pining: We would stay right there inside our hotel room — foregoing the pristine beaches and perfect summer breeze for the starchy hotel comforters and artificial cooling of the air conditioning — and we would sleep. Going to bed would make the time go by faster. Plus, being unconscious meant we wouldn't have to keep feeling that painful separation as the hours ticked by. The more we slept, the sooner we would see Charlie again.

It must have been Adam's idea. He was seven years old at the time and the gears in his brain were always churning with practical thoughts, solutions, and plans. While I was dreaming up dramatic romances for my Barbies, he was busy building intricate Lego models without a peek at the instructions. I loved that when I followed him into middle school, and then into high school, I already had a reputation waiting for me. I was "that smart kid's" sister. He was the kid in math classes above his grade level, the kid with all the answers. However different our personalities, I relished anything that linked me to Adam.

To this day, I still employ our way to cheat time, mostly when I'm on plane rides. Sleeping through an entire flight means I can skip watching the minutes and hours slowly inch along. Instead, I wake up exactly where I want to be or with the person I want to see, as if no time had passed at all.

When my brother took his own life a little over four years ago, I wished I could use our childhood trick once again. This time, I would close my eyes and wake up in a time and place with him still in it.

I found out on a Wednesday afternoon. I was at work in New York City at my first "big girl" job. My dad was the one to call and deliver the devastating news that Adam's life was suddenly over. I walked into my boss's office and handed him my phone. My dad wanted to explain the situation; he didn't want me to be left alone. I watched my boss receive the news as everything turned simultaneously blurry and bright. The people and things around me faded out of my vision, leaving me as a lone figure in a hazy world without distinct lines or direction.

Emptied out and frozen, I felt like an automaton that couldn't function without someone else's guidance or orders. My coworker asked for my credit card and ID to book my flight home for that evening. My boss helped me gather my things. He scurried around the office explaining our sudden departure while I sat in his chair, too stunned to continue the sobbing that had started when I was standing alone in the stairwell, on the phone, asking my parents again and again if they were sure.

During the cab ride to LaGuardia Airport, accompanied by my boss, my brain jumpstarted like a revolving door of trivial thoughts and dark realizations.

My class was supposed to start tonight. I'd need to email the professor and tell him to not expect me anymore.

What should I do with those two books on my shelf that I was going to give Adam for his birthday?

Would my parents be able to handle losing a child, or is this the sort of heartbreak couples get divorced over?

What am I going to tell people when they ask if I have any siblings?

Anyone I meet from now on will never get to know my brother or that piece of my life.

On my flight home, I had the whole row to myself. What would've been a pleasant surprise for any solo traveler was a somewhat frightening gift in my current state. It was my first moment of being completely alone with my sadness. Because it was a late flight, the lights in the cabin were off and I sank into the dark cover, masking my constant stream of tears.

More than ever before, I needed Adam's old trick. I desperately wanted a blank, thought-free sleep to save me from four hours of suppressing the urge to throw up and feeling my throbbing headache. But unlike other flights, I knew our childhood technique was no match for the grief I was feeling. Sleep wouldn't rid me of this pain; it would only forestall the harsh reality that was waiting at my destination. From this point onward, my life was always going to be broken into distinctly separate halves: before he was gone and after I lost him.

I'm now well into the "after," and more than anything, I struggle with how to love Adam now that he is not physically here. It's never been a question of whether my love for him exists; it's a matter of how exactly that feeling manifests itself and where it's supposed to go now that he has passed. Until Adam, I had never lost someone close to me. Today, I live in unfamiliar and unforgiving territory.

> People say I'll always have the memories but the painful truth is that memories are all I have left.

How can I say how much I miss him, when I can't call to check how he's doing and hear his voice? How can I express how much I love him when I can't see him in person and fall into the comfort of his great, big hugs? People say I'll always have the memories but the painful truth is that memories are all I have left.

It's not really the remembrances of family trips, birthdays, or holidays that fill the empty space Adam left behind. Instead, it's the tiny, unassuming moments and routines, like how he would scarf down every meal as if he was in a competition, or his unusual way of texting with three fingers, which always looked to me like he was clawing the phone. These pieces of his life jump out at me unexpectedly. They are the moments I greedily snatch and hold onto fiercely.

Adam had always been the star pianist of the family. He'd wake up early in the morning and enthusiastically play his favorite tunes, like "The Entertainer" or "Maple Leaf Rag." I much preferred to sleep in and found this habit of his to be completely infuriating. The week after his death, my mom found an old video of Adam playing the piano. The song was different from his usual, energetic standards. The tempo was slower, the tone more sentimental. We sat together, only three of us, watching Adam play the haunting melody. A strange urge came over me. I dug through our piano bench until I'd found it: the sheet music for Chopin's "Nocturne Op. 9, №2." I was never as skilled a pianist as my brother, but I managed to fumble through it. As I slowly traced the same piano keys he had, the song surfaced to fill the quiet lingering after the video.

Later I read about "Nocturne" online. The song is described as "reflective in mood until it suddenly becomes passionate near the end. The new concluding melody begins softly

but then ascends to a high register and is played forcefully in octaves, eventually reaching the loudest part of the piece, marked fortissimo. After a trill-like passage, the excitement subsides; the nocturne ends calmly."

To me, the description was a perfect encapsulation of my brother's short but meaningful life. That thought hurt and comforted me.

During my parents' courtship, they exchanged books they enjoyed. One of the most memorable was *The Tao of Pooh*. From there, they were inspired to give their future son the middle name "Christopher" and their future daughter the middle name "Robin." Before we were born, we were connected. And even after his passing, I still feel that connection, often in the most mundane ways, especially when I'm at the doctor filling out paperwork or when I'm purchasing something online and I'm prompted for my middle name.

The further I venture into a life without Adam, the more I understand this new, quieter, and more delicate way to love. It's about tending those subtle threads that bind me to him and him to me. It's about collecting small scraps of memories. It's about the inconsequential things having meaning and cherishing their importance.

Adam left these little pieces for me to take throughout my life, and it's my job to care for them. They appear suddenly and speak to me in a way they never had before. While it's different than the love I knew, it's what I have left and what will be enough.

And if this is all some sort of sleep, perhaps one day I will wake up, see Adam again, and tell him, "Hey, I've been thinking about you."

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