



Running Through Grief

One writer was in the depths of despair after enduring an unimaginable tragedy. But running gave her a renewed sense of peace.

BY MICHELLE MATHAI
PUBLISHED: AUG 10, 2023

My father used to say, in the thickest Indian accent he could conjure, “If you don’t behave, I’m going to marry you off!” I would shine a brilliant toothy grin at him defiantly and whisper, “Make my day!” We both giggled, knowing what a hilarious prospect that would be. I was the youngest child of parents who had an arranged marriage in Kerala, India, my father 33 and my mother a mere 20 years of age. Their cataclysmic union, where differences in generations clashed when paired with the feminist movement of the ’70s in New York City, yielded an outspoken, independent, smart-ass of a daughter. My father and I both knew I would’ve crushed the spirit of the poor guy were I to be matched. Two decades after his death, part of me wishes Dad had made good on his empty threat.

“I don’t have time!” I said as I scoffed at my friends when they asked if I was dating. “Too many projects for a love life. I can’t have anything derail my focus. I’m training for the NYC marathon, writing a book, hosting a podcast, and working full-time. There are not enough hours in the day for such fluff when I’m in such a productive phase of my life.”

My friends readily accepted my gaggle of excuses. I wasn't sitting on the couch, bored, pining for love or withering away from grief. I wasn't attached to a dating app, desperate for codependency. These days, being single is a norm and even considered smart by those who have been married for some time and are bored of their partners, jealous of my freedom. I was just busy being an overachiever with a great job and hard-core hobbies. Yet, the truth was too tough for me to say out loud. The truth was that the thought of losing one more person in my life petrified me.

My family died in front of me, and each loss resulted in the building of a fortress around my ever-tender heart. I held the deep understanding that life had irrevocably changed when my parents fell victim to a car crash when I was just 26. I carried a heaviness, not from the elephant tears that flowed from me — the weight of such intense grief — but from being the only survivor of the accident.

Any plans I may have had around marrying someone someday or having kids became unbearable to think of without my parents guiding me through the milestones. How could I possibly have a wedding when I didn't have my mother there to dress me in my ivory and gold silk sari or hear Dad whisper that I looked like an angel just before we marched arm in arm down the aisle? How could I give birth knowing they couldn't see their family line grow, see their own eyes staring back at them, or spoil the kid silly? I invented so many beautiful images when I turned on the magical thinking machine. All I had to do was close my eyes to make them real.

My parents' deaths foisted me into a new role as caregiver to my older brother, who had been diagnosed with brain cancer just before they died. Now it was just the two of us left to navigate the realms of life through a terminal illness. My heart walls grew taller as my brother's treatments grew harsher, and I feared the day I would lose him as well.

I attempted to date over the years after my parents died, but instead of testing a guy for compatibility, to see if we shared dreams or if sparks flew, I wondered instead if he was strong enough to handle all the heartbreak. Could my losses be his too? Tragedy is so unromantic, but could it be something that connected us? When I was in my 20s and 30s, most people hadn't experienced the maze of grief I had already navigated.

So, when my brother's body finally began to show signs of wear after 19 years of cancer, I held his hand at my home through eight months of hospice, understanding what compassion and love actually meant. The heart walls that I built for him crumbled because he needed me, and I

had to care for him in a way I never knew existed. Selflessly and without question. It was, as one friend put it, a mitzvah.

I admit, I thought about what it would be like to have a partner in caregiving, watching out for my brother by my side every day. I longed for that person, someone to share the pain with, to commiserate in the silence. To joke about the number of adult diapers I had ripped as a rookie caregiver trying to maneuver a 180-pound man. Observing, in unison, that my brother's once-vibrant face with warm, mischievous brown eyes turned somber, and his always exuberant banter became monotone. He transformed into a stranger, thanks to early onset dementia, and I was alone.

So, when my brother died, I drifted. Since the faces we love are our mirrors, I no longer recognized myself without him. I'd already become accustomed to not being a daughter, and now I ceased to be a sister. No longer was there a family. I didn't know how to exist without him. Without them. I cried when I saw the MiraLax in my medicine cabinet, instantly flashing back to attempts at mixing it with prune juice or sneaking it into my brother's Diet Coke. Anything to make him feel better, to get his body to continue to function. To not quit on him. On us.

I looked in the mirror during those months and didn't recognize the woman looking back. I was too busy caring for my brother's every need to notice that I had gained 30 pounds, to realize that my face had aged 10 years. There was no time to care for myself. Exhausted, alone, in a profound grief funk, I knew I had to do something extreme to shake things up.

So, I signed up for the TCS New York City Marathon, hoping that some hard-core training would transform this doughy caregiver body, imprisoned in hospice with my brother, into a person again. I wanted to run in New York to reconnect with the city where I was born, where we were all alive and together, to feel the energy of the streets that might bring me back to them.



I recall the interview I had with the charity I wanted to run for, and the most important question the rep asked was “What is your *why* for doing this? We are asking you to put your mind and body through the wringer. So, it is vital to be clear about your reasons.”

