

*Stricken:*  
The 5,000 Stages of Grief

edited by

Spike Gillespie

and Katherine Tanney



Dalton Publishing  
P.O. Box 242  
Austin, Texas 78767  
*www.daltonpublishing.com*

Copyright 2009 by Spike Gillespie and Katherine Tanney. All rights reserved.

Printed in the United States of America

Edited by Spike Gillespie and Katherine Tanney

Assisted editing by Ric Williams and Neil Kahn

Cover photography by Mary Stephens

Cover design by Tamar Design+Marketing

Interior design and typesetting by Deltina Hay

ISBN-13: 978-0-9817443-6-0

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Stricken-- the 5,000 stages of grief / edited by Spike Gillespie and Katherine Tanney.

p. cm.

ISBN 978-0-9817443-6-0

1. Grief. 2. Loss (Psychology) I. Gillespie, Spike. II. Tanney, Katherine. III. Title: Stricken-- the five thousand stages of grief. IV. Title: 5,000 stages of grief.

BF575.G7S767 2009

155.9'3--dc22

2008044791

This book is dedicated to Sandy Silver,  
and to the memory of her son, Christopher Kern

xxx, 000



Spike Gillespie

## Editor's Note

ON JANUARY 31, 2007, Molly Ivins died. Molly was my great friend and long time mentor. She wasn't your typical mentor. She gave me advice like, "If you're a starving writer, save your pennies and feed your cat, because you can trick your hungry stomach into feeling full with a glass of water, but you cannot shut up a hungry cat."

Molly was the busiest person I knew, and yet she always made time to take me to lunch, tell me her wild stories, and encourage me in all of my writerly dreams. She also loved my son, whom she first met when he was around seven. Long after Henry stopped hanging out with me, the one party he always still wanted to join me at was Final Friday, monthly bashes where Molly threw open her doors and all manner of hilarity and political satire ensued. I swear we must've gone to at least 80 of those events over the years.

When Molly's cancer came back for the ninetieth time, I got really nervous when my cell phone indicated an incoming call from Betsy, her assistant. This nervousness gave way to deep sadness when I got the call I was dreading: Molly was at the end.

I had the honor and privilege of spending a number of Molly's final days at her bedside, holding her hand, telling her I loved her, kissing her fuzzy bald head goodbye. My son, too, had his

chance for a farewell, and I could see something had changed permanently in him when we got back on the hospital elevator, after he saw her that one last time.

Sarah Barnes, who used to share those lunches with Molly and me, called me around six p.m. that Wednesday night to ask if I'd heard the news. I had not. I curled up in a ball and cried.

The next night, my then husband announced I had two choices. I could either cease all contact with him for a period of time—some months—a period he would determine without my input, at which point he would consider trying to work on our disaster of a marriage. Or I could have a flat out divorce.

I don't suppose it's ever "good timing" to walk out on one's spouse. But I found his timing to be especially harsh. The double whammy of losing my friend and my marriage in twenty-four hours leveled me. Totally.

Over the next several months, I fell apart. I came very close, quite literally, to having a nervous breakdown. I could not force food into my body. I chain-smoked. I lost forty pounds in about ten minutes. And I cried every single day. For six months. I was astounded at my body's ability to produce so many tears.

Back in 1986, I had a miscarriage. I locked myself in my room and decided I would never come out again. My mother explained to me this was not going to be the case. I was, she informed me, going to get my ass out of bed, get dressed, and go to work. And so, begrudgingly, I did, surprised at the comfort this distraction brought me.

My mother's advice came back to me in 2007 and, though large stores of my memory from the first half of that year escape me, I do know this: I was busy. I was really, really busy and purposefully so. I embraced this busyness because, though it exhausted me, I knew that if I gave in fully to my grief, I was going to totally lose my shit. I recognized the value of some denial and so I buried myself in projects and travel.

Of the latter, I was fortunate enough to have many generous friends who sent me on numerous trips, which, while in the moment didn't always feel healing, in retrospect helped

tremendously. I spent a week in Japan, face buried in my futon, my shoulders shaking as I sobbed. I spent another week in Ontario, at a theater festival, seeing amazing parallels between my life and countless tragic characters conjured by Shakespeare and Albee and Steinbeck.

As for burying myself in projects—this book is a direct result of that strategy. Not only did I want to process my own grief, not only did I want to work and work and work, but I also suddenly had this keen awareness of what grief felt like as I was feeling it. I wanted to give voice and shape to that. So I called upon my friends to offer their stories of grief.

In the request I sent out for essays, I made it clear that I was not looking for neat and tidy pieces that echoed some sort of *Chicken Soup For The Sad Soul* pep talk. Grief does not, in my experience, respond to pep talks. Yes, being loved and supported and listened to and force fed helps. And I am so grateful to everyone who did those things for me. But in the end, the process is what it is, it winds down weird paths, and when you start to feel better, there's no sense in relaxing into it, because you never know when some little something is going to retrigger the avalanche. (Months after my ex-husband walked out on me, I ran into Whole Foods to grab something. I was instantly paralyzed—I'd bought so many meals for us there and now revisiting this place brought on a visceral reaction so great it threatened to knock me down again.)

My therapist, to whom I am forever indebted, told me that grief is like a spiral staircase. There are days when you are far from the wall of the pain and you feel like you're moving up. But then, when you least expect it, there you are, shoulder back up against the very feelings you thought were behind you.

Another good friend passed along some advice his mother gave him: *Grief takes four seasons to move through*. Which isn't to say that there is a set ending point, of course. I've had things I've grieved for decades. But I think the advice means that if you can get through that first year, life becomes more bearable. Certainly this was the case with me.

At the risk of sounding like the sort of *Chicken Soup* spoon-feeder I claimed not to be interested in hearing from, I have to say that the rough changes grief rudely foisted upon me led me to a place far better than I could imagine. Several of my phobias fell completely by the wayside. A number of my projects bore surprising fruit. And now, as I write this, I'm closing in on a year since my double loss, and I can't remember the last time I cried. But I can certainly recall the last time I ate.

This book is filled with the personal stories of people looking at grief from all sorts of angles. The title comes from an observation made by my Buddhist friend, Carlene, who pointed out that *stricken* is about as precise a description as you can get on the topic, and from Laura House, whose essay opens this collection, and who notes so well how countless the stages are.

At the end of this book are words of wisdom on how to help others in grief. These thoughts are from my friend Sandy Silver, who, in acting on her grief, gave a tremendous gift to the entire city of Austin. It was through this gift that I met her. If you've ever walked around Town Lake and seen the beautiful pink granite bench that is inscribed: XXX,000, Chris, you have experienced this gift.

Chris is Sandy's son, who died in 1991. Long before I ever met Sandy, I passed that bench every day, probably for ten years, as I took my daily four-mile walks. I could not put my finger on it, but that bench spoke to me. I always had the feeling that I knew Chris, though we'd never met. I mentioned this in an essay in *The Austin Chronicle*, and Sandy called me. Not long after, I was walking by one day and there she was, at the bench. We've been friends ever since. Every year, on Chris's birthday and death anniversary, I take flowers to the bench. I'm not the only one. And if you go to see it, be sure to take a look at the back, and underneath, where you'll find little treasures embedded in the granite and limestone, mementos of a beloved son.

The list of people to whom I am forever grateful for helping me in my grief is entirely too long to publish here. My inner sanctum, my son's father, my ex-brother-in-law, my therapist,

the people who gave me work even when I was hardly at the top of my game, the amazing writers who joined forces with me one night to perform a spoken word production to help me heal—a production that has grown into an ongoing theatrical show.

I want to give a very special shout out to Ori, who showed up and surprised me and invited me into his world with laughter and compassion and a gentle infinite patience, particularly those many moments when I found myself on that spiral staircase, up against the wall unexpectedly, nearly too terrified to move ahead.

Another special thanks goes to Deltina for her faith in the project. There were long lags in the process because when I was deep in grief, writing about it, and reading about it was too much. And then those other times, when grief backed off and gave me a little breathing room, I found the prospect of writing and reading about the topic wholly unpalatable.

Toward that end, I have tremendous gratitude for Katherine Tanney, who agreed to tag team and co-edit this book with me. Katherine nudged me toward deadlines, brought many wonderful writers to the project, and pulled more than her share during the editing process.

—*Spike Gillespie*



Katherine Tanney

## Editor's Note

WHEN SPIKE GILLESPIE TOLD me she was going to collect essays for a book about grief, I was in the thick of my own research on the topic. I was reading C.S. Lewis's diary following the death of his wife ("A Grief Observed") and a series of letters by Genevieve Jurgensen about the loss of her two young daughters in an auto accident ("The Disappearance"). Around this same time I became aware of Austin's Dalton Publishing when I wrote about a publication party for one of their authors in my newspaper column.

I asked Spike if I could contribute an essay and to my surprise she invited me to help her edit the project. We contacted writers and the essays began to come in. What struck me when I printed out everything and began reading the pieces as a body of interconnected parts was how isolating grief is. It's so easy to feel alone with it, stricken, as you go through your day, assuming others are happy, spared.

