

Excerpt from “A Seven-Year Goodbye: *A Journey through Child Loss & Beyond*”

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Chapter 1: Endless Journey

My son Aaron was born in San Francisco on August 6, 1982. His father, David, had committed suicide a few months before I gave birth. At age 25, I experienced the deepest effects of both life and death. In my depths of intense heartache and grief over David, I also experienced the miracle of childbirth, bringing the greatest happiness ever.

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I'm in the shower this morning, hot water pounding on my skin, rousing me from a deep but broken sleep. Thoughts run through my barely conscious mind, weaving a disorganized pattern of memory from nearly seven years ago. As my unsettled brain jumps to more recent times, I begin to think about my friends Pam and Shawn, who helped me through some of my darkest hours. This thought leads to how I would do things differently if I were awarded a do-over during the time when my mom, Dennis, and Aaron died. It seems almost amusing as I reflect on how miserable I was then and how content and at peace I am now. Then the tears come. I start to miss Aaron. I stand there in disbelief until the hot water runs out.

Tripping down memory lane prompts me to recollect and record the series of life-changing events that shattered my world.

The Gory Details

My mom, Maxine, died January 2, 2001. Her breast cancer had returned, aggressively invading her body after a two-year remission, causing intense pain and distress. Taking care of her medical, physical, and emotional needs came naturally to me, and I enthusiastically slipped into the role of her primary caretaker, with help from my brothers, their wives, and a few of mom's closest friends. I was close to Mom, in a "friend" kind of way. I don't recall her being a very happy or nurturing mother when we were growing up, even though I knew

she loved us. Mom was intellectually brilliant, politically and socially active, but felt oppressed as a wife and mother. When I was around 10 years old, she divorced my father, and as soon as my two brothers and I were teenagers, she moved to Southern California to attend UCLA and fulfill her academic dreams. We visited throughout the years, but it wasn't until some 30 years later, when she returned to Northern California, that we truly reconnected. She moved to a small house in my neighborhood so she could be near us during her last few years. Her death hit me hard. Both of my parents were gone now, and feelings about her leaving me that I had suppressed, surfaced. I was so happy to have her back in my life after all of those missed years. Then, she was removed again, this time permanently. Depressed and upset, I leaned heavily on my husband, Dennis, for support.

I officially met Dennis in my living room when Aaron was around 6 years old; my roommate was his best friend and co-worker at the Mill Valley Fire Department. He followed me around the house trying to talk to me, but I really wasn't too interested. He asked me out, and I told him no. I refused him several more times, but then he persuaded me to let him take Aaron out on a boat ride to Angel Island. It rained on the day we had planned for the outing, so he offered to come over to the house and make us dinner instead. The idea of having a meal ready when I got home from work really appealed to me! That afternoon, when I picked up Aaron from after-school care, he wasn't feeling well. When we arrived at home, Dennis was already preparing dinner. As soon as we walked in the door, Aaron began throwing up, starting in the living room and leaving a trail of vomit in each room as we made our way to the bathroom. I took him into my bedroom, calmed him down, and changed his clothes. I began snickering to myself, "This will get rid of Dennis; a single guy without kids will never be able to tolerate my life!" Problem solved – or so I thought.

As we entered the kitchen, I was fully prepared to say good-bye. What I found, instead, was Dennis with a bucket of hot water and disinfectant, cleaning up after Aaron. He then proceeded to finish cooking dinner for us. He won me over that night with his kindness, acceptance, and strength of character.

We moved in together after dating for three months, and were married a short year later. He graciously and happily assumed the role of Aaron's dad. We were very compatible and happy together. Dennis was strong and stable, and he loved and cared for Aaron and me. In 1992 we had James, and then Daniel in 1995. Dennis, who was from a large family, had always wanted kids and was a loving and active father. He doted on me, allowing me to be a devoted, full-time, at-home mom. I was living my dream. We were together for 12 wonderful years.

Exactly four months after Mom's death, on April 30, 2001, Dennis suffered a massive heart attack. He had just been on a five-day break from work and was

home cooking dinner. Our boys, 9-year-old James and 6-year-old Daniel, along with James' friend Micah, were seated at the kitchen table. Aaron, age 18, was away on a trip in San Diego visiting some friends. I was in the living room finishing up a phone conversation. I came in for dinner and sat down next to Dennis. He turned to me and said, "I'm having chest pains, I hope they're just psychological, but I don't think so." I looked him straight in the eyes, took him by the hand, and led him into the living room, away from the kids. As we walked, he calmly commanded, "Call 911. I'm having a heart attack." I carefully repeated his request and then dialed the emergency number. We sat side-by-side on our blue couch, and within moments he began to convulse. I held onto him and frantically told him I loved him over and over again. His body slumped down, neck bent backwards while gasping and sucking furiously for air, like a fish out of water. All of a sudden, I felt his spirit release upward and I knew that he was no longer there. I began to panic as his convulsions became fierce. His face turned beet red, with white froth bubbling from his mouth. Then he collapsed, falling unconscious to the floor.

