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When Grief Won't Come

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A friend of mine knocked on my door with some sad news. Her mother had died.

As I sat beside her on the couch, I felt her sadness like an embrace. It wasn't just the tears that imparted her pain. She seemed to deflate before my eyes, as if something that kept her upright and moving forward was no longer there.

She left, I hope feeling at least a little better with the chance to let her emotions run the halls of our long friendship, I thought about my friend's heaving sadness at the loss of her mother. And I thought about the relief I felt at the loss of mine.

How do you handle the death of someone who is impossible to love? Certainly, there is gratitude for raising us after my father died when I was three. But finding memories of the good times is like picking through a box of broken glass.

What I do remember is a strikingly beautiful woman who could charm, but a woman who was immature, self-involved, critical, jealous and competitive. She was a woman with a refined talent for darkening the brightest moments.

There was the time I told her that the love of my life and I were going to be married. Her response: "I'll believe that when I see it." After returning from a lunch with a cousin, she went on about the cousin's daughter earning her Ph.D. I asked if she had mentioned that I had been accepted to a very prestigious grad school to which I had applied. She said "No, we really didn't talk about you."

She delighted in pitting me and my sisters against each other: a word here, a broken confidence there, enlivened by a few mean-spirited distortions. She managed to keep us all in her orbit, without ever drawing close to each other. It's a distance that remains today.

It's said that grandchildren are the beautiful thank-you gift you get for making it through your own children's teenage years. One response to my 11-month-old son was: "Are you sure he's not too fat?" As our children and my sisters' children arrived and grew older,

trips to grandma's house were never a time to show off first steps and funny tricks. They were just a responsibility.

Over the years, these moments - the hurts, disappointments, the slights, the anger - accumulated like deep, wet snow on an unstable roof.

And then she was sick. And then she was gone.

Grief is good. It's honest and cleansing. It's the thing that allows you to move on. You want the sadness, and you want it to linger. But sometimes, moving on is just too damned easy.