Weird, how grief weighs like a physical burden on you. You have to drag the sadness and anxiety and depression around with you. Your life is just as it was—same busy schedule, same good friends, sweet dogs, love of yoga, but all the joy has gone out of it. You go through the motions with the friends considerate enough to extend invitations. You dress up, show up, bathed

and smelling good, as if all is just dandy. But inside the pain is sharp and will not be put off.

I wrote those words during a bout of intense grief last year, over the sudden loss—something like a miscarriage, I imagine—of a very promising young relationship.

It's my hope that the amazing variety of voices in this collection and the kinds of grief considered will offer companionship and support to those who have found themselves, or may still be, crushed in the fists of the beast.

Thanks to the gifted writers who responded to my invitation to contribute, and to Spike Gillespie and Deltina Hay at Dalton Publishing for giving me the opportunity to participate in such a worthwhile project.

—*Katherine Tanney*

# Table of Contents

Laura House . . . . .	19
<i>The Thing Bout Losing My Mom...</i>	
Rachel Resnick . . . . .	27
<i>Touch Me</i>	
Owen Egerton . . . . .	35
<i>Holiest of Times</i>	
David Zuniga . . . . .	41
<i>The Truth Remains</i>	
Jim Krusoe . . . . .	51
<i>Memorial—for L.H.</i>	
Marie Wilson . . . . .	57
<i>The Three-Legged Dog</i>	
Donnalyn Watt . . . . .	63
<i>I Cannot Think What To Do</i>	
Debbie Lee Wesselmann . . . . .	69
<i>Before Loss</i>	
Holly Whitaker . . . . .	75
<i>A Story of Grief</i>	
Spike Gillespie . . . . .	83
<i>'Til Grief Do We Part</i>	
Victoria Sullivan Hendricks . . . . .	89
<i>And Both Are True</i>	
Miriam Kuznets . . . . .	97
<i>Joining the Club</i>	

Amy Friedman . . . . .	105
<i>New Year's Day</i>	
Mary Ann Reynolds . . . . .	115
<i>Margaret</i>	
Hope Edelman . . . . .	123
<i>Kaddish in Topanga</i>	
Katherine Tanney . . . . .	133
<i>The End of Grief</i>	
Margaret Moser . . . . .	141
<i>Married to the Tattoo Mob</i>	
Mollie McLean Staffa . . . . .	149
<i>Mortal Vexation</i>	
Lyman Grant . . . . .	157
<i>The Stuff of Dreams</i>	
Gary Kent . . . . .	169
<i>Homage to the Broken Heart</i>	
Mylène Dressler . . . . .	179
<i>Flying Dutchman</i>	
Anonymous . . . . .	185
<i>An Anger with a Million Names</i>	
Buffy Cram . . . . .	191
<i>Still Life with Loss</i>	
Sandy Silver . . . . .	199
<i>Helping Others in Grief</i>	

clouds form & uniform

he sleeps in a narrow bed  
& cannot remember his dreams

or how in heaven there are no churches  
there are he imagines long beaches white &  
trackless & in the distance great whales breaching

he laughs: there are ice cream trucks in heaven  
& horses that smoke fine Cuban cigars  
but there are no churches  
& no one dreams of

being someone else or what might have  
been or what will happen if there is  
no heaven or hell or time enough  
to say goodbye or wander  
into a room of ghosts

no dreamcatchers  
prayer sticks  
talismans  
shawls  
bells  
dust

how what  
he cannot hold  
becomes everything  
worth holding  
the long light  
a body of  
soft rain

© 2008 Richard Lance Williams September 7 for Rod

## Laura House

# The Thing Bout Losing My Mom...

WE ALL KNOW THERE are stages of grief. Denial. Crying. Eating. Anger. Rage. Freak out. Bargaining. Drinking. Begging. Pleading. Sex with strangers. Reluctant acceptance. Acceptance. But these don't tell you the whole story. You actually have to go through an entire reprogramming of your brain. I mean, I had a mother every day all day long for thirty-five years. Suddenly, I didn't. Logically, I understood. She had cancer; she got sick. She's gone. Got it. But now, she's just gone? How is that possible? How is my mother never to return?

Mom got diagnosed in 2000. She called me from Texas at my new job in San Francisco. She'd never called me at work, ever. She said, "Well, I have cancer." Like that. Who does that? She just didn't see the point of beating around the bush. I was thinking plane ticket. I asked if she was going to have an operation, chemo; what was going to happen? She said that she and Dad were going to have a bowl of soup, then head to the hospital.

Record scratch. What?

"You're calling me on the way to the hospital?"

"No, I said we were going to have a bowl of soup!"

And that's my mom. Don't bother Laura with my cancer. Years before, she'd had a complication from anesthesia on an out-patient eye tuck procedure and got a blood clot on her brain.

No one in the family even called me. I was three hours away in Austin. Finally, her best friend called, “Laura, I don’t know if your dad told you, but your mom has a blood clot on her brain. It’s fine. Don’t worry yourself, just wanted you to know.”

It’s fine? Is that a Texas thing? Of course I worried myself. Of course I hopped in the car and went to see her. She was a big reader and my dad and brother had gotten her some books. SHE HAD A BLOOD CLOT ON HER BRAIN. I got her books on tape.

But this was worse. This was cancer. Her mom died from it. Everybody seems to die from it. I didn’t want her to die from it. But she was going to die from it.

She had three rounds of chemo over five years. The first one made her feel sick and lose her hair, but when she came out of it she joined Jenny Craig and lost seventy pounds. After the second round a year and a half later, she joined Curves. She wanted to live, and live well.

She did what she could to be healthy and kept enjoying her friends and her life. I mentioned her being sick to a friend who asked me what kind of cancer it was. I didn’t know. I asked my mom. She said, “Oh, who knows?” It was ovarian. I cautiously mentioned support groups to my mom. She said, “This cancer has taken enough of my life. I’m not going to give it any more time by sitting around talking about it. I do what the doctors tell me and forget about it.”

In 2005 she was having her last session in her third round of chemo. She came home and couldn’t breathe. Her lungs were filling with fluid. She was too tired to walk across the room. This was the woman who, when I called months before and asked what she was up to that day, said, “Oh, going to Curves, then chemo, then the grocery store to get some potatoes to go with the chicken.” Now she couldn’t walk across a room. I was miles away in L.A. at the time. Dad called. Dad had never called me, ever. He said mom was sick, back in the hospital, in ICU, and he was just letting me know. Oh. I asked if I needed

## The Thing Bout Losing My Mom

to come home. He said to wait till morning; maybe it'd take a turn. It did.

She wasn't dying; she'd contracted congestive heart failure from the chemo. Apparently, it's common and you can live with it, like diabetes. You stop eating salt and a few other things and you're fine.

A week and a half later, Dad called me for the second time in my life. Mom was in the hospital again. Should I come home? Again, I got the wait till morning thing. But something wasn't right.

I experienced that a lot around my mother's death. You know things. Maybe when you're close with someone who's about to enter the spirit realm, you somehow get more connected to the spirit realm. I don't know, but I do know that I knew.

I called my best friend. Her mom and my mom are best friends. I asked what the deal was. She said it was bad. Fuck it. I called her mom, Verna, the same one who'd told me about my mom's brain blood clot. I'd never called her, ever. She said it was bad. "Laura, that little light in her eyes is gone." Oh, god. Has a sadder sentence ever been said?

I called the airline to see what to do if I needed an emergency ticket the next day. I cried. I slept. When I woke up, I had a message, "Come home." I ran to work, grabbed my laptop, and hopped on a plane, bracing myself for a bad weekend. We'd get Mom home and it'd be a drag, but it'd be all right. Right?

Three things. I don't know how to say this, because I haven't experienced such a thing before or since, but when I was at the airport, about to board the plane, I felt my mom. I was wearing a denim shirt similar to one I'd gotten her. First I felt her in my shirt, and then I felt she was around me, kind of up in the air. And I felt her saying she needed to go. And I felt myself thinking to her that she should go, if she needs to. And I wouldn't argue it with a skeptic, but that's what I felt—as if my mom had astral projected to me to make sure I was okay.

Second thing. I fell asleep on the plane and dreamt my mom was dead.

Third thing. I talked to the woman next to me. Her grandmother had had congestive heart failure and she told me all about it. She was very sweet and comforting. As we were about to unload off the plane, she touched my arm. “What’s your mom’s name?” “Carole,” I said. And then, in a voice that sounded somewhat otherworldly, she said, “Carole’s gonna be fine.” And not for a second did I take that to mean alive-fine. I don’t know how else to explain it. It felt to me like an angel or spirit was speaking through this woman saying Mom will be fine, like, in the ultimate sense.

Another best friend of Mom’s, Norma, the former school nurse who lived down the street and who took her to every chemo, picked me up. We were driving to the hospital, making chitchat as best we could, when she got a call. Her end was something like, “I’ve got Laura and we’re on our way. Oh. Okay, well, we’ll see you in a minute.”

And I knew. I didn’t ask. She didn’t tell. But I knew that was the death call. And this wasn’t in any preternatural way; this was just common sense. You could hear it in her voice. We got to the hospital, and Norma turned around with tears in her eyes and said, “She’s gone. I’m so sorry.”

It wasn’t congestive heart failure after all. She’d gotten a viral infection that attacks the heart, looks like CHF, but takes you out very quickly.