Where were the paramedics? I called again, screaming into the receiver. I got my brother Joel, also a firefighter, on the phone. He tried to get me to perform CPR, but I couldn't function. I ran outside and saw two women taking a walk. I ordered them to get my neighbors. Kat came over and tried to do some CPR, with no results. Mike from across the street ran over and removed the kids from the house. I watched their faces as they passed the living room and witnessed what appeared to be their dead father on the floor, and me falling apart. Eleven minutes later, an impossibly long emergency response time, the paramedics arrived, eventually taking Dennis' lifeless body away on a stretcher. I sat on the front porch bench and shook fiercely and uncontrollably while my neighbor and friend Helen tried without success to calm me down.

At first I couldn't reach Aaron, who was due back soon from his trip to San Diego, but then he called to say he was almost home. I calmly told him that Dad was in the hospital; he'd had a heart attack but was O.K. I didn't disclose the urgent details, wanting to make sure he drove safely the rest of the way home. It was in the ICU that he learned the truth. At only 18 years of age, he faced the situation like a man. He tenderly held Dennis's lifeless body, taking the time to softly speak to him. The last words he said before he left the room were, "I love you."

Dennis was kept on life support for two days. He was declared 100% brain dead, with no hope for survival. Hundreds of family members and friends, along with his firefighter/paramedic co-workers, came by to hold vigil in a room adjacent to his. I also visited him, but I knew his body was vacant, as I had witnessed the release of his spirit during his heart attack. Hooked up to tubes and

respirators, smelling like death and unable to respond, there was nothing coming from his ashen, lifeless body except the strong, silent command for me to leave and go home to our traumatized boys. It seemed disrespectful to stand there and watch his body in such a compromised position. I knew he would not want that to be my last memory of him. At 4:00, May 2, 2001, we allowed life support to be removed, and at 47 years of age, Dennis Gallagher was officially pronounced dead.

Aaron and I drove home in silence. James and Daniel anxiously asked for news about their dad. They looked so young and innocent, all of that about to be taken away. As the three of us huddled on the couch together, I gently and straightforwardly explained, "Dad died this afternoon. Nobody did anything wrong, he had a heart attack. It's the worst tragedy, but we are going to be O.K." I tried to reassure them that I would always take care of them, and told them how much I loved them, and how much their dad loved them. They wailed and sobbed; we all cried and just held on tightly to each other.

That had to be one of the most heart-breaking moments I've ever experienced. Life as we knew it was forever changed.

One week later, around 1,000 of Dennis's family, friends, community members, and co-workers attended his funeral. It began with a rescue helicopter flying over the church, and bagpipers leading folks to their seats. It was an amazing tribute, but I was still in a deep state of shock, and continued to run back and forth to the bathroom, sick to my stomach, throughout the entire event.

The following year would become inarguably the worst year of my life so far. I remained in a state of shock for about three months. Tidal waves of fear, anxiety, sleeplessness, body pain, crying, and continual nausea swept through me constantly, without any relief. Every ounce of my emotional and physical being hurt, and once the shock began to wear off, my assaulted state worsened. The intense crying and stomach pains would not stop. I holed up in my room for most of that year, coming out only to take care of the boys. I thought about Dennis day and night, night and day. Missing him was so intense it would make me feel sick, like having the flu. After about six months, the path from my bedroom to the outside world began to seem really long and treacherous. On a good day, I could spend some time in the backyard. On a bad day, the hallway from my bedroom was a journey too long to endure.

To make matters worse, there was a complication in receiving Dennis's pension from the fire department, so we had no income and our medical and dental insurance were terminated. The monthly cost of Aaron's medicines alone reached into the thousands-hospitalizations and the frequent specialist appointments became, well, unthinkable. Whatever money I had left in savings was used for medical and living expenses. With the help of my brother Matt, we found an attorney who took on our case to help us get Dennis's pension.

