

CHAPTER ONE

LOSING STEVE

I lost my younger brother, Steve, to suicide on May 16, 2004, just eight days before his 54th birthday. He was born on May 24, 1950, exactly nine years after Bob Dylan, who was born on the same day in 1941. Although he never said so, sharing a birthday with his hero must have gladdened Steve's heart. Entering his rebel years in the mid-1960s, Steve played Dylan's music obsessively. Not just for the message, which was in direct opposition to our Royal Canadian Mounted Police household, but also for the lyrics, which ignited his soul.

Like Dylan, Steve had the soul of a poet. Although he only wrote a handful of poems in his lifetime (that I know of), they were good ones. His letters, always a pleasure to receive, had the unhurried literary quality of a writer at ease with the language. Books like James Joyce's *Ulysses*, a challenge for the most learned of English majors, were recreation for Steve, even though his postsecondary education had focused on the trades.

When my sister, Kathy, and I emptied out the back of his old half-ton truck, a well-read copy of *Ulysses*, novels by some of the best Canadian authors like David Adams Richards and Alastair MacLeod, as well as classic works by Edgar Allan Poe and William Blake, came tumbling out of weathered, slightly mildewed cardboard boxes. Words were Steve's passion and his sanctuary. But when he chose to leave this life behind, he did not leave a note. In his final moments, words must have failed him.

BEYOND WORDS

I have since found out that only a small number of those who die by suicide leave notes. In fact, according to Canadian researcher, Dr.

Antoon Leenaars, author of *Suicide Notes*, the percentage of those who leave notes varies from 12% to 37%.

I was secretly glad that Steve wasn't one of them. Given his distressed state, it is probable that his final communication would have told only the dark side of the story. It would not likely have been the full truth about his life and, as his valediction, it would have been tough to refute. Maybe he sensed that too. A complex and unpredictable man with vast reserves of intelligence and wisdom, and wild explosions of laughter and impishness, Steve was much more than his despair.

But his despair was part of him. It has its own tale that needs to be told. Ending his life in his truck by a gravel pit off a back road in Saskatchewan was the final denouement, but what were the turning points that preceded it? What happened in the first and second acts? I have speculated about this endlessly, alone and in conversations with Kathy and our mother. We knew he was troubled but Steve was a proud man who wore his pain like a silent garment. Its presence was obvious to anyone who cared to notice, but it was never to be acknowledged. For the last ten years of his life, he lived in the remote corners of British Columbia's Interior working as an independent logger who spent long, solitary stretches in the bush. We saw him so rarely that even if mutual introspection were part of our family culture, none of us wanted to risk offending him by inquiring about how he was *really* doing. We were afraid of losing him. And, sadly for us all, we lost him anyway.

RAVEN TO THE RESCUE

In the immediate aftermath of Steve's death, there were times when my anguish was unbearable. Organizing his cremation with Kathy from our mother's home in Victoria, BC, I yelled at her for taking a supportive call from her boyfriend when we were waiting to hear from the funeral home in Saskatoon, over 1000 miles away. She had a long chat with him about his golf game, a neighbor's new car, what he'd had for dinner the night before, etc. It seemed to go on forever and I was becoming increasingly antsy. I was worried that we'd miss the call if the funeral home were to call back, but there must have been more to it than that. When she got off the phone, I don't even remember what I said, but it was loud, angry, and intense, and she left the room in tears.

I felt awful. I had hurt my baby sister, toward whom I had always felt protective. I had just lost my brother, and now I was going to lose my sister, my only remaining sibling. I sat perched on the edge of the loveseat in the family room, feeling as though I had blown my nice girl cover to reveal the monster I really was. I found myself staring at the wall plaque of a raven my brother had made for our dad about 15 years ago. I had never paid much attention to it before, but it seemed to be drawing me in.

A short time later, I went up the stairs to where Kath was sitting, looking wrung out and upset, and I just said I was sorry. I said that I had lost a brother, she had lost a brother. I told her I wanted to pin Steve's death on someone and she was closest. I said that when she was talking to Bill, I felt jealous of their intimacy. I felt so alone. She heard it, and said it probably wasn't the best timing for their call given that we were in the middle of arranging for Steve's cremation. She confessed that she probably wanted to escape from dealing with that. Who could blame her? We hugged. We got through it.

It is said that Raven is an emissary from the spirit world. I have a sense that Steve gave us a bit of a hand from the Other Side.

HELP FROM A DISTANCE

It was sobering and scary to see how volatile and unpredictable were the shock waves of my grief. This wasn't something that I could control and I was concerned about more outbursts. We had a memorial service coming up and I needed to get it together – not just for my sake, but for Kathy's and our mother's as well. In desperation, I put in a long-distance call to Dr. Anne McMurtry, a friend with a doctorate in comparative religion whom I had once used as a consultant for a proposal for a children's television series that I'd written about a young girl's quest for The Sacred.

Through our professional connection, I had come to respect Anne's psychic abilities, her capacity to access the guides on the inner planes, and her unique gift for contacting souls who have passed on. She was an accomplished clairaudient with an extensive track record. She said she would immediately administer some long-distance Reiki for both Steve and me, if I were willing. I didn't know a lot about Reiki, other than it's a form of healing that originated in Japan and involves transmitting life

force energy, or chi, to people whose chi may be blocked or depleted. But after giving her permission and receiving the healing, I felt less afraid. I felt more at peace. I was able to continue working with Kathy on Steve's memorial with an untroubled heart.