I went upstairs in a daze and found my Dad. He and my brother walked me into a room where my mom had just died about ten minutes before. Just about as I was landing. As if she waited till I landed safely, but didn’t want me to actually see her die. And I don’t know that you get choices like that, but I believe if she’d had a choice, that would have been it.

Dad and I went home. A message on the phone said Mom’s wine was ready to be picked up. That’s so my mom, having a special order of wine, even when she was dead. I grabbed her phone book and started calling. Mom had a lot of friends. Friends from childhood, college, teaching, church. And that’s when the grieving process began for me. I told people over and

## The Thing Bout Losing My Mom

over for hours that my mom was dead. I just kept saying it and how it happened. I wouldn't wish that task on anyone, but I don't know how else I could have processed it.

My mom was dead and dealing with that became a near full-time job for me. Grief is serious. A friend lost both of her parents within a year and didn't grieve, and then got hit with viral meningitis, she claims, from keeping it all inside. I remembered, "Feel your feelings." And I did. When I felt a cry come on, I let it happen. Driving, eating, in line at Target—wherever. My brain had to get that she was gone. Gone gone.

My brain understood Mom being at the store, so that's what it felt like for a while. Yes, we're getting rid of her clothes and clearing out her stuff, but she's at the store. She's with a friend. She's at church. She's down the hall in the restroom. My mind kept imagining she was just elsewhere. That's all my mind could do. I had to ease into the "gone" part, I guess.

What surprised me most about grief was the surprise. I was constantly surprised that my mom was dead. It was consistently news to me. Logically, I knew. But it took time to really, really know. For a while, I'd wake up crying. I'd wake up like any other time, then it'd hit me, "Oh, another day—My mom's dead—What?—Yes, dead!—Oh, god," and cry. Or I'd be at Target. I'd see a necklace, "Mom would really like that—But she's dead—She's what?—Dead!—Oh, god!" And I'd be off again. That's why the first year is the hardest; it's three hundred sixty-five new days that you've never had without your loved one. Your birthday, their birthday, Christmas, Valentine's. Or what I found the hardest: just days. Just a Saturday and you're driving and you want to call. Just to say hi. And you can't. You can't call just to say hi. And it seeps in more and more. So very, awfully, slowly. Just that. You can never again just call to say hi to your mom.

And I know, you can pray or talk to the sky, write a letter and never send it, but fuck that. That's the hardest part for me. Not the big stuff. At Christmas, it kind of just feels like Mom is in another room in a way. Birthdays were often forgotten anyway,

that's not too big a deal. But the little things. I do see necklaces she'd like and have to remind myself that she's gone. Still. Gone today and gone tomorrow.

That's the pain of grief: reminders. It's confusing. It's stark new information. It's unwanted. But it has to sink in: My mom was alive and now she's dead. And when it does, that's acceptance.

It's been two years now, almost exactly. I kept a journal of the first year. It helped to write it out. There's a lot of swearing.

There are things people don't tell you about grief. All that I had a sense about it was, "I guess you're sad and cry a lot." Some people have goodbye dreams where they get to have those last words with a loved one. Or they feel their loved one in the room with them from time to time. I never had that. Know what I did get? Effing Hall and Oates "She's Gone" stuck in my head.

Like I needed that on top of everything else. Wasn't I suffering enough? I'd explain to my brain the song isn't even about dying, it's about a break-up, but she just wasn't having it. I'd innocently think, "She's gone," and we were off.

Maybe grief is new to you. If so, I'm glad it's not commonplace for you. Secondly, here's some advice.

First. Feel your feelings. Seriously. So simple, but not always easy. Sometimes instinct says to ignore our feelings. Don't. I never denied my grief. I cried through every "my mom is dead" call. It took to about Person Number 77 before I could say it without breaking down. I cried at the shoe store buying shoes for her funeral. I cried in Kohl's. I cried in the car. I pulled over if I had to. And with each bout of crying, I learned it passes. It doesn't feel like it ever will. Don't think your grief is worse than someone else's. It's grief. It's a gut-wrenching, psyche-changing process. Honor it. Pay attention. It's convulsing, painful tears. It'll go for hours. And, eventually, it'd be just an hour, then less than that. Then just once a day, then not every day. I still cry when I talk about it and I cried as I wrote most of this. I'm actually sitting in my mom's chair right now in Grand Prairie.

## The Thing Bout Losing My Mom

I cry. And if you need to cry, I can't express to you strongly enough to do it. Let it out. Better out than in, as they say.

Second. And this is maybe less clear, but powerful. You have a window of about a year. A few weeks into my grieving process, an older friend pulled me aside. He could tell I was hurting a great deal and he'd lost his mother years before. He said, "I don't know if this will make sense to you, but you have a window of about a year. After that, things pretty much go back to normal. But you have this special year. Use it. I don't know what it is for you, but for me, I wrote my book. I just want you to know you have this special year to use."

And I didn't exactly understand at the time, but kind of I did. I felt different. I felt changed. I felt closer to...Being? More fearless? The worst thing that could happen to me did, so what was I static in other areas for? What could scare me now? It was unbelievable to me that anything would ever go back to normal again, but it does. Once again, you get annoyed by traffic or you count calories or you fret about something stupid at work. All the things that were so small in light of my loss, things that I didn't even notice for a while, that I couldn't believe anyone cared about, they all come back. For a while, all I could do was be in the grief. But it lifts. I have days where I don't think about it at all. And I have days where I see a seventy-year-old at the grocery store and I start to cry. It's like that. Grief is more like the flu than anything else. It just comes on. And it passes. I used my year. I was in touch with myself. I felt very deeply. I traveled and took classes. I made huge moves on my career I'd been too timid to try before. I got my dream job and a much needed divorce. Not that you have to do any of that, specifically, but it worked for me.

Losing gives us much needed perspective. I believe that if we don't use it, we will lose it. Losing my mom was nightmarish. But it also brought the rest of my family closer. It triggered changes in me, changes I'm so grateful for. It softened my heart. It opened my eyes. It elevated my soul. I wish she were here for me to tell these things to, but that's not how it works. Grieving

Laura House

loss is a fundamentally necessary process. I'm so sorry you have to go through it. But I know you'll get through it. And I know you can come out better for it on the other side. Hang in there.



LAURA HOUSE WAS TEACHING seventh grade in Austin, Texas, when she decided she'd rather be a comedian. She is now a regular performer/director at the Acme Comedy Theater in Hollywood and writes for TV shows like "George Lopez." You may have seen her on MTV's "Austin Stories" or playing a hillbilly slut opposite Natalie Portman in *Where the Heart Is*.

Owen Egerton

## Holiest of Times

THE HOURS ARE SLOW. My grandfather is not fully conscious, but we speak to him and read his favorite poems aloud. Occasionally he squeezes our hand or says a name. We, his family, are gathered in his small room in an assisted living home in west England.

It is a weird waiting, sitting by a deathbed. We fill the time by catching up on family gossip, watching cricket on television, passing my four-month-old baby back and forth and laughing at her babbling. In the early afternoon, we treat my grandmother to a pub lunch and a scenic drive. This is a routine we'll follow for the better part of a week.

Arden, our baby, is a star. We live in Texas so this is a first meeting for most of the family. In the evening after dinner, she shows off her newfound ability to put most of her foot into her mouth, rolling back and forth, gleefully sucking her toes as if they're sugarcoated. She giggles, she gurgles. She dozes, she whimpers. We sit around her in the same way we sit around my grandfather. Two nexuses of the family. One newly arrived. One preparing to leave. Both close to the edges of life. Both faces reflecting the pink-red glow of a low sun. One dawn and the other sunset. Both cry; both can only eat when fed; both call out in their sleep for their mothers.

My grandfather was born in Wales in 1913, before World Wars I and II, before the Holocaust, before television,

international flights, computers. He didn't have electricity as a child. Arden was born in Austin, Texas, in 2005. Moments after breathing her first breath, photos of her were emailed via cell phone around the world. They are the oldest and the youngest, the chronological borders, of the family.

My grandfather had been at a hospital. I visited him there when we first arrived in England. It was a dim, clean room near a loud hallway. The nurses called him "Ivor," a name he hadn't answered to in decades. "He goes by Ken," I told them. They nodded and wrote nothing down. The doctors and nurses could not keep the tubes in Grandfather's arm. He pulled them out; he cried out through the night. They sent him back to his room at the assisted living home. Now there are no tubes, no doctors, and the attendants call him Ken. Except one, who insists on calling him "Poppet."

He does not need medication. He does not need doctors. He's not sick. He is dying.

Arden was born in a hospital. Florescent lights and the smell of disinfectant. Our doula, a birth guide, arrived shortly after we did. She lowered the lights and rubbed rich smelling oils on Jodi's legs. My wife, like my grandfather, frustrated the nurses and doctors by refusing their painkillers. Jodi was not sick. She was giving birth.

Our doula, Lanell, stayed with us throughout the birth, answering our questions with calm and encouraging words. The nurses and doctor checked in on us as labor progressed, but it was Lanell who remained close. As the contractions increased in strength, Jodi's eyes opened wide. Her expression seemed to be asking, "Is my body doing this right? Should I be afraid?" Lanell took her hand. "You're doing great," she said and smiled. "Your body is doing just what it should be doing." Jodi nodded and took some deep breaths.

