

He shook me, desperate to wake me up. I didn't budge. He pleaded; his voice got louder. "Please..." pierced the fog of sleep that enveloped me. "Please! Please, come and see what Santa brought." He didn't see any movement as I lay covered in blankets, snug in my bed. Beside himself with frustration, he said, "I'll give you a quarter." Reluctantly, I dragged myself out of bed and trudged to the living room.

He still believed in Santa; I didn't. He was about five years old, and me, a worldly eight. I don't remember if he paid up, but he was thrilled to show me all the loot that Santa left under the tree.

That Christmas was a lifetime ago. As we grew into adulthood and traveled our own paths, shared holidays became fewer and fewer. Our childhood Christmases were big, festive affairs. There was lots of family; dinner for thirty was the norm. Our Italian heritage meant the food was plentiful and delicious. Food and family, that's Italian.

This year I really missed my brother. I thought about the way he loved all the different kinds of fish that were a Christmas Eve tradition. He had even cooked a whole Italian Christmas Eve dinner all by himself when he lived in Ohio.

Almost three years ago, I was driving home from shopping. My car sound system was blasting with the soundtrack from "The King and I." I had just purchased the CD for a dollar at a thrift store. I was singing along. It was a gorgeous March afternoon. I was happy.

After I pulled into our condo's parking space, I picked up my phone and clicked on my emails. There was an email from a coroner in Ohio. I felt the blood drain from my face. My palms got sweaty and I felt short of breath. My brother, I just knew it was about him.

Missing Neil

The email said to call the number provided immediately. My fingers struggled to press the numbers on the keypad. I reached the coroner's office, and a recorded voice told me to leave a message.

In my head I screamed, "Leave a message, are you out of your mind? This is the coroner's office. I need to know what happened. Is he dead? Why else would I be getting a call from the coroner's office?"

My brother hadn't been doing well for the last few years. I knew he was on a downward spiral. I tried to help; my mother and father tried to help. He lost his marriage because he refused to do what he needed to do to turn his life around. He no longer had much of a relationship with his son. He hadn't been taking care of himself. As my head spun, I wondered if he'd had a heart attack, a stroke or was in a fatal motor vehicle accident. I called the coroner's office again. The recorded voice came on again. I waited and waited for someone to return my call.

Finally, the phone rang. I took a breath and answered. The man on the other end of the phone asked if I was Lorrie McCann. I said yes. He told me he was from the coroner's office and my brother was dead. He said my brother died sometime between noon and 1:00 p.m. that afternoon.

He was found by the front desk clerk at the hotel where he'd spent the night. The clerk went to his room when he didn't check out or answer the phone. Apparently, he was last seen around 9:00 a.m. in the hotel lobby getting a cup of coffee. He hung himself. He used his belt to suspend himself from the guest room door. Since that day, when I sit in a room with the door closed, I stare at the door, and the image of him hanging fills my mind; the sight of a belt makes me wince.

Missing Neil

How does a person go to the hotel lobby, drink a cup of coffee, ride the elevator to his room, and then take off his belt and hang himself? I wonder what he was thinking as he rode the elevator. What was the final straw that caused him to end his life?

According to the Centers for Disease Control's National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS), in 2017, there were 47,173 recorded suicides, up from 42,773 in 2014. On average, adjusted for age, the annual U.S. suicide rate increased 24% between 1999 and 2014, from 10.5 to 13.0 suicides per 100,000 people, the highest rate recorded in 28 years.

My brother died in 2017; he is part of the NCHS statistics. He was very talented. Before things started to spiral down, he won awards for excellence in his field. He was a graphic artist.

The next day my husband and I drove to my mother's place on the east coast of Florida to tell her that her son was dead. Mom and Neil lived together for the last several years until she moved into a continuous care community. He was her baby; the fact that he was a grown man didn't matter to her; he would always be her little boy. As the miles clicked by on our trip across the state, I kept thinking, "I'm going to break her heart." She has dementia but she's still very aware.

I sat next to Mom and looked into her eyes. She knew immediately that something was wrong. I told her as gently as I could that Neil was dead. As the words seeped in, I watched her face contort, and then there was a low moan, "No, No, No!" I wanted to take my words back, tell her it was all a mistake. But she knew and I knew that the words were true.

Mom asked me how he died. "Did he have a heart attack?" Perhaps it would have been better to lie, but I thought she deserved the truth. It was bad enough to tell my mom her son was dead. But by his own hand, that was the worst.

Missing Neil

There is a stigma to suicide. In our Judeo-Christian culture it goes against everything we hold dear. It is an affront to God. It leaves those left behind with endless questions and self-recrimination.

I'm a bereavement counselor. I sit with those in the depth of grief every day. I am trained to help clients as they navigate their grief journey. It is intense work, but it is a real privilege to be part of the sacred story of those I serve.

This is different. I am not the professional when it comes to my brother's death. This is real; this is my life. Everything I know about grief feels like it's part of a different world.

I stayed home from work for the next few days. I was having shoulder problems and was going to physical therapy. I decided to keep my appointment that week. A new physical therapist greeted me and wanted to start an exercise in which I extended my arm using a pulley attached to the top of a door. I looked at the pulley mounted on the door, and all I could think of was my brother hanging from a door. I dropped the pulley, ran to the bathroom, and fell to my knees sobbing.

I think about the last texts my brother and I exchanged. I texted him that we were in for a cold snap in Florida. His last words to me were "bundle up."

He struggled a lot during his life, and in the end, he was not able to conquer his demons.

When you lose a sibling, you lose a part of your history. It was just the two of us. He was the only other person who lived in my childhood home besides my parents. We probably sat at the same kitchen table for thousands of meals while growing up. We drove together to school. We went on family vacations together, we watched TV together and fought about who got the bathroom first.

Missing Neil

Now as my mother becomes increasingly forgetful, I manage her life alone. I want to call him and tell him about what Mom is doing. Then I remember.