

Slow Demise

Category: Suicide

written by Alison Hartman | February 24, 2023

On Christmas Eve of 2016, I received a phone call from Baltimore's Shock Trauma Center.

"Hello, this is Dr. T," the caller said. "I'm the physician for your son, Adam. He was rushed to Shock Trauma last night. He jumped off a three-story building and landed on a car. Fortunately, he was under the influence, so he fell like a rag doll and only fractured three vertebrae."

"My son . . . what?" I gasped.

"As I said, he jumped off a building. It appears he was attempting to take his life. He should be okay, but he's undergoing further tests and imaging of his brain and spine. We should know more by the end of the day." Dr. T said all this in a perfunctory, offhand tone.

This wasn't the only time I'd been phoned out of the blue by a doctor about my son, but it was my first call from Shock Trauma. Adam, then 25, had been struggling with heroin addiction for eight years, so I was used to getting alarming calls from hospitals, rehab facilities, and the police. But this one was different. Most people entered Shock Trauma at death's door.

But this time, ironically, heroin seemed to have saved his life. If he hadn't been high, he might have died by suicide. Many times, I'd asked myself, wasn't his drug addiction a slow suicide? I often felt I was watching my son destroy himself, one frame at a time, the film of his torturous life playing in slow motion. As his mother, I found it excruciating to watch, knowing there was nothing I could do to rescue him, though I tried in countless ways. My maternal bond and love for him was so deep that in my wishful thinking, I'd have taken my own life to save his.

Three months later, Adam was discharged from another stay on the psychiatric unit with a plan to re-enter rehab. On the way to the treatment center, like many addicts, he wanted to use one "last" time. This time it truly was. I received a phone call from the police notifying me that my son had died from an overdose. I was summoned to identify his body. The police reports and autopsy results said he took an unintentional overdose of heroin and fentanyl.

Since losing my son, I've contemplated whether his death was accidental or intentional. Suicide often occurs when someone makes an impulsive choice to end their life in an abrupt way. Perhaps there's also a chronic type of suicide, when people kill themselves slowly through ongoing destructive behaviors. Either way, it seems my son suffered such profound sorrow and pain that slow suicide was his way out.

In my grief, I'm finding ways to survive my son's tragic death and, through

my love for him, live a life of meaning and creativity. I know that's what he would want for me.

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The National Suicide and Crisis Lifeline number is 988.
The Lifeline provides free and confidential emotional support
to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress
24 hours a day, 7 days a week, across the United States.
Call or text 988 to connect with a trained crisis counselor.