My mother acts as doula for her father, guiding him through an experience easily as strange and intense as birth. She often leans close to him and reminds him we are here. She gives him sips of water and tells him he is doing fine. She is not telling

him that he is making a recovery. That would be a lie. Instead she assures him, with spoken and unspoken gestures, that it's all right to let go.

Only once during the days around my grandfather's bed does he open his eyes, although he is urged often. I believe he opens his eyes not for his sake but for ours. We believe we are there for him. And I imagine he is grateful enough, but the truth is we are there for our own reasons. He is working on deeper things. He is speaking to friends and relatives long since dead, mumbling their names from a dry mouth. He is visiting places he hasn't seen since he was a child. For him the lines are thin: between what is and what was, between the living and the dead. Who are we to interrupt such journeys so he can acknowledge our presence?

Perhaps it is not as spiritual as I would describe. Perhaps it's a brain melting away, confused and full of dementia. Or maybe it is both. A note from a guitar is a floating moment of music and also simply a vibrating string. I'm told my baby's first smile was just a rumble in her belly. But it pierced my heart nonetheless.

My parents, both doctors, can see my grandfather's death approaching stage by stage. They estimate the days and later hours, monitoring his progression in the same way that, months before, they had felt Jodi's belly and described the baby's development. There are no real surprises as my grandfather lies in his bed. He is traveling a well-worn path. New for him, but as old as life. He does hold on a day or two longer than my parents had suspected. "He's always been stubborn," my mother says. Her brothers smile. My grandfather has crept up to the edge of death, and like a prolonged labor, he holds strong and moves not an inch forward. We wait, taking turns holding his hand, taking turns walking with the baby in the garden.

Then, on the day before my family is scheduled to fly home, a change in breath and skintone tell my parents that his passing will be in the next ten minutes or so. The family quickly gathers around his bed; my mother takes her father's hand and speaks gentle words as if she is calming a child to sleep. My grandmother

kisses his lips and speaks his name. We watch those stuttered last breaths. Then he stops breathing all together. He is dead. And the strange thing is, it's a surprise. Has this just happened? But it most certainly has. There's a change in the room as clear as the first winds of a storm front.

The moment of Arden's birth was preempted by hours of labor, the drama of pushing, the excitement of seeing the crown of her head. But here, too, the moment of birth was a surprise. There's a photo of Jodi and me first seeing the baby. Our faces are bright with shocked amazement, as if a baby was the last thing we expected to see.

When my grandfather, Poppa is what we call him, when Poppa dies, the staff of the home lets us sit with him. Touch him. My grandmother kisses his cheek one last time. They leave us for as long as we need. It is holy and odd. I'm reminded of our first hours with Arden, refusing the nurse's offer to take her to the nursery. We held her: a small, warm creature with the smell of birth still on her new skin. Later Jodi would comment on how amazing it is that people were working, shopping, or just hanging out while something as extreme as birth was happening.

And didn't we feel that leaving my grandfather's room? How dare there be a sitcom playing on television. How dare two men argue outside the window or a dog bark at birds in the yard. Quiet. My grandfather died today.

All this holiness hiding in a corner of the world, in a corner of the day. I find myself afraid of the holy. The same fear that fills my belly when I look out over a canyon or stand alone in the dark. It takes a certain effort to sit still. There's a desire to let the attendants push us out of my grandfather's room, let the nurses take the baby, let some official, authoritative hand fill the moment with the "necessary." The moments—quiet with a new life, quiet with a passed life—whisper too loudly. The gain, the loss, the change. The moments remind us of our own condition, and we fear that if we listen too closely the horrible awe of it all will break us.

## Holiest of Times

In spite of our fear, we do listen to what the holy is whispering. We sat with the baby. We sit with the body. It doesn't break us, but it changes us.

When my wife and I return from England both of us follow the lessons in different directions. Jodi begins volunteering at a local hospital visiting new mothers and speaking with them about breast-feeding, basic baby health and ways to connect with other mothers. She especially enjoys helping the younger mothers, teenage girls with frightened eyes and homework due. Jodi also begins her training to be a doula herself. I'm drawn to the other end of the journey and start volunteering with a local hospice group. I sit with the dying, usually in their homes. Sometimes we talk about life and spirit. Sometimes baseball and the best way to make a milkshake. Often there's no talk at all. At night Jodi and I compare notes and are continually intrigued by the parallels of blessings and pains experienced by families losing a loved one or birthing a child. These two moments—life beginning and life ending—offer brief, often startling, glimpses into the nature of what it means to be human.

Arden is in the room when her great-grandfather dies. She quietly nurses in her mother's arms. Her eyes are closed and there is a question in her tiny brow. When my grandmother cries, she stops nursing and cries as well.

Later that night, after many tears, I place Arden in my grandmother's lap. My grandmother's gaze, which had been glazed and distant, focuses on the baby. She cradles her in her thin hands and leans close. She wipes her own eyes and smiles. Arden smiles back and laughs a little. My grandmother also laughs. Arden reaches out and touches my grandmother's face as the family sits still, holding the moment and feeling the holy.



OWEN EGERTON IS THE author of the novel *Marshall Hollenzer is Driving* and the short story collection *How Best to Avoid Dying*. He is also an accomplished screenplay writer and commentator

## Owen Egerton

for NPR affiliated stations. He is the co-creator of the award-winning comedy hit “The Sinus Show,” and for several years he was the artistic director of Austin’s National Comedy Theatre. Egerton earned his MFA in Creative Writing from Texas State University in 2005. He currently lives in Austin, Texas, with his wife and two children.

Jim Krusoe

## Memorial—for L.H.

ONCE UPON A TIME I bought a pup, and because he liked to run, I got in the habit of driving up into the mountains every morning to let him race around for an hour or so while I walked after him. It was a crazy habit, what with the drive taking at least thirty minutes there and another thirty back, sometimes longer than the walk itself, and when I think about it now, I realize I was probably having some sort of low-grade nervous breakdown. Then, there was the waste of gas, the pollution I was creating, the miles put on my van, and even the fact that once, returning from one of those trips in the pouring rain, my van slid into a brand new BMW, which cost something, too. But I don't think I ever missed a day, and maybe it was cheaper than therapy.

It was on one of those mornings that I noticed a small bamboo cross, about four feet tall and two feet wide, that had been stuck into a pile of stony debris at the foot of a cliff, and my first thought was that children had been playing there. A couple of days later when I returned, the cross was spray-painted black, and someone had left a few dried flowers at its base. It was for a pet—a cat, I guessed—though I couldn't figure out why anyone would have gone all that distance just to bury a cat, and certainly the spot, a mass of rocks and pebbles, wasn't the easiest place to dig a hole. Time passed—a week, maybe

two. I got a speeding ticket, adding eighty-five dollars to the cost of the walks, and when I finally returned to the spot, to my surprise there was a heavy six-foot wooden cross, freshly sawed and bolted together, stuck like a stake into the ground. I revised my theory. It couldn't have been for a cat. Instead I figured this was the meeting place of some renegade Christian sect. Still, I couldn't think of any reason why they would have to gather in such a difficult place to get to.

Weeks passed. I think the Christmas holidays went by, and I had extra time in the mornings to drive even farther away for our walks, so it wasn't until mid-January that I returned to the site to find the cross still there, set by then in a base of poured concrete, the flowers put in pots. At the foot of the cross was a plaque that read, "At this site Javier Hernandez fell to his death," followed by the dates of his birth and his fall. He had been fourteen, and all around the cross were careful notes on lined school paper from his friends describing their holidays, the parties they'd gone to, the presents they'd gotten, and telling how much they missed him. The one I remember most, as if the boy's death had rendered him suddenly all-knowing and impossibly finicky, ended: "I'm sorry for my bad spelling. Your friend, Jose."

What kept me thinking about it though—or at least what I think keeps me thinking about it—is the question of where we go to mourn the ones we loved. Why, for example, had Javier's friends and family picked the place where he died rather than visit the cemetery to leave their stream of messages? Did they imagine that all alone in that ancient land of dark and wandering souls, perhaps out of some sense of familiarity, Javier had chosen to hang around the spot where he had entered? Did his family leave notes at the cemetery as well, just to be on the safe side?



About thirty years ago I visited a house on a dusty street in a small village in Mexico where a poet, Lopez Velarde, lived and died. The place was exactly as if he still lived there, with only the addition of a guest book and an old lady to watch it and a

## Memorial—for L.H.

few commemorative paintings. My favorite was one of the poet as a somber, middle-aged man. In it, his back was turned to a set of French doors and a wide green lawn, maybe symbolizing eternity, and next to him was a heaping plate of half-eaten, brightly colored Mexican pastries.

