

life as we know it

[a memoir]

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for christine

*i've finally learned what it is to let myself feel...
and that it is necessary.*

i miss you so much. but only some days it hurts.

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acknowledgements



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preface

i had never imagined my first book would contain so much transparent and serious reflection. nor did i think it would be consequent of a relationship of all things. a topic i feel to be so ordinary and normal; and i, (embodying neither quality) the farthest from them. people who know me well could tell you that i'm constantly light and sarcastic...very seldom downbeat in general conversation. i'd always hoped the initial book would be my work of art - the first of many in a series of graphic novels depicting my childhood; an attempted portrayal of what it was to grow up in a life for which there are no words. a book i've been working on for a little while and thought about for a very long time. i wouldn't say i'm one who wears my past on their sleeve, but i am an inordinately open person. i have absolutely no problem sharing the insanity that i have come to call my life, especially if it can bring some entertainment.

normalcy for me then was debating whether i'd ready myself for the likely possibility of having to witness my dad beat the shit out of my siblings or mom when i got home from school...or not. you never knew. and if so, then deciding whether or not i felt like showing my upset over it. i certainly learned at a very young age to hide it from my friends. to mask the situation from teachers or anyone else one might encounter as a child. i quickly came to comprehend what *was* and *was not* kosher to discuss in public. i vividly perceived what would get me the right kind of attention and praise at school. it's one of the survival skills you naturally acquired growing up in the koh household. shit happens, deal with it.

of course i wasn't going to show up at school and talk about how my dad woke us up in the middle of the night and forced us to berate our mom by telling her she was worthless. he loved to crush her spirit and will. i think it may have been one of his favorite things. of course i wasn't going to reveal all the times he warned us to brace our little minds of the possibility of coming home to two dead carcasses amidst large pools of blood (the bodies being those we came to know as our parents while alive...*hint, hint* implying that he was going to murder my mom and kill himself). don't worry, if you didn't immediately get that implication, he would clearly explain his intent to us as a side note...*just* in case we were too dense to understand what he was eluding to.

that was just the tame stuff, just the talk. he always tried to sound so dramatic and eloquent when deliberating lines like this to us. even as i child, i often wondered to myself how many times he rehearsed these rantings in his head before presenting them to his family. at times, i even thought it funny. not that i didn't believe he was deluded enough to carry out some of these threats. more that his verbal fulminations had become so commonplace that they began to lose their shock value over time.

what i hated most was when he hit them or shattered things. throwing steel table legs and overturning full meals of prepared dishes possibly meant bruises. it most certainly meant indefinitely having to wear shoes in the house so we didn't cut our feet on glass shard remnants missed while cleaning up. often there were many, so you just couldn't be too safe.

why didn't i tell someone about things like this, you

ask? are you fucking crazy? what kind of kid is going to ruin the chance of being cool (or even remotely normal) by disclosing the fact that their father was an alcoholic bi-polar train wreck who desperately needed (but profusely refused) professional help? that may have been a mouthful for a first grader to tell their counselor at school. plus, i liked being unique for other things. we were korean in a predominantly white town. i was already weird and foreign to kids as it was. i didn't need any additional help to make my case. instead, i set the stage very early on to shine. not as the kid with the crazy parents or mental problems, but as the asian prodigy.

instead i would go on in detail how he was encouraging me to learn three languages...or pushing me to be recorded in the guinness book as the youngest and highest licensed ham radio operator at the age of nine. i was praised and revered when i displayed my extensive knowledge of morse code. teachers were dumbfounded at the astute wealth of information derived from the latest intriguing article i had read in one of the many britannicas or childcraft encyclopedia sets our bookshelves housed. i was portrayed as a child genius when in fact it was merely my coping mechanism for dealing with my far too familiar, fubar domestic environment.

on my dad's highs, he did push us to learn much and exceed all expectations. he was fun and engaging, almost to a fault. he genuinely wanted the best for his children and sacrificed much to provide us with opportunities. i coped with his lows by becoming well adept at hobbies and interests i genuinely enjoyed. i even used some of our common interests to create miniature ploys of aberration. it's like when you wave

your hands or a stuffed animal above the camera to capture a baby's attention during a photo shoot. "hey dad! look over here! look at the bunny! wouldn't you rather be playing on the ham radio with me than threatening to kill mom while she's pregnant?" it was a good distraction for me as a child as well as the rest of the world who should have known there was something wrong. i learned how to conceal my feelings at a very young age, and with great skill. i knew all too well what it was to embargo emotion and disallow myself to feel.