Looking back, the really sad part was that there was so much help available, but I just couldn't access it. If I couldn't make it out of my bedroom, how was I supposed to get to an appointment? At one point, a friend offered to drive me to Kaiser to try and get some anti-anxiety medication. It was horrible. When we arrived, I couldn't get out of the car. Being around people and feeling so far away from my safety zone overwhelmed me. The kind doctor actually came out to the car to see me. How humiliating! For me, that experience only validated the pathetic-ness of my existence. Inertia set in, worsening my anxiety and depression. People tried to help me, but I was such a mess that I would alienate anyone who came close. Fortunately, I discovered Safeway.com, a grocery delivery service! Because each time I would try to shop, I'd run into someone who would offer condolences or want to talk about what had happened. Then the walls would start to close in on me, and I'd begin to hyperventilate and would need to leave immediately. Eventually, I quit shopping. I hated being around people, and hated being alone. There was no comfort zone, ever. As the year progressed, my mental and physical state only worsened. Even though I was still alive, I felt spiritually dead. The only thing I cared about was my boys, who were also in a state of shock and deeply grieving. We all slept together at night for the entire first year, and we rarely separated, except for the time they spent at school. Somehow I dragged my zombie self out of my room to be with them each day. Through my heavy fog I could see that they desperately needed to be close to me and know that I could still care for them. I left behind a vibrant, happy life of volunteering in their classrooms, being room parent and team mom for baseball, of play dates, park and beach trips, family dinners, big birthday parties, and of celebrating many joyful occasions. My sons no longer had the Dad who loved them so much, now they would have to grow up fatherless. The pain of that realization, and my inability to do what I loved most—be a mom—almost destroyed me.

When I reflect upon that devastatingly miserable first year after Dennis died, I just shudder with humiliation. I wish I could have been the model grieving widow, who handled herself with dignity, grace, words of wisdom and some sense of composure. I should have been one of those widows that you see on T.V., the ones that men pursue because they're so helpless and beautiful. No, not me! I was about as clumsy and messed up as possible. I think I did almost everything wrong. From screaming and running out the front door as Dennis lay dying on the floor, to self-isolating, to alienating almost everyone I knew, I continued to self-destruct. Angry, exhausted, spiritually void, my focus was on surviving each day.

The miserable first year passed, and some of the heaviness that enveloped me began to lift, ever so slightly. Then, all of a sudden, there was clarity. I understood what was important. What mattered most was who *was* still here—James and Daniel, Aaron, and myself. I owed us a family, in whatever form I could provide.

We were all deserving, and we would have to make a new life, adapting to our changes. I ordered a huge dumpster, threw out lots of clutter, donated even more. We got a roommate, who, in lieu of rent, painted the house and maintained our neglected outside property. We re-arranged the furniture and I retired my truck and bought a reliable car.

I tried everything I could think of to feel better. I went to see two different therapists, then a behavior modification physician. I dusted off those well-intentioned grief books on my shelf and began reading them. Hospice offered a support group for widows, which gave me a much-needed sense of connection. I tried relaxation tapes, spent time alone, spent time with others. I even went to see a guy who claimed anything could be cured by a tapping method, so I tapped away ninety dollars per session. I had a physical exam, saw a nutritionist, and in the middle of a sleepless night, I actually ordered an expensive self-help course from an infomercial. How embarrassing! Nothing really helped all that much, but at least I felt good about *trying* to get better. Something would eventually have to work! I hung onto the words of a young rabbi who visited me during my worst time. After realizing that my grief was too deep to be consoled by Hebrew prayers, he turned to me, placed his hands on my shoulders, and gently said, “I wish you moments, just one moment of peace.” That made so much sense. I could have a moment. And I did. One moment of sitting on the front porch breathing in the fresh air and feeling the sun on my face turned in to two moments of something else, and those moments turned into minutes, hours, and so on. Slowly, I began to live my life again, adding in only what I could handle.

Little did I know that I would need these newly acquired life skills and some of my strength back to carry me through the next and most intense phase of my life.

The Following Year

Miraculously, I somehow survived that first devastating year after my mom’s and Dennis’s death. Aaron, now 19, informed me that he needed to become independent and move out, to live on his own. This was understandable, but given his declining physical health and my mental state, I would have preferred that he wait a while. But, Aaron had his own plans. An unexpected inheritance had come his way, and he became part-owner of a condo across town. I had to support his need for independence, to let him go, even though everything inside of me screamed out for him to stay. I somehow knew that this was the first stage of our permanent separation. I missed the day-to-day interactions with him, even though we spoke on the phone and saw each other frequently.

His health was deteriorating at a faster pace, and I could do nothing to stop it. There was never a time in his life when I entertained the notion that he might actually die from his illness, even though to others it was clearly a possibility.

