

# Welcome to widowhood.

April 10, 2022

I am a 46 year old widow. I am neither a young widow, with a life of tragic possibility and young children to raise, or an older widow mourning the loss of the only love she's ever known. I am someone who deeply loved a very damaged man for ten years before he took his own life.

I am finding that I am struggling to not quantify our relationship by the limited amount of years together that we actually had. I did plan on growing old with this man. I'd stopped dying my hair, stopped wearing anything that wasn't designed for cozy living, hell, I started wearing Crocs. I was comfortable in my skin for, maybe, the first time in my life. He was my favorite travel companion. We had found a peaceful home that we both loved. He had his first grand baby and another on the way - I got to be "Grandrea".

He was a protector, a bit of a clown, definitely rough around the edges. We challenged each other, we were both in our own therapy, battling our own demons, talking them through, getting stronger - I thought.

What I'm realizing about suicide is that you can not talk someone into valuing their own life if they, at their very core, don't feel or accept that they are worthy or deserving of anything good. All the kind gestures, all of the generosity in the world, all the support during struggles cannot overcome damage that permeates a soul from the time they are a child.

I could not save his life.

I wish I could have.

But, in all honesty, the life I was looking to save was not the one that he was

able to offer, but the life that I wanted him to create that was going to take a lot of work.

He came to me, set up by a client of mine/co-worker of his, with a sense of humor that was, mostly, appropriate. He was so passionate about his teaching career. He smiled at me as if I hung the moon. He was the first man in my life that asked for my consent. This was the man I wanted to build a life with - a man worthy of introduction to my children.

He leaned in to helping me as a partner. Laundry? I didn't know her after we were together. Dishes? Nope, I could make an absolute disaster in the kitchen and it would be cleared without complaint. Leftovers? Happily consumed. Son's team needs an assistant coach and a carpool 'dad'? Absolutely. Driving the oldest's friends to prom during a blizzard? Of course. Moving help? Sign up the Big Man. This was the man I built a life with - a partner that wasn't concerned about gender roles, the fact that I made more money than him, that celebrated my successes.

He also came to me already an alcoholic, though I wouldn't know that for a few years.

He came to me ten years ago trying to white knuckle his way into drinking less after a DUI. I didn't know about the DUI until after I was in love. He was a good drinking buddy. We took Ubers. It's unlikely it would have changed anything for me and there's no rear view mirror that helps to see anything except regret.

About four years into our relationship the white knuckling stopped working. Drinking became a daily occurrence. Alcohol was being hidden. Priming was happening before social engagements. And, I didn't really notice.

I was a single mom of two teenagers who, even with the partnership support

he provided, had her hands full with kids, volunteering, and building a business. Could I have noticed sooner? Maybe got him help before he went on a 'walkabout' and passed out overnight in a ditch twenty miles from our home? Should I have bailed after those 48 hours of hell? Again, that damned rear view mirror is of no assistance.

He did get help, at my insistence, at his daughters' insistence. Someone bemoaned that it's too bad that stay in inpatient therapy didn't "fix" him. I'm choosing to think of it as treatment that put his addiction into tenuous remission for almost six years. I'm not sure how long true remission lasted because I know there were slips.

Slips are one thing. A fall is different.

He fell the weekend after my grandpa died. They were weird soul-mates. He never treated grandpa like an old man, though he called him "Old Man." He was patient, he never rushed him along on the repetitive stories, he'd play pool with him for hours and honor him enough to not 'let' grandpa win. Grandpa was the father that he never had. He said losing Grandpa felt like he lost a Grandpa/Dad/best friend all rolled up into one. I knew he was struggling, we all were, I just didn't realize quite how deep his grief was.

For the next eight weeks he kept falling. He could keep it together for work - he still loved work. But every weekend (and who knows...maybe every night) it would be a battle. He'd go to AA, he'd go the gym, he'd walk the dog, but by the afternoon he could not quiet the voices in his head and he would invent a reason to go out of the house. Did I need the car washed? He needed to run water bottles to the school - I should just relax. We were out of \_\_\_\_\_ (insert ingredient here) and he was happy to battle the weekend grocery crowds. Those trips resulted in me, later in the evening, looking at the man I thought was fine five minutes before and noticing that eyes weren't focused,

temper was shorter, and bedtime kept getting earlier.

His falls kicked off a manic breakdown which was, generally, very high energy and mostly positive and probably very easy to hide in his job in a middle school. But in the quiet of our home he didn't quite know what to do with his thoughts. Grief overwhelmed him if he stopped moving. He reached out to his therapist, he went to see a psychiatrist, we had long conversations about his struggles. I was somewhat resentful of his struggle. I too was missing the incredible unconditional love of my Grandfather. I was grieving too.

Drinking and grieving and a family history of mental illness don't combine well.

