

UNCOLLAPSABLE

Soul

How do you endure a broken heart without crushing your spirit?

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PHASE 1

Unforeseen Cracks: The Surfside Condo Collapse

the living room. When she sprung out of bed to investigate, the balcony sliding glass door was inexplicably wide open. By her own account, she told me in somewhat broken English, “When I woke up, I heard sounds coming into my apartment. Sounds like cracking... crack, crack, crack. And I think I left my sliding door open. I tried to close it, and I can’t do it because the building was moved, and the rails and door can’t close. At the same moment, I felt a crack close to me!”

That’s when Iliana saw a 2-inch-thick crack in her ceiling, tearing down her wall to the floor. Her survival instincts instantly kicked in as the warping wall caused all her wine and spirits to fall from her bar. “When I saw the crack on the wall and the wall was opening, that’s when my mind started to speak to me and say, *RUN*, because this building will be coming down soon!”

She quickly dressed, grabbed her purse, and blew out a candle before rushing out the door. To her surprise, the quiet hallway was void of panic. No alarms, no activated emergency systems, no other residents running for their lives. Unbeknownst at the time, there were emergency stairs just a few feet to the right of her front door, but she ran left toward the farthest set of stairs. Before passing Kima’s apartment, she stopped at her door briefly.

My grandmother, Hilda, would often stay long weekends at my parents’ home. She was a fiercely strong, independent, widowed 92-year-old woman that had so much energy. More than anything, Kima loved using that energy to spend time with her family, especially because she lived by herself. My siblings and I would visit my parents’ place to share meals, have conversations, and play her favorite games, such as ‘Rummikub’ or dominoes. She deeply cherished quality family time more than anything! It was very typical for my father to pick her up after finishing his workday in the neighboring city of North Bay Village so she could stay long weekends at my parents’ home.

Iliana remembered how months prior, her “only friend in the building” was my grandmother. Kima’s hearing wasn’t the greatest, so she’d often fall asleep with the TV blaring through her

front door. To warn her friend, Iliana put her ear to the door, but heard silence. The silence gave Iliana enough hope to believe she may have been staying with family, and she knew Kima probably wouldn't have heard frantic knocks on the door even if she was sleeping in her distant bedroom. Iliana later recalled this in an interview with *The Washington Post*:

She is thinking about an 80-year-old woman who lived across the hall, who welcomed her when she first moved in months ago. "I thought that she was with her son that day. I called her daughter-in-law. She disappeared. She hasn't been found," she said. "I feel so bad. I told them I felt so bad. I cry a lot. I feel so guilty."

It's interesting to note my grandmother was so youthful in her elderly age that her neighbors saw her as an 80-year-old, 12 years younger than her actual age.

In a moment of unimaginable fear and desperation, Monteagudo found herself faced with a life-or-death decision. Adrenaline surged through her veins as she instinctively rushed towards the stairs, desperately seeking to escape. Each step she took was filled with uncertainty as the haunting sounds of destruction echoed in her ears. While descending the stairs, a violent and terrifying thunder rocked the building. Believing she'd be crushed in the seconds to come, she screamed to Heaven in a distraught plea for help. "God, help me, please help me. I want to see my sons, I want to see my grandsons, I want to live, please help me, God!" Iliana emerged as the sole survivor that escaped above the first floor, from within the wing that fell victim to the deadly collapse.

Coincidence or Miracle?

In an epic story of survival against all odds, God answered her cries for help. Maria Iliana Monteagudo is the only survivor above the first floor who managed to physically escape the wrath

of the collapsed section of the building. She emerged in the visitor parking lot unharmed. It's hard not to wonder about the what ifs: *What if she had taken her sleeping pill? What if a "supernatural force" hadn't awoken her? What if that crack in her unit's wall never appeared? What if she had taken the emergency stairs closest to her unit? What if she had refused to evacuate until my grandmother answered the door?* It's impossible to ignore the countless factors that led to her survival! Were these mere coincidences or divine miracles? The answer is up to you.

One thing we know for sure: we're eternally grateful for her life, and we believe that if she could do it all over again, she shouldn't change a thing. Altering the circumstances would not have made things better; it would've only increased the death toll from 98 to 99. We don't want Iliana to imprison herself with guilt or shame. We know my grandmother would've wanted her to live, and we're so relieved that she escaped. Had Iliana waited for my grandmother, she wouldn't have been spared. I'm so grateful she's alive to tell her story. Despite the tragic circumstances that brought her to the brink of death, she emerged as a beacon of hope and an inspiration to us all. While we may never fully understand why certain things happen, my family and I take comfort in knowing that miracles do happen, and Iliana is one of them.