Glimpsing that reality for the first time struck terror in me. I knew I did not have the stamina or strength to endure such a loss, and I couldn't imagine the devastating effects it would have on James and Daniel. They looked up to him and needed his love and guidance now more than ever.

But sometimes, life doesn't give options. Aaron's lung capacity began to drop and breathing on his own became more difficult. After a grueling six-month medical process, he was put on a list for a lung transplant, which would buy him many more years of life and allow him to breathe fully. We put all of our hopes into this and I just knew it would work. After all, I had many of Dennis's body parts donated after his death, and what goes around comes around. I believed that Dennis was still caring for us and would make sure Aaron's needs were met. With all systems in place, we began to wait for new lungs.

Aaron was on oxygen now, visibly very ill, and in need of advanced medical care. We had a heart-to-heart talk about him moving back home. I would turn the garage into an independent living area; take care of him through surgery and beyond. Once he was well enough, he could move out again. He was ready to return home. The following evening, a friend and I picked him up. It was difficult for him to catch his breath, and he needed to use oxygen full-time now. I was so scared. He told me not to worry; I could take him to Kaiser Hospital in the morning.

When I awoke, I found him slumped against a wall, barely alive, desperate for air. The paramedics were called and quickly attended to his needs. I witnessed Aaron, strapped onto the stretcher, being wheeled out of the house and loaded into the back of an ambulance. For the first and last time, I was forced to confront his frailty, and had to choke down my fear. I wanted this to be like all the other times he was sick: just a bad pneumonia from which he would heal eventually.

Denial was my best friend and my worst enemy.

Aaron was admitted to the Intensive Care Unit at Kaiser Hospital, and he stayed there for two weeks, until his death. He was put on a respirator, and remained semi-conscious for a few days and then unconscious for the remainder of his stay. There were no new lungs, and because I firmly held on to my belief that he could and would be O.K., I never took the opportunity to say a proper goodbye. We didn't discuss his dying or talk about his final wishes.

I was able to connect with him once again, when I sat next to him in the ICU and began to read a letter I had written for him. Though he was still unconscious, he began to cry like a baby. I found my son again in that one brief and powerful moment, and I believe that he somehow managed to reach out to me. I knew that would be our last connection, and it was.

They would not let me take him home; he would not survive the transport. Each day passed painfully as I helplessly stood by and watched him rapidly

deteriorate, as each new horrific symptom eroded his weakened body. The clear plastic drainage bag that used to be filled with infected mucus began filling with blood. Soft music played continuously and there was always someone there at his side. I still believed that he would pull through. My mind could not wrap itself around the idea of his impending death. I believed in Aaron, and I believed in my power as a mother.

Eventually my wall of denial crumbled, leaving me in despair. There was no one left who shared my faith in his survival, including all of my family, friends, the entire medical staff, and the team of specialists at Kaiser Hospital in Oakland. It was time to let go. We planned to remove life support at 8:00 on a Friday night. My cousin Steve drove me to the hospital, with my friend Michael by my side. Inside the ICU was a loyal group of family and friends, rushing to say their final goodbyes. Slowly, the crowd thinned, and a silent heaviness enveloped the room.

How does a mom say a final goodbye to her child? I knew that if I saw him die I would always be haunted by the memory, like I was with Dennis. I also knew that if I wasn't with him at the time of his death, I would always be plagued with guilt. At the last minute, I ended up excusing myself prior to the removal of life support. This was a decision that I knew would cause me shame for the rest of my life, but I simply couldn't bear to watch my child die. I sat in an adjacent room and waited, while about 10 close family members and friends remained with Aaron. Moments later, Aaron's friend and roommate Allesandra walked up to me and very sweetly stated, "It's over. He died very quickly and peacefully." She handed me a long-stemmed red rose made of glass, which had been placed on Aaron during his last breaths.

After two weeks in intensive care and twenty years of battling this dreadful disease, my first-born son, Aaron David White Gallagher, was now dead.

The bright lights of the hospital gave way to the darkness of the night as Steve, Michael, and I made our way home. No words were spoken as I stared out of the car window into the blank sky. Fear, devastation, and some relief filled me, but it was the emotion of utter defeat that penetrated me down to my core. As I opened the door to our empty house, I felt sick with a combination of numbness, shock, and a broken heart that had sunk into the pit of my stomach.