These are the excuses that I'm making in order to justify his suicide. This is the story I'm telling. This is my widowhood after all. I could just say he died, no one needs these details. But, the honest truth is, his death when it came wasn't all that surprising and I refuse to further enable a society that sees mental illness and addiction as shameful things that should never be discussed out loud.

I've spent the last five years going to Alanon meetings, in my own therapy, and trying to stay on my side of the street. I'm an imperfect person with a whole lot still to learn, but what I did learn is that: I didn't cause it. I can't control it. I cannot cure it. Alcoholism is a brutal disease and destroys not only the alcoholic but can also destroy those that love the alcoholic.

And so, when he said he wanted to escape on another walkabout, to disappear and "dance in the moonlight", and refused to check himself into a hospital to get help - I let him go.

He left on a Friday with just enough cash to maybe drive himself to

California, or Canada, or Vermont - all places that were mentioned on our last manic drive home before his disappearance. I had worked on my own boundaries and had shared, before, and reiterated again, that if he disappeared I would not be searching for him. I did that the last time and it wasn't until he called me and said he was "bad at being homeless" that he accepted help.

I held out hope that this journey would end the same way. But, if you talked to me in the days he was missing 2.0, I said that this one felt different and that if I was a betting person I gave him six months before he ended up dead. I thought, without help, he would likely drink himself to death. I hoped he wouldn't drink and drive and hurt someone. I figured he'd wander the planet for awhile like his oldest brother until I got a call that the car had been found somewhere.

He'd left his phone, watch, and debit card when he disappeared so there could be no tracking. He forgot that he had his iPad. I discovered later that night that he'd gone back to our old home town when the Find My iPhone pinged that his iPad hit a WiFi network.

Knowing that he went back to familiar territory I held out hope that he'd check himself into a hospital that he trusted, or go to one of his favorite AA meetings, or turn around and drive back home. I gave him 48 hours, like the last time.

When he didn't return before work on Monday I decided to file a missing person report. I'd met with my own therapist and decided that the "don't search for" strategy would just leave too many unanswered questions for me that would be damaging to my own mental health. I knew his last pinged location and so a wellness check would be performed if he or his car was spotted.

Monday, I told my therapist that I thought what would happen would be I

would finally take a deep breath, relax a little bit, and then two cops would show up at my door and deliver the news. Maybe in a few weeks.

I'd shared his disappearance with my "crew" - this one was different - no Facebook posts with "missing persons posters" here. I had the support of my family, friends, and his family to let the cards play out.

So, on Tuesday when a dear friend invited me out for drinks and appetizers I went. At just after 4 p.m. I raised a glass and said "To my husband, may he find whatever brings him peace." We laughed, I vented, and then I went home.

I threw on the ugliest, baggiest, velvet joggers I own. I took off my bra (if you know, you know) and threw on a tank top. I snuggled up in an oversized cardigan. I started Righteous Gemstones. Relaxed for the first time in about 72 hours.

And then the doorbell rang.

Thank god for Ring doorbells so that I could take a deep breath as I walked up the stairs, knowing exactly why two uniformed police officers were at my house. I shook my head. My husband hated cops and they were going to be here delivering news about him.

I looked down at my hands, I brought up my phone and, for some reason, my Apple pencil. The TV was still screaming in the basement. My dog was confused. The cop wanted me to take a seat.

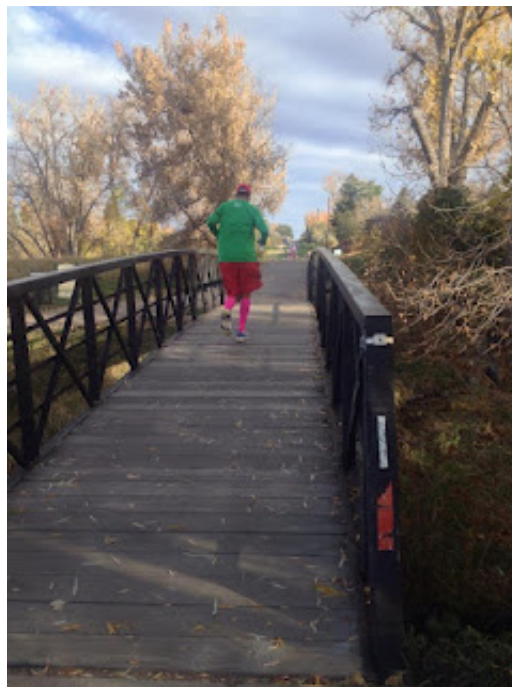
I said, "I know what you're here to tell me and I need to go shut off the TV downstairs as I can't have what you're about to say overlapping with a John Goodman monologue." I was still holding the pencil. I don't know where I put my phone.

The older male cop had tears in his eyes. The young female cop didn't seem quite sure what was happening. My dog laid her head on the cop's knee.

I went downstairs, took the deepest breath I could, struggled with the damned remote and came up thinking - fuck, I still don't have a bra on.