as hysterically dark as we are all are, my siblings and i often joke and laugh about our childhoods while reminiscing. it was the only way we knew how to get through without going nuts. well, i guess you can say we *did* all end up a little crazy, but who wouldn't have? in my opinion, there is the right kind of crazy; which consequently can be disturbingly hilarious (the category i'd like to think i fall). then there is the sad kind of crazy; the people who can't overcome these types of traumatic experiences and have to deal with it on a daily basis (something i'm fortunate enough to say i haven't had to do). the graphic novel i'm working on outlines some of these events in my arcane and humorous tone. once they know me, most people get my sarcasm and perverted sense of humor. though, it does take a bit to get used to...for some more than others. so you can guess my own surprise when this happened to be my first book.

this, i must warn, is not the preview of the dark, yet humorous portrayal of my life. that will have to wait. this is much deeper and introspective. truthfully, this is the edited journal of my mental diarrhea of thoughts following a sequence of events i dreamed

impossible. initially, i even grew quite angry and resentful that my creative energies were pulled off my graphic novel and onto this; however, emotion from this somehow trumped that. i've found that these things have a way of working their way to the surface, wanted or not. i just started writing. somewhere along the way i've come to realize its importance in the place of things. even though i'm the opposite of thrilled about the topic matter (and seriously question who would want to read this), it became necessary for me as i wrote.

although on the surface it seems so, this is not about my break-up. this is about me going through a crisis and how i chose to deal with it. included are the thoughts, logic, reasoning and methodology encountered as i processed my life rapidly crumbling apart. it was strange that i'd been there before with a much more traumatic crisis the year prior. but somehow i felt i more immediately affected by this. since they are in completely different realms, it's difficult to compare the two - my sister's suicide in 2007 and now the disintegration of what i had planned would be the rest of my life. however, i had to grieve both. grief in both situations was similarly dealt...in more ways than i realized throughout all of this. perhaps i felt the blow from the latter to be more crippling since it so intimately affected my day to day actions. so drastically altered my entire life plan as a whole.

now that everything has played out, my experience seems so mundane and conventional. perhaps because divorce/splitting up is now so common place in today's society? that may be the case. but all i know is that at the time, it seemed entirely earth shattering. i

didn't know what to do. didn't know how i was going to manage. what was the proper way to sort through the disarray and chaos of what had always been so easy and tidy? perhaps this is exactly what all people feel when they go through a serious split or divorce. if that's the case, i wish someone would have been able to brace me for it. even though now it seems obscenely brief, i was an absolute fucking mess. for two weeks, i literally felt like i was the walking representation of what would remain in a train wreck. office co-workers (who i didn't clue in until about a month after it happened) have said that they had no idea...that my behavior didn't much skip a beat at work. even though i may not have outwardly displayed the turmoil, instability in myself is the opposite of normal.

my feelings warranted documentation so i continued to type. first i wrote by hand, but quickly learned after entry one that i worked much more efficient digitally (no matter how much more i craved scratching it all down for its ephemeral effect). so here it is...the most honest writings i've put on paper up to now. hopefully, i don't regret this.

introduction

it's really very terrifying to know that life as we know it today can be turned upside down and inside out on a dime. everyone thinks that it could never happen to them. i am guilty most of all of that thought. here i was, living this ravishingly consummate life and could ask for little more. so i thought, anyway.

sure i've had some rough and dark times in my life, but it was never anything that i couldn't get through. in fact, i firmly believe that those very times are what have built my character. contributed in molding my personality and who i've become. at the risk of sounding ostentatious, i love that person. i don't feel i'm extremely vain, but i really do love who i am and what i've come to be. what i've decided to do in my life. if i had to re-live it all, it would be awfully tempting, but i wouldn't change a single thing.

with every major struggle i'd experienced up to this point, no matter how horrifying or unthinkable the situation; when reflecting in retrospect, i'd always felt each one made me stronger. that each made me more viable to get through the next tragedy. in fact, i find one of my most favorable traits to be my stoic and unrelenting ability to cope with the craziness that has been my life. i never believed that i would be susceptible to this type of pain.

of course i knew the circumstance of infidelity not impossible, but certain was the impossibility of my vulnerable exposure to its effects. not only do i fear that the recent events that befell me will not result in this, but that they will accomplish quite the opposite. adversely change me. make me weaker. make me

naive. i can already sense it's happening.

we become far too comfortable with the absolute certainties in our day to day lives. we take for granted the reprehensibly blind truths we aren't exposed to and blissfully ignore them on a daily basis. life as i knew it was nearly perfect. everything i knew about it was certain, thinking my knowledge of its ins and outs so intact. i try not to make it seem anything beyond gratitude, but i've been truly happy for quite some time.

an inner part of me has always felt sorry for the rest of you. everyone else. anyone that had to comply with the struggles of a dramatic relationship or less than perfect connection with their partner. even though it internal, how conceited was the way i smugly pitied everyone else for not having a relationship as thoroughly wonderful mine. in some ways, i deserve what happened to me for even visiting that self-satisfied train of thought. i kind of had it coming.

life as i knew it changed in the matter of minutes. i appallingly witnessed this truth and am living proof that it can happen to any of us. even to me, who i foolishly thought, the best of us.