Although Iliana survived, it's not without being haunted by the atrocious mental images that have plagued her with anxiety and anguish. "Every night, I can't sleep without a pill because it's coming like a film in my mind every night," Monteagudo said. "And you know how long one year to suffer? Do you know how many months, how many hours, and how many minutes? To think about it and suffer." She continued, "Fifty years of collecting things lost it in seven minutes—in seven minutes... everything." Monteagudo said, "I don't have one picture of my parents. The last picture that I take a look at when I am leaving is my father and my mother in Las Vegas laughing, both of them." Monteagudo further said, "I try hard to find happiness, but I lost it. I can't find it."

Iliana escaped from the building, but she did not escape the suffering. Just because her life was relieved of going down in the collapse does not mean her soul was rescued from the trauma. Iliana's story is a testament to the fact that even if you escape physical harm, you can still suffer from the emotional weight of a heartbreaking event. This is a reality that many people can relate to, but you must validate your own pain.

Hope Against All Odds

That night, a story emerged that gave me a glimmer of hope. My grandmother could still be alive. Southeastern Iran is known for the Bam fault, which causes frequent seismic activity, with an average of one earthquake per day. On December 26, 2003, a devastating 6.6 magnitude earthquake destroyed the city of Bam, claiming the lives of 31,000 people and leaving another 30,000 injured. Approximately 85% of buildings were damaged beyond repair, leaving 75,000 residents homeless⁸. In contrast, a similar earthquake with the same magnitude struck California four days earlier, causing only 3 fatalities. The reason for this significant disparity was due to poor construction practices, lack of structural regulations, and minimal building codes in underdeveloped third-world countries⁹. The odds of survival in Bam were low, especially for someone who was nearing 100 years old.

Despite the bleak odds, a miraculous story emerged. A rescue team found a 97-year-old woman, Sharbanou Mazandarani, alive and unharmed after being buried under rubble for nine days. The rescue workers attributed her survival to a piece of furniture that shielded her from falling debris. When asked how she survived, Mazandarani replied, "God kept me alive"¹⁰. Her story gave me hope that my grandmother's survival was possible, leading me to believe that she could've survived, and long for that outcome.

Few moments in our lives are as turbulent with anxiety and fear as the space between receiving bad news and waiting for good news. It's healthy to have fear, but crippling when fear has

you. Undoubtedly, there are times when a traumatic experience will understandably consume you, just as I experienced. But you must eventually evict the dominion of fear. It carries a heavy price, as it gradually erodes and weakens your spirit until it collapses entirely. A symptom of a spirit of fear is overthinking. Overthinking leads to under-living. Overthinking for too long can trick you into believing lies that control you through confusion.

Sometimes God uses what seems like an impossible circumstance to remind us of our desperate need for Him. Encountering His presence reshapes our hearts, teaches us reliance on Him which refines our character. When we ask God for help, He often responds with hope, because it's the fuel that keeps the fire burning in our hearts. It's what sustains our souls in suffering, strengthening our spirits to face another day. God uses uncertainty to remodel our hearts. While we cry out to be rescued from devastation, the truth is that it's not always within our control. We can control our choice to look for Him amidst our fear.

Hope restores the life fear tries to steal. It's the antidote to fear and the lifeline that pulls us out of the depths of despair. When the lights have gone out and you're stumbling in the darkness, remember that hope is your compass. Fear may attempt to shrivel your heart and crush your spirit, but hope expands your heart. Hope reminds us that our individual circumstances may be unique to each of us, but the pain is not unique to any one of us. Hope bridges the gap between your grief and your miracle.

But what happens when you're clinging to hope, only to be met with devastation instead of the miracle you so desperately desired? How do you bridge the gap between grief and the miracle that never came to pass? I desperately prayed and believed for the miraculous rescue of my grandmother, envisioning a moment she'd be triumphantly rescued from the rubble. It would've been a miracle of monumental proportions, a story to be told for ages. To hear her say, "God kept me alive", like Sharbanou. But the painful reality is that she didn't survive, and countless others perished alongside her.

These pages are for those who feel betrayed by hope. They serve as a guide for anyone finding themselves wandering the treacherous terrain of unbearable pain. It's a readily available emergency kit for any emotional hit. Consider this book a life vest if you're drowning in the depths of despair.

Before we delve into the stories ahead, it's essential to understand the broader scale of the Surfside collapse. The magnitude of the tragedy, the lives forever altered, and the collective mourning that enveloped a community. By comprehending the grander context that these individual stories unfold, we can begin to grasp the depth of our shared pain to reclaim our lives. While our situations may diverge us, our sufferings converge us. We each face different circumstances. But we all face the same feelings that need healing. As you read ahead, my prayer is that you make the promises of Psalms 73:25-26 your prayer. "Who do I have in heaven? There is no one on earth who I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever."¹²⁵