I wrapped the cardigan around me, pulled my legs up underneath me in a chair - the cop was in my "spot" - and said "Okay, go ahead."

The details of the where and how are not ones that I've shared with many and will continue to keep that part of the story limited out of respect for both the living and the dead. I'm choosing to remember him like this photo and hope that his last moments were filled with memories of him running, dressed like a colorful buffoon, celebrating movement. I will never know exactly what he was thinking. That is the brutality of suicide. The questions you ask yourself are relentless. It's the worst 'Choose Your Own Adventure' book where every single choice ends in death.



And so that's how I became a widow. I suppose it was in the "I'm so sorry to

tell you but your husband was found just after 4 p.m. this afternoon, he was deceased” moment but, if I’m honest, even three weeks later I’m still not sure that I’ve arrived at the ability to say, “I’m a widow” or fully understand what widowhood means.

The immediate “to-dos” after the death of a spouse are surreal. The cops don’t travel to his children, to my children, to my parents, to my support system. Who gets a phone call? Who gets a text? Who has to find out tonight? Who can wait until morning? Who just gets the gut punch of a social media post? I’m supposed to call the coroner. What happens when the coroner doesn’t answer? Do I still keep letting people know that all I know is that he’s dead? How? Where? Now what? I should have charged my phone. Oh, that whole taking a body somewhere. Yes, that needs to be decided very soon. Do I have a preferred funeral home? Uh, no. The car? Yes, it’s been towed and it’s \$200/day to keep it there so we’ll have to figure that out. I forgot to eat dinner. I should let his work know that he won’t be in tomorrow, or ever. What can we get you? What do you need? I have no damned idea. There’s going to be an announcement to his students so I should tell the world. How do you tell the world that a man that many people loved did not love himself? I should call my therapist. How do you forgive yourself for not doing that one last push, that one last safety net? How do you explain to his dog that he’s not coming back when she goes looking? He has therapy tomorrow, I should cancel that. When can you simply break down crying for all of the loss, the potential? How does a very private person who deals with emotions by writing actually look people in the eyes? What is time, what day is it, where am I?

Everyone was both perfect and awful at the same time. I say awful because I am the support system for others. I don’t like receiving support. It is quite uncomfortable. The outpouring of well wishes and sympathy was like an ice bath - you know it’s good for you, but it’s painful. The stories shared by his



students were so bittersweet - I hurt doubly because these were children hurting. I wanted people around me at all times and concurrently needed to be alone. Once alone I wanted to find others to talk to but also didn't want to reach out to anyone. My kids are incredible, even through their grief, they are so supportive. We laughed, raged, maybe haven't cried as much as we should (we're working on this emotional intelligence thing). I think what was the most supportive was when people just "did". My cousin, who was widowed much younger than I, just said "I know you'd say no, so I didn't ask, I'll be there in a couple of hours." Friends stopped by with coffee, teachers brought comfort food, gift cards were delivered, a notebook arrived that was solely to "talk" to him (or yell..I've been doing a lot of write/yelling), friends pushed back when I tried to push them away, texts were received with the simple message "I'm holding space for you."

My step-daughter, who is another oldest child and the do-er in her family and I talked about how hard it was to let people help and how it's in our nature to provide support even when we're hurting. She reminded me of the [Ring Theory of "Pour in: Dump Out"](#) . I'm working to let people pour into me. I worked to put boundaries around people's requests to dump onto me.

Widowhood feels a little performative in nature. How sad am I supposed to be in public? Should I even be in public? What is the right answer to 'what can we do for you'? Do you write thank you notes to every note you receive or just to the ones that sent food, flowers, and memorials? Can I write those after I fill out all of the paperwork that goes into death? What is the etiquette for saying that I'm really angry with my dead husband but that I miss him very much? Can you be angry with a dead person? Can I feel both loved and abandoned in the same moment? Did he think he was still protecting me by ending his battle? How do I answer the question, "How are you?" Who are the safe people to laugh with, cry with, rage with when the one person that you consistently felt safe doing all of that with is the person who killed

himself?

I have lost the ability for small talk. I have described my brain as having a ‘grief concussion’. I’ve worked to not lose myself in #deathproductivity. I do not know how people go back to work within days or weeks of a loss. I am privileged in that I have a little time. Not a ton, but I’m going to choose to be a little financially irresponsible and delay going back to work for awhile so that I can process this loss.

I’m taking notes. Maybe my experience will help someone else. Maybe I will learn something that is life changing. I’m leaning into every feeling. This blog started in the early 2000s with me writing during the birth of a new business, followed me through my divorce, was intermittent during my single motherhood, went down a brief rabbit hole of dating, and then back into parenting/entrepreneurship. Now, 20 years later writing is a way for me to process life’s adventures. We’ll see if it can walk me through widowhood because, for the first time in my life, I’ll admit I have no idea what the hell I’m doing.