I had come to Mexico to stay with a friend, Jean-Phillip Carson, whose house was on that same street. He sold his home in Los Angeles about the time Nixon bombed Cambodia, saying he couldn't stand sending his taxes to such a government. J-P had owned a big, beautiful dog, an Akita, and the man and the dog formed one of those couples that famously resembled each other. Both were sleek, had tiny, even rows of teeth, and mutton chop whiskers. Though the dog had been hit by a truck a couple months earlier, in a freak accident in a town about fifty miles to the north, whenever the two of us passed a certain part of the street where another dog used to bark at his, J-P and I would cross over, as if his dog were still alive. It was J-P's habit to lie flat out on the living room rug each afternoon, and he said that when the dog was alive the dog would join him. Then, the afternoon of the day before I was to leave, J-P took his nap as usual, but when he came out from the room his face was wet. He said he had a dream in which his dog came to him, this dog he had loved so much, but when he reached out to touch him, the dog's eyes had changed into the eyes of a wolf. "Why would that make me cry?" he asked me, his face still gleaming. "That's the strangest part of it," he said. "Stranger by far than the dream."

I left him and took the long and scenic route back to Los Angeles. J-P was supposed to leave about ten days later, drive up quickly, and meet me to resume a discussion we had begun in Mexico about his founding a magazine devoted to images on film—something I was completely unqualified for, but which I fantasized would change my life. I dawdled along the coast, spent some extra time in San Diego, and when I arrived in Los Angeles, there was an airmail letter waiting for me. It said that in order not to pass through the town where his dog had been

killed, J-P had taken another route, one on which a cattle truck had been forced to brake suddenly, flipping over onto his small car. He had died instantly on the road between Mazatlan and Culican, near one of those spots along the highway I used to see covered by clusters of small crosses indicating accidents and put there in memory of others who had died.



And all of this came back to me the other night when I dreamed of a man who died a while ago—a writer, an editor, and an uneasy friend by the name of Lee Hickman. In my dream, Lee started out as the Lee I knew: brilliant, painfully self-conscious, looking as always like a boy whose mother dressed him, a character out of one of those fifties comedies, a Junior or Ricky or a Bud, now grown-up and gotten terribly off-track, too wise and cynical and sad and needy ever to coax laughs out of a live studio audience. Then Lee began to change his shape, going from old to young, from one person to another (although I always knew it was Lee) and finished up as Michel Foucault.

This wasn't quite as odd as it might sound, because throughout his life Lee had always wanted to be my teacher, and though I certainly needed one, for various not-very-good reasons, I resisted. In almost any group of writers we would find ourselves sitting on opposite sides of the room, as far apart as possible, yet of course, staring at each other. Now after his death I found myself in my dream needing to ask his opinion. "Lee," I said, "I've been writing these essays and I don't think they're the least smart in a way that you'd like them." (Lee's magazine had prided itself on its post-modernly distance and poetry.) "But to tell the truth, they seem to be the best that I can manage."

I waited for the Lee in my dream to answer while he took his time changing back from Foucault to himself. "Well . . ." he shrugged, and then gave a sort of tired wave as if he'd either given up or just didn't care. Meanwhile, I watched as he began to fade, like a released fish traveling deeper and deeper beneath

Memorial—for L.H.

the surface, back to join the other dead, where he still lives, not unclearly as in life—that drawer full of snapshots constantly being shuffled—but inside my mind, becoming simpler with each passing day: a phrase, a word, a syllable, and finally just a sound—a howl for all those ever lost and for all those soon to be.



JIM KRUSOE HAS PUBLISHED two books of short stories, five books of poetry, and two novels, *Iceland* (Dalkey Archive) and *Girl Factory* (Tin House Books). His next novel, *Erased*, is scheduled for publication by Tin House in 2009.

## Spike Gillespie

### 'Til Grief Do We Part

THE MONTH I FILED for divorce, I also had plans to attend a lot of weddings. Eight actually. Not the best time to be repeatedly toasting celebrations of the very institution that ultimately left me reeling, barely able to get out of bed, and saying goodbye to twenty pounds in five weeks. But making last minute excuses not to attend these affairs was not an option. As a wedding officiant, I'm more obligated than a postal worker. Rain, snow, sleet, hail, a pummeled heart—none of these things can stop me from showing up. Without me, there is no wedding.

Besides, I needed the money these gigs paid more than ever. I needed to pay for my divorce. I needed to cover the increased expenses of not splitting the bills anymore. And I needed to save for expensive laser removal and future cover up of the enormous tattoo that prominently featured my ex-husband's name.

The actual ceremonies weren't too bad, once I got going. The times I did get choked up and started crying a little, I like to think were perceived as tears of joy wept for the couple, not grief over my own uncoupling. A slightly weepy officiant is a good thing, giving the distinct impression the preacher is fully present, not just going through the motions.

And the truth is that I remained happy for all the couples I united that month. I admired their hope. I enjoyed their smiles. I loved the spontaneous moments when they clutched

each other or the congregation burst out in joyous laughter and wild applause. Often, these moments provided brief flashes of relief for the pain that otherwise tore through me every waking hour.

The hard part, though, was always the drive *to* the wedding. My ex-husband, before he left me, used to go with me. For us these were romantic dates, and a sense that we were renewing our own vows filled us. We ate well, surfed the happy energy abundant at the reception, and fell in love all over again every time.

Three days before I filed, I performed, for the second time, the wedding of a young couple. This was actually just a formal celebration of their first marriage—performed for insurance purposes months in advance of the big soiree. That ceremony was tiny, held on a brisk autumn night at a little chapel down a country road. As we turned off the main highway it dawned on me that I'd been here before.

The preceding spring, to mark her eleventh anniversary, I'd gone with my husband and his kids down this very road, to the place where his last wife's ashes had been scattered. I was honored to have been invited, unsure when the day began if they felt I belonged there with them.

Looking back, I realize that was the feeling I had most of the time I was with them—a feeling that intensified as time wore on and the kids grew increasingly resentful of my presence. I had thought, when I moved in, that it was a lovely way to remember her—all the portraits of her hanging on the walls, her ashes in the spice rack, her possessions scattered throughout the house. But when it became clear that I was not “allowed” to move any of these things, nor was I “allowed” to keep my possessions anywhere but our tiny bedroom, I realized that something was very wrong.

Once, I put a magnet with a picture of my son on the refrigerator. It was soon, without explanation, replaced by a magnet featuring my predecessor. The stack of wedding gifts we left in the living room when we headed out on our

## 'Til Grief Do We Part

honeymoon was shoved into a disorganized heap in our room while we were gone.

Subtle digs gave way to blatant attempts to show me I was not welcome. One night, while I was out, one of the kids smashed all my potted plants and methodically went through the kitchen breaking only my dishes and a few wedding gifts that had crept out of my designated holding pen. The dead wife's sister held holiday dinners insisting my husband attend but banning me from the events.

I finally moved out, but did not give up. The plan was that I would share custody of my husband with his kids who, though legally adults, clearly still did not know how to act grown up. But separate households were never part of my vision of marriage. I grew cranky. Soon, our limited time together involved having the same argument over and over. Me: "You don't give me enough time." Him: "I'll never be able to give you what you need."

I should have seen his departure coming, but I did not. When he announced one night that I could have several months of no contact or a flat out divorce I felt like he'd hit me in the head with a shovel. I could not abide by either choice and the economics of the situation—supply now diminished to no time together whatsoever—sent my addictive impulses into overdrive. I begged. I pleaded. I cried. I yelled. I became so thoroughly unattractive that *I* did not even want to be around me, so it wasn't much of a stretch to see why he didn't either.

If you asked my husband to name the top reasons he left, I think he'd say I was too angry and that he felt I was making him choose between the kids and me. I, of course, would disagree.

My take would be that he and his kids never grieved the last wife, never let her go. As in Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking*, they kept her things, convinced she would one day come back and need them. When I showed up and slept in "her" bed and used "her" space, that left no space for her return. How weary I grew of listening to tales of this saint, how she never did anything wrong. I knew her birthday, death day, and wedding

## Spike Gillespie

anniversary. I even knew what she wore the day she married my husband, eighteen years before he became my husband.

They got married in Vegas. She was eight months pregnant, bursting and glowing in her saffron dress. Bursting and glowing like the saffron harvest moon that hung full, heavy and, I couldn't help thinking, very pregnant as it slowly rose in the sky that night we drove down the road, past her ashes, on our way to that little wedding. I instantly thought of her at the sight of it. I imagined her saying: *Appreciate him; let the anger go; be glad you're alive to be married to him because I wish I was.*

At the big wedding of the couple whose small wedding brought me this poetry of full moon and scattered ashes, my husband called right before the ceremony to say he wasn't coming. (I had suggested we use this wedding as closure, since I'd informed him I was divorcing him, but had some absurd hope we could have one last wedding date, try to lay it down gently.)

Though his call didn't surprise me—I was accustomed to him not showing up by then—still I was rattled. I put in a call to my therapist who talked me down. I pulled myself together and joined the procession. I read a passage I was not looking forward to. But they had hired me long ago, and I had not yet removed these words from the *Wedding Ceremony Menu Options*. An excerpt:

*Shortly after I met my husband he presented me with a cardboard puzzle piece he found on the ground. He said, "You're my perfect little puzzle piece, you fit just right into my life." It was the best gift I'd ever been given and later we had it cast in silver. I wear it always as a reminder of how fortunate we are to find the people with whom we best fit in this world.*

I didn't tell the couple he wasn't there because he'd left me. I just said he had an emergency that kept him away. Upon the insistence of a friend, however, I did inform the following week's couple—who had also chosen this passage—of my circumstances. I asked if we could trade out for something more authentic. They were compassionate but insistent. They loved

## 'Til Grief Do We Part

the story. Would I please keep it in? I did and, because I did, I was forced to get out that necklace and wear it one last time.

