

Mom's dead. Not sure if anyone told you

by Rebekah Christofi

"Mom's dead. Not sure if anyone told you."

This is the message I woke up to from my brother at 6AM on a work day. For a second, I thought he was joking. For about five seconds, I felt relief. Then, I had to sit down because I felt emotions that I don't have any names for. Finally, words came out, to my husband:

"My mother is dead."

"What? How? Are you okay? How does it feel? What do we do?"

"I don't know. I think I'm okay. I mean, I don't know. Maybe I'm not okay."

My 57-year-old mother died from a heroin overdose. My youngest brother said he found her on the bathroom floor: "Usually, when I find her like that, I just shake her really hard and she wakes up." This time, she didn't.

I've done the whole grief thing before: Someone dies. Usually they're old. You cry, gather with family and friends, share nice memories, hug people, pause quietly to dwell on your mortality at church, then at the cemetery, store your memories in a cozy corner of your mind, get your closure and move on. This is not like that. How do you mourn for something you've never actually had? How is it that something you thought you were already prepared for, something you knew was eventually going to happen, feels this terrible when it finally does? I hesitate to call it "grief."

"There was already a void in my heart where a mother should have been," my sister said. "There was always the hope in the

back of my mind that she would get better one day and we could have some kind of mother-daughter relationship. Now, that door is closed for good.”

Growing up in a house where every adult was high and strangers lived in every room makes me oddly comfortable in chaos. Violence, hunger, fear and uncertainty were also guests in that “hotel,” as our neighbor used to call it, but I was never permitted to own that reality. Everything had to be a secret. I envy people who seem to carry peace around with them. I am so attracted to things like meditation, yoga and even church. Peace eludes me. The silence is sometimes too intense for me and every noise makes me jump. I have to constantly remind my shoulders to stop creeping up closer to my ears.

My entire life, I was bullied into denying my reality, so as I stood in church, behind my mother’s casket, I was filled with anger and hostility towards many of the people in the pews. I have always been told that I was the problem. Over and over I was reminded that my lack of ability to “forgive” was the issue here, not my parents’ addictions. I couldn’t make eye contact with the people in that church. I didn’t want their pity, but most of all, I didn’t want to be a victim of their judgement and ignorance once again. What I wanted to say to them was this: You did not grow up in that house. You do not get to decide how I handle my childhood trauma. You do not get an opinion on my relationship with my mother. Instead, silently, I looked straight ahead at the bleeding Jesus.

When your mother dies from a drug overdose, society wants you to sweep it under the rug: “Let’s not have a wake;” “Let’s say she died from a ‘brief illness.’” Yes, let’s all conspire together to maintain this endless cycle of denial and lies.

My mother’s overdose is the most unsatisfying “I told you so” I will ever have. I didn’t win anything. When you are imagining your mother’s last moments on a bathroom floor with a needle in her arm, there is no validation. There’s no, “Ha! I knew it! I knew she was still using! I was right all along!”

And if you imagine that's what happened in my mind when I heard the news, you are mistaken. I found myself googling if heroin overdoses were painful. She had once told me that she hated when people wore all black to funerals and she really disliked the smell of traditional funeral flowers. I immediately felt compelled to make sure those wishes were respected. To me, these things are proof that, somewhere inside of me, I love my mother.

There are children out there who still have to live in chaotic homes like the one I grew up in. They don't know what kind of mother will be there when they get home from school. They are nervous about what the house will smell like as they walk through the door. Will today be good, or will there be strangers in my house? Will mom be doing "bad" things in the basement? Will I have to go to bed hungry tonight? Will everyone start screaming and fighting? Will the police come again?

There are little girls who are too tired for 5th grade because they have to wake up in the middle of the night and make bottles for their screaming, newborn brother. They can't do their homework because they have to push a stool up to the stove to try and make some kind of dinner for their younger siblings. They have stopped seeing the point in playing with their dolls and pretend dishes. They sleep restlessly on the floor with urine-soaked blankets, scratching at their head lice. There are mushrooms growing in the cracks of the tiles on the bathroom floor. Am I making you uncomfortable? Good. It has never been comfortable for them and it will never be comfortable for me, so you can feel it for a few minutes. Those little kids turn into adults and it doesn't just go away.

When I tuck my daughter in, shut off the light and close the door, I often pause, astounded by the fact that she feels safe alone, in the dark, because at age 33, I still don't and I probably never will. If my husband gives her cough medicine in

the middle of the night and leaves the spoon in the bathroom, when I wake up and see it, I am back in that house with the blackened spoons of my childhood. Sometimes, I wake up screaming in the middle of the night. I jump out of bed, turn on the lights and frantically try remind myself that I am safe now. My daughter wakes up and tells me she has dreams about playing with kittens.

Once, on the morning of my Middle School graduation, I thought my mother was dead. It was, all those years before, that same feeling of simultaneous relief and dread.

My mother doesn't have to put makeup on her track marks anymore so that people will treat her like a human being, and I'm not covering up anything anymore either. Words like "closure," "forgiveness," and "peace" cannot coexist with lies and denial. As long as there are children who live in houses like that, I am going to have to continue to make people uncomfortable.

I have searched my brain since her death in an attempt to collect any good memories. I have none. My friend tells me that maybe they will come to me someday. She says that maybe I trained myself to forget the good things so that it would hurt less when I saw her high or when she said cruel things to me. Maybe that's true. But I do know this: At some point, I kicked at the walls of her womb and she placed her hand on her stomach and she carefully chose my name. I like my name. Right now, that is all I have.