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KAISTian Story _ Winning essays from the CAF contest

My Faceless Grief

000 | KAIST Department of Bio and Brain Engineering

Our society often perceives grief as a debilitating and pitiful condition, but my grief has taught me that the most vulnerable people are in the greatest need of empathy and understanding.

I have grown to accept that I am different and that I will never be able to alter my family history to resemble that of my friends. Instead of seeking acceptance from society, instead of demanding to be seen as more than just a broken person,

I have come to terms with how my grief has made me more sensitive to different shades of human suffering. Instead of comparing my past with my friends' past as an excuse to explain why my inner life has felt so different, I have learnt to acknowledge that suffering cannot be measured by any metric standards.

My suffering has taught me to be open to other people's suffering, to not shun their weaknesses or look the other way when their pain gets too unbearable.

I should have remembered the morning of February 24, 2014, as just another one of those inconsequential mornings my fourteen-year-old former self would have spent writing my eighth-grade final examinations.

I should have woken up early to revise trigonometric identities for my mathematics final due that morning, taken a quick shower, double-checked my school bag to ensure I had packed my geometry box, eaten a spoonful of cereal, and headed to school with my younger sister, a seventh-grader, who had to write her biology final that morning. Instead, that fateful day will forever represent a fork in the road - an incorrigible chasm - that exists between my past and present. I remember being violently shaken out of slumber by an alarmingly painful howl, one that I recognized as my father's, and leaping out of bed as soon as my body's fight or flight response kicked in.

I have hazy memories of how long it took me to reach my sister's room, but, try as hard as I might, I can never forget witnessing my father steadfastly holding my sister's limp body, her neck trapped within the confines of a noose. Somebody had rushed to the kitchen to fetch a knife, and somebody had cut the noose. Somebody had to set my sister free. My father made arrangements in haste to take her to the hospital, while my mother kept on reassuring me that everything was still O.K., that my sister was alive because her body was still warm. I remember rushing back to my room and presenting God with a wager: I would relinquish everything good my future had to offer in exchange for my sister's life. The twenty minutes I spent waiting to hear news from the hospital were filled with hope because I knew that God could not possibly wrong an innocent child.

God failed me that day. The doctors tried to resuscitate my sister, but nothing could be done. She had already been dead when my father had found her. At the age of fourteen, I felt ruthlessly betrayed and abandoned by my sister.

Eight years later, I am still only beginning to understand how the profound loss of her life has distorted, and in many ways defined, my reality.

The only way I knew how to cope with the aftermath of my sister's suicide was to get away from my parents. I could not bear to live in the same apartment with my parents where my sister had taken her own life and where each of us was helplessly marooned in our islands of grief. I moved to a boarding school in a different Indian state to finish my secondary education and tried hard to forget that my family history had been marred by any account of unnatural deaths. For the first two years after her suicide, I had convinced myself that my sister, a prankster who could fool me effortlessly, was playing a cruel prank on me and I'd find her at my doorstep any day now, grinning and quipping, "Gotcha sis."

Many years later, my therapist had explained that this state of constant delusion was my teenage brain's freeze response - mother nature's way of ensuring that my developing brain could protect itself after suffering immeasurable trauma.

The anger and guilt I had been internalizing could not be contained forever. Every once in a while, it reared its ugly head and made me break out in violent sobs in quiet classrooms and act out physically whenever I felt any threatening emotions. I felt as if I wasn't a person but a vessel of rage, wreaking havoc and hurting people wherever I went. In that regard, after matriculating, I was overjoyed to learn that I had been selected through a scholarship program to study at a high school in Singapore. As long as I could escape to new places and new opportunities, I would never have to think about where I had come from and how I was fundamentally different from everyone.

In high school, my singular goal in life was to find a boy who could love me so deeply that the internal chaos would settle permanently. I did not want a boyfriend, I wanted a saviour. My fear of abandonment was so intense that I could never make friends with anyone of either gender. All my relationships were inherently turbulent, short-lived, and transactional in nature. In retrospect, choosing unavailable people was an ingenious solution to build a facade of external chaos that I could point toward as the source of all my misery, thereby effectively masking the tsunami of emotions I was desperately trying to cleanse my consciousness of.

I got even luckier the next time when I got admitted to the Physics undergraduate program at the University of Oxford. I felt honoured to have been given the opportunity to study at such a prestigious university and believed wholeheartedly that I could erase my past and start anew yet again.

I studied at St. Catherine's College, Oxford for a trimester but ended up withdrawing from my degree program because of the financial burden I was all too aware I was putting my family through. I had learnt about KAIST from my high school seniors and had been informed that at KAIST, I would be supported with academic scholarships and enjoy more academic freedom.