At that reception I was approached by a number of people who praised the story. Of my absent husband, one woman said, "He's a real keeper. I had one of those, too, but he died." Another guest wanted to touch the puzzle piece. "Touch it?" I wanted to say. "You can *have* it."

Recently I performed another wedding at that little chapel down the country road. The sky was still light as I drove by the place where her ashes were scattered. I started to cry. I collected myself. I did not call my therapist. I performed the wedding. I got a little weepy. I didn't say why. For reasons I will never understand but forever appreciate, the post-ceremony song was Gloria Gaynor's disco breakup anthem, *I Will Survive*.

Heading home, I pulled over by the little stream and got out of my car and stood watching the water. A rancher type in a pickup pulled over.

"You broke down?" he asked.

"No," I lied.

I spoke to her then. Out loud. Me on a gray spring evening, a chill in the air, the water running fast from recent hard rains. *Please, I said, help them let you go. Not for me. It's too late for me. But they are stuck. They won't be happy until they say goodbye.*

Months later, I ran into my ex-stepdaughter unexpectedly. We said hello and exchanged a few words. That night, though the daily tears that flooded me every day all day for the first six months after my ex-husband walked had finally ceased, I found myself again sobbing uncontrollably. I had seen in that young woman's eyes that it was still there—all the grief that had pulled me toward her when we first met. All the grief that triggered an anger in her so deep that she eventually pushed me away in a violent rage. All that unprocessed grief, a grief that haunted her father, too.

A grief I caught, like some airborne illness, that filled me and rattled me and changed me forever.

## Spike Gillespie



SPIKE GILLESPIE IS A journalist, author, blogger, knitter, and wedding officiant in Austin, Texas. Her work has appeared in *The New York Times Magazine*, *The New York Times*, *National Geographic Traveler*, *GQ*, *Playboy*, and many other publications. Online her work has been published lots of places, too. Her blog resides at: *spikeg.com*. Her books include *All the Wrong Men and One Perfect Boy*; *Surrender: But Don't Give Yourself Away*; *Pissed Off: On Women and Anger*; and *Quilty as Charged*. She shares her life with her son, Henry; her partner, Ori; and four out-of-control dogs.

Amy Friedman

## New Year's Day

THERE WAS THIS DAY, New Year's Day, difficult enough on any ordinary year—all that pressure to feel vital and newly born—but this particular day was the beginning of the seventh year G and I were married, and it was the start of the year we might actually live together. It was just two months before his parole hearing.

G and I met when he had already served seven years in prison. I was working as a newspaper columnist. I walked into the penitentiary where he lived and we fell in love. That always arouses gasps of disbelief, but there's not much to that part of the story. We fell in love the way people do—nothing all that different from the way I'd fallen in love with other men, even though G was serving thirteen-to-life for murder. He was once a drug dealer; he shot and killed another dealer on a miserable spring morning in a little northern Ontario town. When we married, I understood he wouldn't be eligible for parole, even for day parole, for more than six years, and, no, we didn't make love before we married.

But up until that New Year's Day, for nearly seven years, G and his daughters—teenagers who lived with me—were the center of my life. I knew a lot of people snickered behind my back about our marriage; I saw the disdain or pity on others' faces. I was, after all, a Seven Sisters School graduate, a woman

from a wealthy American suburb, well-bred and well-born, and even though lots of women talk about how appealing those boys from the wrong side of the tracks can be and so many of those women think, well, yeah, okay, having sex with them would be okay—behind bushes, under stadium seats, in the dark, in summertime—nearly every one of them also believes, fiercely and firmly, that it's not okay to marry them. I knew a lot of people who thought that.

Still, at first I told everyone about us, and when they asked what he'd done, I'd tell them, murder. Maybe that was the rebel in me, but nobody knew G—and no one except those willing to visit prison could know him—so all I had was our story. So at first I liked to tell it. That's why I know the kinds of questions people have.

Most people wanted to know if he was fabulous looking. Well, he wasn't Robert Redford or Paul Newman or Russell Crowe or any of those movie bad guys with their makeup and great lighting and lots of hip clothing that fits perfectly, but he was a handsome guy, well built though he tended to put on pounds—he was that type—and so he worked it off, became slender and muscular. His hair once was blond, and he thought it still was when we met, but by then, though he was only 38, it had turned silvery grey. He had blue eyes, yes, piercing blue, and he wasn't tall but he wasn't short, and he had a firm handshake, though as I recall our hands were the same size. And when we fell in love I felt the way everyone does—heady, stomach a little empty and turning somersaults whenever he laughed and talked and when we kissed. I remember his lips as soft, and I remember loving his anger, too—because I was angry at the same things he was—man's inhumanity to man, selfishness, unwarranted cruelty. He read a lot. He grew up in a middle class family. He had a doctor sister, a nurse sister, a businesswoman sister. His mom was wonderful. He was an athlete who took a wrong turn—a terrible turn.

The few people who visited prison and met him—Kate, Diane, Anndale, my mom and dad—understood why I loved

## New Year's Day

him. They always remembered that his voice was rich and deep, and so was his laugh. In fact, his laugh was delicious, the kind of infectious laugh you can never forget. Anndale was the first to point that out, and Kate spoke of his eyes with all their sadness and loneliness, and the way they lit up whenever he had visitors.

Okay, so maybe I just liked bringing warmth into a lonely man's life, and maybe the marriage was pure ego, but then, I always thought, every marriage is in some way.

And, yeah, he had his lines. The casually tossed off, "I want my daughters to meet you—my daughters need to meet an impressive woman," but he wasn't the only man who ever used that line on me. Lots of Harvard-educated lawyer-types had used the same line because, face it, it's the kind of line that works on women like me, women who like to think we are professional, that we cannot be conned.

Still, a lot of people thought, and some said out loud, "Oh man, Amy fell for a con," and they said, "Why do you think they call them cons?" and "God, could you ever...you know...could you?" They never asked outright, "Did you ever make love?" But, yes, we did, once every three months in a trailer on the prison grounds, behind walls and gates and under lock and key, and later I found out that guards could listen if they wanted to. I found that out because once one did, and he let me know that as I was leaving prison grounds after one more goodbye.

The fact is, I'd never talked with anyone the way I talked with G. I'd never had that kind of time. Nobody does. Two and three and four and six hours each day, seven days a week for nearly seven years at a table, sharing a bottle of water or a coffee or tea. That was it. Except for those rare trailer visits, we just sat together in sterile rooms, our feet sticking to the linoleum floors thick with sweat and gum and anxiety, our bums aching from hard chairs, our eyes stinging from smoke, our hands sweaty from clutching each other, our hearts fluttering a little, our limbs aching to touch, attuned to the voice booming over the loudspeaker, "Fields, move back; Friedman come to the desk."

I spent six New Years' Days in prison visiting G, and this was year seven, and I believed this would be the last.

Instead I woke up that morning—cold, bitter cold—and I knew something was wrong.

Let me set the scene. This was Ontario. By that time G was living in a prison several miles from the bungalow I bought one month before we married. I bought it because I wanted us to have a place that was ours, a place that would be a haven for G to come home to one day, a place that would comfort me and the girls.

The bungalow was funky and fabulous—lopsided, badly insulated, with chintzy yellow siding and a rickety roof, but it sat on the lip of the St. Lawrence River and from every window I could see the water and tangled vines of ivy and sumac, towering pines, lilac trees, and wide open land. Later, new neighbors bought up the little places and transformed them into mini-mansions; they tamed wild landscape into manicured lawns. But that winter our little corner of the world was still a wilderness in its way—six kilometers from a town of five thousand, Gananoque, twenty kilometers from Kingston, a limestone gem on the glittering shores of Lake Ontario.

I heated the bungalow with a woodstove so that, always in winter, and on that New Year's Day, the air felt like a thick blanket, fragrant with oak and pine. That morning I lay on the same couch I lay on every night—the couch that wasn't beautiful but was the most comfortable couch I've ever known. I stared out at the river through the sliding glass doors. On this same spot, every night for all those years, I'd sat and talked on the phone with G. Of course, I couldn't phone him—prisoners have to call out, collect. And naturally my phone bills were endless pages of collect local calls—and my left ear grew a callous, and my car always needed repair from long drives to prison. But I could never get enough of G, not even of his voice, not even when it was drenched with anger or suppressed fear, which it often was. Everything about him turned my heart inside out. Even now, even ten years since the last time I saw him, I can

## New Year's Day

hear the thick sadness deep in his throat, can feel something that is no longer love but remains a kind of sweet sadness for all that was lost. But back then, back on that New Year's Day, I sat on that couch and closed my eyes and tried to imagine what it would feel like when G finally came home.

By then I may have already lost sight of who exactly I loved, but I did know we were bound together in this fight of ours to bring him home to his loved ones, to surround him in sanity, to sit with him, holding his hand, staring out at this river. To lie in bed with him so that he could listen to the cry in the distance of the loons and to the splash of the carp in the springtime river; to watch the moon rise over the river, and the sun set. To swim together, and hike together, and wake together. To watch him cooking up his famous fish stew in our kitchen and serve it on real plates. To do everything other couples did. Ordinary things. To live our lives free of guards listening in on every conversation we shared, free of strip searches, free of beginning each visit knowing that G was stripping off his hideous uniform and bending over before a hostile guard, lifting his heels, enduring all that humiliation so that he could walk into a room to hug us.

