

When I was eight years old, my mom was diagnosed with ovarian cancer. At the time, I didn't really understand what that meant; all I knew was that my mom was sick, but she would get better eventually. Two years passed and my mom was practically skin and bones. Even then, I couldn't accept the truth that was becoming alarmingly apparent: my mom was going to die.

Then, a week after my tenth birthday, I watched my mom take her last few shallow breaths, before finally letting go.

I was heartbroken. Not only because I lost my mother, but because I lost my understanding of reality. My childlike sense of naivety, believing that the world had rules and was fair, was instantly shattered. It felt like a betrayal. When I lost my mom, I learned that bad things could happen to the ones I loved, that bad things could happen to *me*. Fresh into my double digits, my entire faith in reality was lost.

So naturally, I sought a way out.

I turned to fiction, more specifically, animation. Having loved art and drawing since I was young, animation felt like a way to enter a world where drawings were brought to life, a world that spoke my language. Suddenly, my walls were lined with anime and cartoon posters and my shelves were inhabited by figurines of my favorite characters. I was a certifiable dork, but I was happy. Escapism was unbelievably cathartic.

I only truly understood the importance of escapism when I watched Disney's 1951 *Alice in Wonderland* for the first time. I was immediately obsessed, more than I had ever been before, and proceeded to rewatch the film daily for weeks. Suddenly, my sketchbooks were filled with Alice and the inhabitants of Wonderland. Like my other obsessions, it satiated my need for a new reality, but that wasn't why I loved it and continue to treasure it as much as I do.

Looking back, it's clear to me why *Alice in Wonderland* always resonated with me. My view of reality after my mother's death was not unlike that of Wonderland. I felt like I was wandering alone, endlessly lost in a world with no rules, no stability, and no safety. I was scared, but much like Alice, I tried to put on a brave face. I acted as if I was years older than I was because when you're thrust into a new world by yourself, growing up feels like a necessity.

Of course, I was still just a kid. A kid who got stubborn, frustrated, and sad. I would scold myself for not listening to my own rules, for not being a grown up at ten years old. Seeing all those feelings play out on screen made me aware of how unfair I was being with myself, and how stifling the imperfect child in me was only keeping me from healing.

More than anything, Alice encouraged me to continue to be curious about the world, even when it hurt me. I learned that there's fear in the uncertain, but there's also beauty. I stopped trying to look for fairness and order and learned to embrace the cosmic randomness of reality. Instead of running from my grief, I learned to explore it through my art.

I'd be lying if I said there wasn't still a part of me that blamed the universe for taking away my mom, a part of me that still searches to understand what I could've done wrong to deserve to lose her. I still turn to fiction to make me feel better, but now, I'm able to use it as a way to work through my own reality, instead of rejecting it.

As I continue through life, I realize curiosity is what keeps me going. It encourages me to create, to explore, to grow, but most of all, it encourages me to believe in reality.