

Chapter 1

Scattered Notes

**We cannot look at the sun all the time,
we cannot face death all the time.**

Elisabeth Kubler-Ross

Where did he go? The light was on next to his chair. The radio sang. The house was empty. I discovered the truth behind his absence scratched on white notepaper scattered across grandma's old canning table. He was thirty-two years old and signed his last words, "No Need, Nick." He had drawn a circle with two dots for eyes, no nose, a straight line for a mouth next to his name. No smile, no frown, no expression. My friend pieced the puzzle together and sent her husband out in search of his body. Nick's garage reeked with the smell of his remains, which were slumped over the steering wheel of his Camero. He had stretched an air compressor hose from the exhaust pipe through the driver's window and clamped it into place.

People die on battlefields fighting in the name of peace, in their own beds desperately gasping for a miracle cure, while others take their own lives before they know whom they truly are. Suicide is a wretched waste.

I was tempted to tell our children that their daddy died in a car accident. My denial and isolation began as I tried to rescue our children before the lightening bolt of their father's suicide could hit them. Did I want to protect us from the stigma attached to a survivor of suicide or pretend that his death occurred under more common circumstances? The masquerade could never last. I wondered about the outcome when time revealed we had lived a lie. Children instinctively know when there is more to a story. Grown ups lower their voices while children lock their eyes to their lips, brows, and body language. My fingers caressed his last words folded into a square in my pocket. I couldn't lie to our children. The car accident detour would have rationed out filthy guilt over a precious lifetime.

My mind raced for explanations of his absence. Denial was truly a buffer and played tricks with my eyes. The suntan lotion sitting with the lid half opened jolted my mind about half a click, but I passed it by. I checked the patio, the bedroom, the bathroom and expected to find him alive... rinsing his hands, eyes twinkling; a bad joke. I wanted to scream with delight to my little ones, "Here he is; it's OK; everything's fine!"

The trauma hadn't blistered but it had started to sting. Ross and Elizabeth looked up to me for answers. A friend held Lauren. "What could I have done; why hadn't I known; was I to blame?" I wanted to fly away, but I had to stand on hated truth. He died on purpose. Once the truth was out, it could not be retrieved or reinvented. A lie would be an agreement to live in shame. A survivor of suicide doesn't need to deal with any more shame. Shame kills too.

I went cold in the midst of a sticky, summer eve. Carbon monoxide poisoning. I looked into three sets of innocent eyes; one green like mine, another brown like grandma's, and another blue like his.

"Daddy killed himself with car smoke. He died in the garage." He left an eight-year-old son, a five-year-old daughter, and a one-year-old daughter. We watched the ambulance open up and swallow their daddy all zipped up in a man-sized plastic bag.

Policemen questioned me until my head split.

"Was your husband depressed, under medication? Was he angry?" The questions asked at the scene pierced my numb brain. "Was he allergic to anything?" "Was he allergic?" "Could he still have a pulse?" The officers finally left me alone. Our minister arrived with his wife, my psychotherapist. She counseled me on several occasions during the separation. We held hands in our neighbor's house on the hill overlooking ours. Together we formed a circle. No beginning, no end, we bowed our heads.

"Dear Father, hold Nick's spirit in everlasting love. Amen." Everyone held his or her own prayer that night.

The children and I spent the night with my parents. Questions continued to torture my mind. As parents we have a multitude of decisions to make regarding the rearing of children. We love our children and want to shelter them from life's injustices. I have never regretted telling our children the truth even though Ross responded with, "I should have helped him. I should have taken him to a doctor." Children responsible for their parents? My God, I thought it was the other way around. Children are willing to fall heir to their parents' mistakes. My son felt he could have provided the missing link, a trip to the doctor and prevented his father's suicide. But, his dad had refused both counseling and Alcoholics Anonymous. "I don't need counseling, and I don't have a drinking problem!"

I regret my abrupt disposal of snapshots and the distance I placed between his friends, his family, and me. I trashed a photo album overflowing with Harley Davidson adventures and late adolescence. I loved riding along the coastal highway with my arms hugging his warm, trim waist... summer tanning our backs. The wind whipped his sun-bleached hair and wrapped it around the molding of his candy-apple red helmet. We were invincible and soared like eagles with the spirit of companionship beneath our wings. He was gone. I wanted him to roll his fingers around the handle grips and ride again. Instead, another handful of snapshot memories fell into the trashcan. What was I afraid of? He wouldn't jump off of the prints and attack me. Now, our children won't have many pictures of their dad.

Nick made toys for his children, painted friends' homes, and fixed their radiators and transmissions. He comforted them when their relationships trickled down the tubes. He held me in his arms when a car

hit Elizabeth. He calmed me down, stopped me from spitting in the face of the negligent driver. On my side of suicide, guilt bubbled up like hot oil and splattered flashbacks on the promise of each new day. Anxiety grabbed onto my shoulders and shook me. I couldn't forget the goodness and love with which he had showered me.