That morning I again listened to Bruce Cockburn, and I joined him in song, "You gotta kick at the darkness till it bleeds daylight."

That morning I felt terror. I was frozen in fear. And aching, as if someone had socked me in the gut. I had no breath. G hadn't phoned me the night before. New Year's Eve and no phone call, the first night in nearly seven years he hadn't phoned with the exception of those nights when the prison was locked down—when violence raged inside, sometimes for weeks at a time. During those times there was no communication. There was silence. There was fearful waiting.

So I telephoned the prison and I asked the guard who answered, "Anything wrong in there?"

“What?” he asked. I heard the bitterness in his voice, but who wouldn’t feel bitter working in prison on a crisp New Year’s Day?

Sometimes I did feel sorry for those guards who sat in the same dismal rooms we sat in but held nobody’s hand. I felt sorry for them, and I hated them because I knew what they thought of us. They wondered about us women who loved convicts. They thought, and sometimes told us, that we were sluts, miserable garbage. They asked us how we could dare to bring children into these miserable places—and who were these kids? The older guards—men and women who had worked inside for years—understood that people are people, that some cons are cool, some not so cool, some wives are messed up human beings and some are lovely, and that some of these children—like all children—would go to Harvard, while some would rob banks, some would marry several times, some would become nuns or priests, astronauts or farmers, models or medicine men. But most of the guards despised us wives and our children, and in return we despised them.

Sometimes in my dreams I heard the echoes of their voices calling over loudspeakers, “Friedman, feet on the floor, hands to yourself,” the way they did in order to humiliate us in the visiting room. But that morning on the phone, I heard in the guard’s voice only his own loneliness when he said, “Nothing going on in here, lady.”

I woke that morning with my heart pounding and this deep ache in my gut. G and I were always saying goodbye, and every time I said goodbye I thought, “What if something happens to him tonight?” Prisons are violent places, like the rest of the world but more so, and with no escape. “What if something happens to him?”

It was one of my mantras.

And that New Year’s Day morning I knew something must have happened. Nothing would stop him from phoning me on New Year’s Eve. So I said, “Excuse me, what did you say?”

He said it again. “Nothing going on in here, I said.”

## New Year's Day

"Nothing? You sure? No lockdown?"

"Everything's quiet," he snapped.

"Well, is my husband in solitary then?" I held my breath. Something always happened on the cusp of big moments, and this was the year. This was parole year—six weeks shy of G's hearing and the possibility that he might be released to spend his daylight hours at home, only the nights locked up still.

I looked outside at the frozen landscape, at the ice frosting bare tree branches, at the sweep of deep, white snow, and I remembered: The day before we were to wed, the prison in which he lived—the one that was only a few miles from the bungalow I purchased so that we would be near each other—had sent him thirty kilometers away, to a higher security prison, "for the good order of the institution," and I remembered spending the next eighteen months and thousands of dollars fighting to bring him back where he belonged, fighting a bogus story administrators invented only to deter our marrying.

So on that New Year's morning I listened as the guard shuffled papers. I held my breath, waiting to hear what they had done to him. But the guard grumbled, "Nope, he's fine. In his cell. Or maybe the gym."

I felt that kick to the gut again and then, before I could stop myself, the words poured out, "But he didn't call last night." By then I knew enough never to say such things to guards, never to offer them ammunition to use against us. But I was weak-kneed, lost. Naturally the guard picked up on that.

"Nothin' I can do about that," he sneered. I could hear the sneer and smirk in his voice.

"You're sure nothing's wrong?" I asked again, and then I pinched my arm, hard. What's the matter with you, Amy? I thought.

"Nothin' wrong," he said, and then, thankfully, he hung up on me.

I sat very still. The girls were away, and I was glad for that. I needed silence. I needed solitude. I needed to find a way to breathe again. The day was cold enough to offer me an excuse not

to venture outside. I rekindled the fire in the stove and inhaled the scent. I wrapped a blanket tightly around me. I called no one. I just lay there and waited for G to phone. I waited through the entire day, watching the bright blue sky turn frosty and pale, then grey, then black. I watched each star emerge, listened to the sound of snow hardening.

When the clock switched from 10 to 10:01, and I knew the prison lights were out and he wouldn't call, I tried to cry, but I must have been holding my breath; tears wouldn't come. Was G angry at me about something? Had I said or done something wrong? I replayed every visit and conversation we'd had all through those holiday weeks. I thought about the Christmases when his mom was still alive and I had somewhere to go, a family to embrace me, gifts to unwrap and gifts to give; I thought about his mother's funeral, about that day when, for the first time in a decade, G was released from prison so that he could attend his mother's funeral, wearing shackles and handcuffs, escorted by guards. I thought about how much I needed him to come home, how I couldn't spend another year in visiting rooms, couldn't spend another year supporting everyone, couldn't spend another year dreaming of real life....

Why hadn't he called?

Two days passed like that. I don't remember moving once, though I'm certain I must have showered. I may even have eaten something. Perhaps my beloved Kate stopped by. She usually did—still feisty and formidable in her eighty-third year, still driving her crazy creaky Honda, her little brown dog and her big Afghan hound in the back, still working, still bossy, still glamorous as she had been in the 1930s when she was a Hollywood movie star. She must have stopped by because Kate worried about me when she didn't hear from me. Maybe she did appear. Maybe she said something wise. She usually did. Maybe she was the first person to explain to me about how frightened prisoners can become when they face release. I do know Graham told me that—lanky and lovable Graham, director of the prisoners' rights organization, always sane and always warm,

## New Year's Day

and such a friend. He's the one who told me the stories of men on the eve of parole—men he'd known who committed suicide or tried to escape or committed crimes. He explained that suddenly they would fear this freedom they'd so long craved, about how fear made them crazy and stupid.

On January third, the phone rang, and when I picked it up and heard the operator say, "Collect call fr..." I screamed. I know I screamed. "Yes, yes, yes, I accept..." and I remember the way G's voice cracked, the way he sounded even farther away than usual, so far away, out of my grasp altogether.

I said, "G, G, why..."

He stopped me. He explained that all night long on New Year's Eve he'd lain in his cell thinking about us, thinking of what was ahead, thinking he couldn't do this to me, couldn't saddle me with a husband who faced years of parole, who couldn't earn much money, who was a nobody, only a burden...

He kept talking, but I interrupted. "G, I love you. We can do this...I've spent seven years fighting for you...we can do this...don't leave me...please...give this a chance..."

I did talk him into letting me visit him that day. We stood in the hideous room hugging each other, holding each other. He held me with more longing than I'd ever been held. We kissed. We looked into each other's eyes. We smiled and wept. I gripped his hand and stared at him.

"Don't do this to us, don't leave me," I said.

He didn't. Not that day.

Not that month.

He didn't leave me for another eighteen months, not until after he'd been paroled and after he'd dived into a deep pool of depression and anger.

But even when I think of all those days and nights of sadness that followed the New Year's Eve when he first did not telephone me, I see only that sheet of snow outside the bungalow, and I feel the cold that pierced me because that was the morning I knew we were finished.

Amy Friedman

I just pretended that I didn't know.

The footprint of that wound remains, and sometimes when I look out at a field of snow or at bare branches coated in ice, I feel the stab all over again. And still, and this is what I don't understand but what I do know, somehow I feel only gratitude that I can feel that deeply, that I can hold in my heart still both the love I felt and the pain.



AMY FRIEDMAN HAS PUBLISHED two memoirs, *Kick the Dog and Shoot the Cat* and *Nothing Sacred*. But since she published them in Canada, where she was a well-known newspaper columnist, prison activist, and shepherd, the books aren't easy to find. Easier to find is her syndicated newspaper column of children's stories, "Tell Me A Story," which can be read in newspapers throughout the world and CDs featuring the stories. Amy teaches "Writing the Personal Essay," "Creative Nonfiction," and a new course, "From Page to Stage," at UCLA Extension. Amy is currently writing a memoir entitled *Sweet Talker* about the prison years.

Margaret Moser

## Married to the Tattoo Mob

IN MAY OF 2006, a former lover and friend committed suicide in a particularly poignant way: He visited with his friends and family over a period of time then took his gun and drove to the graveyard where his parents were long buried. Sitting in the car outside the cemetery, he put the gun to his head and pulled the trigger.

I was devastated. We'd ceased being lovers twenty-five years before but we'd remained close as friends. I often reviewed his work over the years, interviewed him on occasion, and kept the feelings warm. After his death, I was called upon to edit a section of the newspaper dedicated to him and his art. Within the many sections, I wrote about my relationship with him, trying to bear in mind that it would be read by those who knew him as well as those who didn't.

What I didn't expect was a near-hysterical call from his wife. She believed that her husband and I had carried on after they were married. It wasn't true; we'd been done and over with before they even met. In her horrific grief—and perhaps a measure of understandable guilt because their marriage was rocky—she focused on me. Alternately screaming and weeping, she sobbed about her pain and frustration and anger and bewilderment.