The next morning, James and Daniel would have to be told that their brother was gone. Here we go again. I'd been honest with them, providing information each day of Aaron's hospitalization. They chose not to visit him in the ICU and I respected that decision, knowing that their wounds from losing Dennis were still fresh, and they might not be able to handle the present situation. Conjuring up whatever strength I had left, I told my brave boys the awful truth, stripping away even more of their youthful innocence. They loved Aaron and looked up to him. I couldn't even imagine how this new loss would affect them. I desperately wanted

to protect my boys, but I knew that might not be possible. I felt their pain and anguish, and once again felt helpless to make things better. My role as a mom had been seriously beat up. Already emotionally compromised, and facing the reactions to death that unfortunately I knew all too well, I steadied myself for what lay ahead.

Planning the memorial came easy to me and I followed my clear vision. The fairgrounds building near our home was filled with over 350 friends and family members. My cousin Steve facilitated the service, and those close to Aaron spoke lovingly and passionately. Photos were set all around, and there were beautiful bouquets of 65 roses, a nickname for Cystic Fibrosis. Aaron's favorite barbeque restaurant catered the event. I was determined to be present, to take it all in, and to be available to James and Daniel. Connecting to people who were connected to Aaron, all in one room, held me closer to him, if only for that brief ceremony.

My initial shock did its job of softening the blow and provided much-needed relief, but it soon gave way to numbness, due to unbearable pain and grief. With a permanently cut umbilical cord, Aaron was nowhere to be found. He was lost, and so was I. Nothing seemed to calm my inner panic. It was as though everything that I had ever known in my life became an unknown, including me. I began to believe that somehow I must have deserved this fate. Not only was I unable to save my own son, but the mistakes I felt I had made regarding decisions for his medical care came back to haunt me with relentless guilt. The thoughts of what I could have or should have done played obsessively in my mind. I begged the universe to let me be with my son again, and missing him consumed my every thought. The emptiness where Aaron used to exist left a hole too big to handle. Socializing became a chore. I felt as though everyone had expectations of me that were not possible to meet. Solitude was my greatest comfort, and existing quietly, alone, was my path of least resistance. Whatever religious beliefs I had simply vanished, they made no sense anymore and were of no comfort. My self-worth plummeted to an all-time low, and I believed that I didn't stand any chance of redemption. I shut down, avoiding any feelings, except for anxiety and depression, which forcefully pushed their way forward. I no longer cried, because I felt nothing. In my distorted thinking, I didn't even deserve to grieve.

Out of desperation, and somehow recognizing my seriously compromised mental state that had been eroding my ability to function over the last nine months, I joined a grief group dealing with loss of a child at our local Hospice chapter. Eagerly accepting the opportunity to participate, I looked forward to the first meeting and hoped for the best. I had no idea of how my life would change as a result of simply showing up.

It was there in the Hospice "reflection room," with soft pastel colors, scented candles, and large windows overlooking a lush green garden that my healing

process began. We came together as a group of ten strangers, all with the common experience of having recently lost a child. Our group leaders, Bev and Shannon, not only made us feel welcome and safe, they also honored us for our courage, and acknowledged our strength for what we had been forced to endure. For the first time since Aaron's death, I began to let down my guard and open up. Instead of feeling judged for all of my irrational thoughts and behavior, I felt understood. Each one of us had been traumatized, and we came together in hope of connecting with others who were suffering similar losses. Collectively, we knew the pain, the anxieties, and the seemingly unusual side effects resulting from intense grief. We were all in the same situation, and even though each individual's falling apart presented itself in a different form, that didn't matter, as we innately understood each other.

After a few sessions, we were asked to introduce our child. I carefully wrote down my introductory pages, and put together some select photographs and memories. Through this process I finally began to feel the incredible loss as I assembled my presentation. Visibly shaking with an overwhelming barrage of emotions, I introduced my dead son, the one I thought no one would ever get to know again, to the other group members. It occurred to me that although he had died, he did not have to disappear. He would still be my son.

Slowly, with much trepidation, I opened up. I listened and heard the other participants' stories as they introduced their deceased children. Their pain mirrored my own, and I hung on to every word and emotion, like a life raft. I had the honor of getting to know their children—Lisa, Phoebe, Brian, Ethan, Jennie, and Rosie. My healing process began in the room with these new friends, friends who simply understood. Our grief group formally met for eight weeks, but we have continued to meet regularly throughout the years. We have supported one another through each new grief phase and beyond, and through our darkest hours.

This is not my life story, nor does Aaron's death define who I am. It is his life that has given me definition, shaped me, made me a first-time mom, taught me responsibility, love, and fulfillment. There is no "getting over his death" or "moving on," but a process in which death is incorporated into life. Unfortunately, there is no way out but through, and nowhere to run. So I walk this path, whether I like it or not, gathering knowledge and new friends, and moving in different directions when necessary. For better or for worse, through times of great happiness and sorrow, I will continue on. This is my endless journey.

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