After moving to Korea, I became sexually "liberated", which further exacerbated my vulnerable mental health. My teenage self saw my sister's suicide as an act of abandonment, and henceforth, it had become my goal in life to escape abandonment by all means. Cocooned within a lover's embrace, swimming in an ethereal ocean of warmth and connection, however temporarily, I felt seen, protected, and loved.

Even though these feelings were addictive and all-consuming, physical intimacy never satiated my deepest emotional needs, which I had carefully bottled up and safely hidden from view in a dimly-lit, moss-infected part of my soul.

At KAIST, the shape of my body or the colour of my skin made me feel like an unsightly presence. My feelings of guilt and shame had deeply corroded my self-esteem, which made it incredibly hard for me to be honest about my trauma as I feared being treated like an outcast. Ideas, principles, and ambitions which were once the guiding forces of my life had been sealed and exiled into a nameless corner of my memory, and a completely new philosophy of hedonism without any semblance of morality began to dominate my worldview. I had started to view people as objects, whom I could freely use without paying any regard to whether I was actively hurting them through my actions. I felt that the trauma I had suffered at such an impressionable age entitled me to act impulsively without any regard for consequences. Not surprisingly, I ended up losing most of my friendships and my room became a prison where I would lock myself for multiple days.

By making it my life's goal to fill the emotional void existing within me with another person's love, I spiralled further out of control and eventually lost my sense of self completely. Little by little, important parts of my undergraduate life such as the satisfaction I felt while learning neuroscience in my courses, the curiosity and passion I engendered for my lab research work, the self-sufficiency I earned through part-time jobs, and the feeling of belonging I craved in a vibrant circle of friends dropped away like a house of cards blown away by a powerful gust of wind. I failed to be punctual and consistent at my part-time jobs and frequently quit them prematurely because of the shame of having to face up to my failures.

Even the cut-throat academic environment at KAIST could not motivate me to strive harder in my courses, and I often missed classes and assignments. In my sophomore year, I ended up failing two courses and got C and D grades in the other courses. I quit working in my neuroscience lab after spending several months devoted to my research project. During my first semester at KAIST, I recall being a passionate student of science who wanted to learn about the neural underpinnings in the brain so I could invent better mental health diagnostic tools with the ultimate goal of reducing suicides. Within a span of four semesters, I had transformed myself into someone who was failing at every single domain in her life. I couldn't get decent grades no matter how hard I tried to concentrate or put in the consistent hours it takes to conduct research in a lab. I couldn't even find a boyfriend who was willing to love and support me through the hardest times. I felt the kind of loneliness that made me want to disappear, to retreat into a dark corner and never be found. Depression had entered my life when I could not delude myself anymore that my sister was really, truly dead and it had since become my constant companion. With every passing day, I found myself agreeing more with Van Gogh's alleged last words - 'The sadness will last forever.'

But help came, slowly, and then suddenly. My best friend came across a support group for bereaving family members of suicide victims known as Grief Anonymous and encouraged me to attend one of their virtual zoom meetings. It's based on the model of Alcoholics Anonymous but for people who are grappling with the aftermath of a family member's untimely death.

I have been going to the online meetings since August 2021, and I am finally making some progress after so much recovery work. I passed all my courses last semester and started minoring in Science Technology and Policymaking. I apologised and made amends with many of my former friends, and I am able to speak to people without feeling pangs of shame pulse through my body. I am able to manage my course workload better now and am proud of how far I have come within the last year.

Coming to terms with my sister's suicide has often felt like I was playing Catch 22 with my own grief. It can be hard to let go of the past, and sometimes I may have even clung to my pain as a crutch, as the only evidence I had to validate the reality of my sister's death.

Grieving somebody's loss is fundamentally different from most other activities humans have been designed to partake in, like doing laundry or cooking food. There's no handbook or recipe manual accompanying the heart-breaking news of somebody's death. Even though I have spent thousands of hours trying to process my grief using various avenues such as crying and talking to friends and therapists, it can still hit me like a ton of bricks even when it's inconvenient for me to break down.

Our society often perceives grief as a debilitating and pitiful condition, but my grief has taught me that the most vulnerable people are in the greatest need of empathy and understanding. I have grown to accept that I am different and that I will never be able to alter my family history to resemble that of my friends. Instead of seeking acceptance from society, instead of demanding to be seen as more than just a broken person, I have come to terms with how my grief has made me more sensitive to different shades of human suffering. Instead of comparing my past with my friends' past as an excuse to explain why my inner life has felt so different, I have learnt to acknowledge that suffering cannot be measured by any metric standards. My suffering has taught me to be open to other people's suffering, to not shun their weaknesses or look the other way when their pain gets too unbearable.

I had spent most of my teenage and early adulthood years desperately trying to avoid getting abandoned by other people, but this adventure down the rabbit hole has taught me the most important lesson I could have possibly learnt at twenty-two: to never abandon myself.