I was angry and afraid. I had pretended for years that I could handle anything. I hid my sorrow from our children each time Nick and I fought. I would pack them up and drive to the Children's Museum, twenty short minutes away. Sometimes I would call home to check his temperament. Was he still angry or had he slept it off? The answer would determine whether or not we would share supper at the table with daddy or have McDonald's Happy Meals. He didn't drink at home, much anyway, I lied to myself. The children didn't see the bottles he consumed between 7 o'clock in the morning and noon. He worked the graveyard shift and needed something to calm him down, sedate him, so he could sleep while the rest of the neighborhood played. He used to pull in the driveway and walk straight to his workshop with plans for a giant sandbox, jungle gym, or backyard swing. He loved to play. Ross and Elizabeth would find him building their newest toy from scratch. We still have those little wooden soldiers with tiny metal washer buttons down their fronts. He helped the children paint their initials on the backs. He sawed and nailed and hoisted fifty-pound bags of clean, white sand on top of his broad shoulders, whistling, all the way to their sturdy new sandbox.

What happened to the love we once shared? Why had I pretended to agree with him, to enjoy him, to love him? Nick used to ask me to join him for a whiskey sour like in the good ole days. I used to eat the orange and chew up the maraschino cherry before guzzling down my favorite drink.

The arguments we used to get into after those drinks stopped me from ordering them. I became a poised prude. He would be high. High on life itself or beer or something and I would stare right through his joy with cold, solemn eyes.

The arguments didn't stop but their themes changed. Now, it was his drinking that caused all of our problems. I no longer drank and was innocent as a wide-eyed child. It would be years before I understood how and why I enabled him. I looked down at our babies' faces on the night the ambulance consumed Nick and prayed they would forgive me for the lies I slipped into their daddy's soul.

Our minister, Nick's father and brother planned the funeral with me nodding in agreement between them. We played Bridge Over Troubled Waters and Morning Has Broken. A dear friend from high school sang Morning Has Broken with her golden voice at our wedding twelve years earlier. The chapel we created inside of my parents' living room vibrated with hope and happiness for a long, happy life together.

During the funeral, I sat off to the side propped up against my brother's shoulder. He protected me through the service with the love and kindness I desperately needed. I knew he didn't blame me.

"Sis, Nick was threatened by you. It wasn't your fault." The polished brown casket was closed. My neighbor saw him last. Mom thought she talked to him last. Our family portrait smiled on an easel and faced a parlor full of family and friends. My thoughts raced as I relived the day we had that portrait made.

Nick's mother asked us from her deathbed to have it made. She was eaten up with cancer, and I would not refuse her.

I kept our marital problems a secret. We swept our broken dreams under the rug, sat our children on our laps, and smiled for the photographer. This is the last portrait I'll make with Nick, I vowed to myself as the camera snapped and flashed.

So many hearts were hurt in my search for freedom. His mother had known him so well. She died two months ahead of him. Had she not wanted to mourn her first-born son? Perhaps she hastened on ahead to prepare for him.

Three months after Nick's death came October. Halloween decorations were plastered all over town. Cold chills spread up and down my body. I stared, trancelike, at dangling dead limbs. Is that what he is now? I contemplated his ghost cutting circles around our house. Nick's family had always hosted great Halloween parties. They defeated the scar of death by acting it out. One by one, his aunts, uncles, and cousins descended on Grandma and Grandpa's cow pasture. The cows were long gone but the ambience of a deserted meadow framed a headless horseman, vampires, and a variety of spooks.

One year, Nick built a set of stilts and towered above all of the little ghouls and goblins. He made a smaller set of stilts for Ross and Elizabeth and taught them how to walk just a little bit taller. I stopped attending family parties after his death. He fell over the edge of no return, and I slipped out of sight too.

The New Year passed with the conclusion that we were all skeletons wearing temporary flesh. We would all die... something I had known all of my life, but had never stopped to think about what death meant. I felt robbed.

Nature whittles away at our bones and cells until old age, terminal illness, or an accident separates spirit from a worn-out temple. Is there really a time for suicide? I pray there isn't. It is my hope that individuals will consider every option available and choose life over death. What meaning would you like to leave about your meanderings?

Elisabeth Kubler-Ross wrote about her loss and grief workshops in her book, *On Death and Dying*. She described the following five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. To graduate from the denial stage survivors are encouraged to feel the good-bye ceremony. Countless good-byes will appear around every future corner if the funeral did not implant the fact of death into your mind. We may numb and isolate ourselves in denial but memory chases us. Mourners shuffle around the funeral parlor, file into their cars, and follow purple flags stuck on shiny black cars. There is not one thing we can do to change history.

Here is an exercise for you to do if you missed the burial service of your loved one. Go outside, pick up a clump of soil and crumble it over your garden. When you are ready, bid one last formal good-bye.

Journal

Write or draw about:

- **How do you feel about life now?**

Dee Burt

Journal

Write or draw about:

- **What conversation or scene twists and plummets inside of you?**

Journal

Write or draw about:

- **What were you thinking and feeling during the funeral service?**
- **What did you like about the service?**
- **What disappointed you about the service?**