As best I could, I reassured her repeatedly that there had been nothing between me and her husband during their

courtship, marriage, or anytime since. I tried to soothe her fears and frustrations, offering the empathy of my dad's suicide. In the end, somewhat calmer and a little mollified, we ended the conversation on a mildly positive note.

Afterward, I sat in my office at home in front of the computer and stared out the window for a long time. Across the street, little kids scampered in the driveway of my neighbor Susie, their Mexican grandmother who regularly presents me with helpings of beans and tamales. The postman drove up and filled the mailbox. I watched a dog relieve itself on the neighbor's lawn and trot off with its tail wagging. All of these benign incidents seemed to say, "Life goes on. Yes, it does."

Yes, it does.



Less than a year later, on a tender green April morning in 2007, an email popped up into my computer from my friend Kandi. I returned the call.

"Rollo's dead. I don't know any other way to say it. I'm sorry."

Her words cut to the bone. He'd killed himself with a gun, just like his mother did. Just like my father did.

The pain was exquisite.



Rollo Banks and I were married December 4, 1984, less than three months after our first date. We stayed married for fifteen years and with the exception of a couple of periods of estrangement in the early 90s and around the divorce in 1999, we remained very close. For the last few years, I'd been editing his "Tattoo Tales," a series of stories from his thirty-plus years in the business being printed in a popular tattoo magazine. I knew these stories backward and forward, so it was a pleasure to edit them.

Born as Michael Malone in San Rafael, California, in 1942, Rollo was a modern master of classic American and Oriental

## Married to the Tattoo Mob

style tattooing. He apprenticed under Sailor Jerry in Honolulu, taking over his shop from 1973-99. He was an early proponent of tribal tattooing and created the modern version of the armband tattoo. He also standardized the look and packaging of tattoo “flash,” the designs displayed on the walls of tattoo shops worldwide. Later, his Rollomatic and Sailor Jerry Bulldog Shaders were considered to be the finest custom tattoo machines made. He was, as he tried to explain the tattoo world to me, “a mayor at the national convention.”

He was really more like visiting royalty from a foreign country. At my first tattoo conventions, it was easy to see he was one of the older (but not oldest) generation of tattooers and accorded a lot of respect. He never shilled himself, though, not like Lyle Tuttle or other peers. That modest streak cost him dearly, for many tattooers exhibited a carnival barker streak and bragged and buffaloesd their way into magazines, honor dinners, awards, and other backslapping events. Going to a tattoo convention with Rollo meant a non-stop stream of grousing out of the side of his mouth. The best gossip occurred after our hotel room door shut at night.

Rollo’s tattoo-inspired works also appeared at Chicago’s Ann Nathan Gallery, the Bruce Bannatyne Gallery in L.A., and the Honolulu Academy of Art. The book *Bullseyes and Black Eyes* was a collection of his work and contained an extensive interview with him. He was also a die-hard collector of Oriental art, Japanese toys, and antique carnival chalk figures. Right up to the end, he lived like an overgrown little boy, surrounded in a mess of the things he loved.



After the initial crying jag was over—about two days—I dragged myself to my computer and started Googling Rollo. Someone paid for his Legacy.com page already and entries were accumulating.

Kandi and I spent a long time on the phone together, comforted in the odd bond we had—she was Rollo’s girlfriend

several years before me and a fellow tattoo artist. We swam the gamut of tearful emotions and finally tried making each other laugh about Rollo, which worked. Then she started filling me in about women who'd been in Rollo's life before and after me and were contacting her. There were long lists of them before me, reams of them, and a few afterward. Rollo, as Kandi reminded us during the memorial, was a womanizer.

Among the many declarations of love Rollo had made to me, the words, "You got me at a time in my life when I don't need to chase women any more," meant something. He'd confessed his many infidelities during his relationship with Kandi to me in detail and was genuinely apologetic. He'd been equally unfaithful to other women but the difference was he'd really loved Kandi and blown it with her. She'd booted him out of the relationship but they remained tattoo buddies, bonded in ink.

"I won't be that way with you," he promised. He kept the promise.

Still, there were lots of names in this conversation with Kandi. Many names I knew as old girlfriends of his who predated her. Some I had forgotten about. Others I was unaware of. Kandi had the job of going through Rollo's personal papers and she found old naked photos of yet another girlfriend of his. He must have hidden them at the tattoo shop because if I'd found them, I would have torched them long ago.

I looked up one name that Kandi mentioned on the Internet and was unsettled to see that she looked like me. *A lot* like me. It shouldn't have been such a surprise, for many of his women over the years resembled each other. He liked women with offbeat features and a few extra pounds, a preference that went back decades.

As I inspected the picture on my computer screen of this woman I'd never heard of but who apparently had a fling with Rollo after we split up, I was filled with jealousy. It came out of the green nowhere and turned to acid bile in my stomach. How dare she! How dare she...what? Enjoy time with a man I'd been married to for fifteen years? Respond to romantic overtures that

## Married to the Tattoo Mob

had once been mine? I felt like an idiot for this jealousy, which was an unbelievably rotten feeling to experience amid fiery pain and emptiness and loss.

I tried to de-justify my raging emotions and clicked on his memorial page. Another former girlfriend had posted about their wonderful “romp.” This name I knew because he’d taken up with her again while we were separated the first time. I’d found her name and phone number during a visit to Hawaii and seen where he’d written her name in tattoo lettering. *Fuck you, bitch! If he couldn’t get it up with me, what business did he have trying to get it up with you?* I stewed and read on.

An entry from the daughter of his third wife galled me. He’d married wife number three within days of our 1999 divorce and I was really bitter about it. I secretly wished on the usurper all the pain and anger I’d gone through with him. That was unnecessary, as it turned out. Their marriage lasted about two years and was, as he told me in a letter afterward, “a mistake.” I took more pleasure than I should have in knowing that his support payments to me outlived the third marriage.

The first wife popped up, too, with a boo-hoo note about how they’d been married too young. *Right*, I thought and tried to swallow a bitter knot in my throat, *is that why you cheated on him with his best friend?* He’d given her little thought over the years, at least while we were married. *Go back into the woodwork*, I privately ordered her. It seemed to work and I felt mildly better.

A few weeks later, I received notification of an entry posted on another site, this one that I had written the obituary for. It was from a girlfriend of his from the 60s, two decades before we met. I knew who she was because of a curious story he’d told me. In the 60s, Rollo made a decent living as a photographer, and it was on an assignment photographing tattoos that the flame was lit.

As his relationship with this old girlfriend was ending, he took a picture of her while she sat at the kitchen table crying. The next photo he took was of another woman, one who would

become his next girlfriend, and in that photo she was laughing. Somehow, the negatives were double-exposed and he ended up with this accidental metaphor of love's fickle nature. I couldn't think of anything ill to wish on this ex-girlfriend because I felt sorry for her. Her grief didn't intrude on mine but I thought guiltily of the wife of my former lover and friend. Had I intruded on her grief? Yes.

Now I started to feel bad in a whole different way. I felt callow and small. I didn't mind sharing my horrific grief with Kandi at all. Very early on in our relationship, I told Rollo that we each had to name the one person in each of our lives that the other person would always have to live with too. I said Louis Black, my editor at the *Chronicle*. He said Kandi. She became my soul sister because we'd both loved the same man and his great artistic heart in the same way, only I got him at the better time.

And I felt like the grieving widow, despite that we'd been divorced eight years. I knew in my heart I was his true love, that of all his wives and girlfriends, I was The One. But I wasn't the grieving widow. I was the bereft ex-wife.



After Rollo's death, I took my dog and ran away to the beach. When I returned, Corky—the friend who'd first introduced me to Rollo—and I decided to have a little farewell to the old man. We invited a couple dozen of the folks who'd known him and gathered on what would have been his sixty-fifth birthday.

I brought photos from over the years plus a few pieces of art. Corky brought his collection of *Honolulu Babylon*, a zine he and Rollo produced in the early 80s. It was wickedly funny, honed on the sword-sharp wit both possessed. On the cover of the third issue was a photo of Rollo holding a gun to his head, Corky's face right next to him. Macabre was the only word I could think of.

Rollo suffered from a variety of illnesses that finally encroached too much on his ability to live comfortably day-

## Married to the Tattoo Mob

to-day. He always said he never wanted to linger with illness or be confined to a bed or become invalid. He told his tattoo partner Keith Underwood that if the diabetes got bad enough, he'd "suck a gun" before undergoing amputation. That phrase is so Rollo; it gave me shivers.

But not the cover of the *Honolulu Babylon*. "The Terminal Issue" it was called. Most people at the memorial looked horrified at it and then to me with pity. Not me. I just laughed. It was Rollo's black humor pulling aside the veil of death and reaching out to tweak me through the ether.

I will grieve for him the rest of my days.



AWARD-WINNING ROCK JOURNALIST MARGARET Moser is the author of three books, including *The Edge Guide to Austin* and *Rock Stars Do the Dumbest Things*, recently adapted for a VH1 program. A retired groupie and high school dropout with no college education, Moser directs the Austin Music Awards for South by Southwest annually. She is currently a senior editor and writer for *The Austin Chronicle*, has been a commentator on NPR, and written for Sony Records and *MOJO* magazine. She has five Chihuahuas and no tattoos.