I shot back instantly, “That’s easy. I will race for those who can no longer run.”

What unfolded during my marathon training was so unexpected. I had been in hiding for so long alone in my grief, processing why this had all happened, feeling guilty for my sole survival. Yet my morning runs reintroduced me into society, passing by estranged neighbors and friends who soon became regulars on my route. After a few months, it seemed as if everyone in town was invested in my race. At 7 a.m., I would hear cheers from my neighbors: “Go, Michelle!” Generous donations rolled in to support brain cancer research from friends near and far. The looks of pity I dreaded from my loss turned into looks of pride and admiration for how I was turning my grief into action. Even my brother’s best friend signed up for the race to endure with me.

Our coaches suggested we sign up for long races to get us used to starting lines, water stations, fueling, and porta-potties to enhance our training. As I approached my first half-marathon starting line in San Francisco, I felt like a new kid in town on the first day of school, cautious and curious, surrounded by strangers, with butterflies in my stomach. I sheepishly made my way to the corral amongst the throngs of uber-athletic runners, worried about how embarrassingly slow I would be and self-conscious of wearing spandex in such a crowd. Yet the running community welcomed me with the openest of arms. No one asked me what time I was shooting for or what my average pace was. Instead, I got fist bumps for showing up to the 6 a.m. start time and tons of well wishes for a smooth New York run later on. I found that true runners don’t judge; they just run because they love the challenge and the endorphins. The momentum of training and the approaching race day slowly lifted me up out of my grief rut.

“Holding so much hurt, this much intense emotion from the loss of my family, meant that I had loved greatly. I like to think that those memories were worth the risk to love again.”

Sixteen weeks of grueling training brought me to the starting line on Staten Island as the Verrazano Bridge loomed overhead. Me and 53,000 runners set out to run 26.2 miles to explore the great city. I was surrounded by the world, with 141 different countries represented, so many people of different shapes, sizes, and ethnicities all barely containing their excitement and wondering if our training had truly prepared us.

As I ran through the five boroughs, New Yorkers danced in the streets offering hugs, high fives, beers, orange slices, and so much encouragement. The collective exuberance of spectators showered every runner with so much love, lightening our burdensome steps and bringing smiles out despite the pain.



[View full post on Instagram](#)

Around Mile 24, we entered Central Park, and I thought of the lemonade stand my brother and I built outside our lobby when we lived on East 72nd Street and Third Avenue, selling Country Time in Dixie cups for a dime. I envisioned my beautiful mother walking me to this very park to run around the granite pyramid at my favorite East 72nd Street playground, fingers sticky with cherry Italian ice. Then there was dear Dad, wagging his all-knowing finger at me with threats of a son-in-law-to-be, and my first dog, Obi, whom I romped through the park with when he was just a pup, attempting to keep him from fetching the remote-controlled boats on the pond.

When my brother passed, amongst the tidal wave of condolences, one particular note stood out to me. It said to take comfort in the laws of physics. The law of conservation of energy states that

energy can neither be created nor destroyed but only transformed. As I turned the corner into the final chute leading to the finish line, I imagined my dear brother transformed from his battered and weary body into pure energy.

In that moment, I realized that during all the solitary early mornings in the dark with my thoughts and just the sounds of footfalls, my breath, and my beating heart, with my mind floating out of my body, I understood that being alone, being single, was not necessarily lonely. In fact, in many ways I wasn't alone as I carried my family with me. I see my brother's brilliant grin in my smile. I hear Dad's deep belly laugh in my laugh and see Mom's loving brown eyes looking back at me every day in the mirror. Holding so much hurt, this much intense emotion from the loss of my family, meant that I had loved greatly. I like to think that those memories were worth the risk to love again.

So now when I open the medicine cabinet, I giggle when I see the MiraLax, thinking of my brother's goofy grin, knowing I can safely start to open the gate to my heart again.

Michelle Mathai lives in the Napa Valley managing a wine and food estate to fuel her writing and running habits. She left her career as a Foreign Service Officer to care for her brother fighting brain cancer and was so inspired by his courage and lessons learned from his hospice that she created her podcast Written on Water, which explores life, death, and meaningful connection. She is currently working on her memoir written against the backdrop of running the New York City Marathon, taking readers mile by mile through her journey of grief from the loss of her entire family. Follow her on Instagram [@mathaism](https://www.instagram.com/mathaism)

Get Shondaland directly in your inbox: [SUBSCRIBE TODAY](#)

A Part of Hearst Digital Media We may earn commission from links on this page, but we only recommend products we back.

RELATED STORIES

[Running With Moms Helped Me Find Myself](#)

[Martinus Evans Created a Run Club for Everyone](#)

[How Swiping for Friends Hurt My Confidence](#)

[I Overcame Suffering Through Surfing](#)

[Understand the impact Outside Your Age Group](#)

[Rushing My Wedding Was the Best Thing I Ever Did](#)