

A Death in the Family

BY MARK MATOUSEK

My sister's suicide brought dark secrets to light. Her memory carries with it the painful debt we owe her.

ONE FEBRUARY AFTERNOON IN the early 1980s, my oldest sister killed herself with an arsenal of pills. Her death was not accidental. Marcia had been planning her exit for many years, battling lifelong depression and demons of self-hatred. Finally, at 30, she lost—or won, depending on how you look at it.

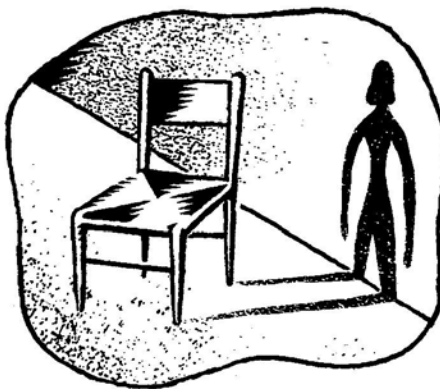
I never believed her cries for help. She came to me, her baby brother, talking about her sorrow, telling me stories that should have alarmed me. Once, she described a lunch hour spent dangling her feet off the roof of a skyscraper, wondering how it would feel to jump. She was deadpan when she said it—amused, almost—as if marveling at the behavior of a stranger.

Still, I was unconvinced. At 21, I couldn't grasp that anyone with a shred of intelligence would choose oblivion over life, however empty that life might be. When things got tough, I wanted to kill other people—not myself—and I naively assumed that Marcia would come to the same conclusion.

Besides, she wasn't a hothead. In a family of extroverts, Marcia was the gentle one, the reader of stories, the baker of cakes, the comforter after bad dreams. She was, as Chekhov once put it, one of life's "supporting players," background music to our crescendos.

Belle, the youngest, found her that day. By the time the ambulance arrived, Marcia was brain dead. For 72 hours, the legal waiting period, we held vigil in the hospital cafeteria, playing rummy and eating Chinese food. Each time a "code blue" was announced, my mother clutched our hands. I ran upstairs to the intensive-care cubicle where Marcia's body was propped up in bed, naked to the waist, surrounded by paramedics pounding her immobile chest till it was black and blue. After they'd finished, I covered her breasts and prayed that they would let her go.

When the respirator was finally unplugged, a twilight zone descended, freezing everyone but me. In fact, my adrenals turned me unexpectedly lucid, masterful, efficient. Since my childhood (and her divorce) my mother had called me her Rock of Gibraltar; now was the time to prove her right. In the shaky days



after Marcia left us, I surprised myself by how solid I was. While the rest of the family stared at the walls, I booked the cremation, emptied her closets, haggled with lawyers over the will. I filled in the blanks for the rabbi (who forgot Marcia's name during the service) and delivered the eulogy, hardly weeping. Afterward, in my aunt's living room, I hugged whoever needed it and helped the women serve bagels and lox.

I didn't grieve. In fact, I was secretly relieved that Marcia had gotten out on her first try. Having done so little for her when she was alive, it was selfish of us to want her back for our own comfort. All that seemed to matter was that Marcia was out of pain. As for those of us left behind, we would just have to make the best of it.

Surprisingly, we did. In the months after my sister's death, our family profile radically changed. Like a herd of cattle during a storm, we drew into a tight circle, resting our weary heads together. Pain

blurred our boundaries, and a loose-knit clan of antagonists turned into a cooperative body. Suddenly we saw one another as parts of ourselves, temporary and precious. Old animosities seemed to dissolve. For the first time in memory, my mother forgave the father who'd disowned her. My sister Joyce, the perennial black sheep, showed her face at holidays. These were sacrificial spoils, I knew, and though the price for them had been far too high, I was grateful for the intimacy.

More than that, we were joined in spirit. Although we were secular to the bone (the rabbi was my Grandpa's idea), the family began to talk like converts. Words like "faith" and "soul" were used. A language of the heart emerged with which to discuss eternal matters, our deepest selves, our terrors, taking us in mood from Norman Lear to Aeschylus. Like characters in a tragedy, we seemed mythic, elevated, purged of our former pettiness. We spoke openly of loving more, making no more victims, recovering together.

I learned that it was true as well that nature hates a vacuum. Marcia's disappearance left more space for the rest of us to flower. My fatalistic mother, who had always stood on principle against self-improvement, began to see a therapist. Joyce, the ne'er-do-well middle child, finished her degree and played the number-one daughter. Belle took Marcia's place as the matriarch. (Our mother was never cut out for the job.) And I, the witness, scribbled my first poems about God and death, and dreamed of becoming a writer.

In poetry, this upswing would have lasted; it would have brought weddings and springtime and hope. In real life, this couldn't be. As the memory of Marcia began to fade, so did the magic of the critical moment. The family demons we had muzzled returned to haunt us with

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The Naked Eye

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a vengeance. Slipping back into unsavory habits, Joyce blackmailed my mother with threats of suicide whenever she needed cash. My mother, who blamed herself for Marcia's death, gave up her shrink and took up vodka. I disappeared to another coast. Opening Marcia's journals, I read between the lines and was shocked by what I began to perceive: a shadow reality I hadn't known existed in our house. Picking through the psychic rubble, I found oblique references to incest, theft, infidelity. The more I learned, the angrier I grew at the web of lies behind my family history. Pressing relatives for the truth, I became the father confessor, the keeper of family secrets.

My inquiries continued for years. For Marcia's sake and mine, I needed to know how this all had happened, and what part I had played. Filial piety didn't apply. Stripped of family sentiment, I began to tell the truth about the violence that had killed my sister. Ironically, this was her gift in the end: to let our skeletons out of the closet, to remind us, in our suburban stupor, that even in houses with picket fences, people can break if care isn't taken.

It's fashionable to talk about healing nowadays as if there were an end to suffering, as if time could permanently close our wounds like a surgeon's stitches. Another psychobabbling lie. Mortal loss is messy and unpredictable. Just when you think the scar is closed, memory rips at it and the pain comes back, as ferocious as before.

Today, when my family gets together, Marcia's name is rarely mentioned. When it is, accidentally, we tend to pause and shake our heads, quiet for a minute. We know without saying so that she was our scapegoat, and the debt we owe her is something we don't admit. Instead, we look at photographs. In the one we like the most, Marcia is radiant and smiling in a blue velvet prom dress we all picked out together. Squinting at her pearls and her date—stiff in his tuxedo—I always think of the year that she died, when we became a family; how we held each other, awake for a minute, then fell asleep again.

Contributing editor Mark Matousek is the author, with Andrew Harvey, of *Dialogues with a Modern Mystic* (Quest Books) and of an upcoming memoir to be published by G.P. Putnam's Sons.

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