THE GAMBLER

Anne phoned me the next day to say she had written a poem, based on a communication she had just received from Steve. I was surprised at how scared that made me feel. Maybe I was blaming myself for his choice to take his life, and wasn't sure I was ready for what I might hear. Maybe I was afraid that he would denounce me somehow. And at the same time I felt jealous that he would talk to her but not me. I was his sister. Who was she to him? They'd never even met. But my need for some insight as to why Steve made this drastic choice was stronger than these reactions. Besides, I felt I could trust Anne as a go-between. She had already demonstrated that she had accurate and obscure information about Steve's musical tastes and books he had read, even though she had never met him in life, he had never been a topic of conversation between her and me, and she didn't know any of his family or friends. I took out my pen and wrote down every word:

*He told me that life had dealt him a bad hand of cards,
That no matter how he rolled the dice he could not escape
This mean losing streak.
He argued that gambling on God's generosity
Would be the last card left to him.
And that, like the story of The Prodigal Son,
He would arrive at his Father's house,
Desolate and broken,
And his Father would welcome him home
With open arms and a forgiving heart.*

Anne's poem, which I have since entitled, "The Gambler", felt true to me, much as it distressed me to hear it. It showed me that my brother was and is a soul on his own path, separate from me, separate from any of our family. I felt terribly sad that Steve had felt such aching loneliness and hopelessness for so long. *The Gambler* seemed like a third-party suicide note from a broken man who had given up on being accepted

and acknowledged by anyone in his life. A broken man who needed to gamble on being welcomed by a God he wasn't sure he believed in. A broken man who didn't know I would miss him.

BOWING TO THE WAVES

One of the things that Kathy and I discovered buried among Steve's belongings in the back of his truck was a poem he'd written when he was in his 20s:

WAVES

*This sea smirks
at all boats –
sees them coming, shifts
her moods with
ruthless glee*

*Safety's suggested
with steady swells –
gently rocking
that hazy hull –
(should pacify the ill-at-ease).*

*Maybe, later
a gale's released –
churning chop, spitting
spray in each
nervous face.*

*Escalating
rollers, whitecaps
dictate zig
zag course to
mother ship.*

*Looming in the distance,
a giant breaker rears up –
A foaming, deadfall
poised ready to drop on that tiny dory,
Bow to the waves.*

This poem reveals more about my brother than he had ever revealed in life, at least to family members. With us he had kept his philosophical musings to himself. In speaking of the squalls and deadfalls of life and our helplessness in the face of them, *Waves* reveals quite a fatalistic attitude for someone so young. There is also maturity in its suggestion that we can neither deny nor control nor evade our life's trials. Our wisest course is to yield to them. Easier said than done.

A DIFFICULT LIFE

As is obvious by now, Steve had not had an easy life. Although hardworking and frugal, making ends meet had always been a struggle for him. He worked at a number of different trades, but with his intellectual interests and introspective nature, he didn't fit the blue-collar stereotype. And yet he found academic life stifling. He disliked working for others, but he was not an entrepreneur. Out of place in a materialistic society that is increasingly intolerant of artists and eccentrics, unless they somehow scale the big-time, Steve had often said that he was born in the wrong century. He also never found a worthy outlet or audience for his creativity. Besides being a talented writer, his carvings of ravens, crows, and other corvids quite uncannily captured the birds' essence. Because he was not one to blow his horn, never mind market his work, Steve's talent went largely unrecognized. A woman whom he'd never met who had bought one of his raven carvings wrote him a glowing note of appreciation that he carried around in his wallet for years.

I often wondered why a bright, funny, creative, and good-looking guy like him had never found a woman. I know he had some girlfriends but I gather from his friends that he was generally too shy to make a move, and when he did work up the courage, I suspect that his intense romantic nature was too much for most women to handle. I heard from a former neighbor of Steve's that the last woman he had been in love with had said that no one had ever talked to her as poetically as he had. Maybe losing his sweetheart was more than Steve could bear.

NOT A CLOSE RELATIONSHIP

My adult relationship with Steve was not a close one. There were many years in which we had very little contact. When I left home,

our family had been living in Alberta; when Steve left home, it was Saskatchewan. We never lived near one another and mainly came together for family events like Kathy's wedding, her children's christenings, our father's funeral, and the occasional Christmas. Sometimes he came to visit me when I lived in Edmonton, Alberta in my 20s and 30s, riding in unannounced on his motorcycle. Such visits were hit and miss for me. Sometimes I would be living in a communal house and he could readily join in on a relaxed and welcoming ad hoc family situation. I was proud to share him with my friends and I felt happy to feel his enjoyment of them and them of him. But other times I was living on my own in a small apartment and felt invaded by and uncomfortable with a visitor I wasn't prepared for and didn't know what to do with.

What I would give for Steve to drop in on me now, in whatever form – the red-haired boy who mortified me when he began his school career casually eating peanuts at his desk and dropping the shells on the floor; the motorcycle-riding wild guy in his 20s; the lonely, deep-thinking man in his 50s. I'd take any of them. Maybe we'd walk out on the deck of my current house-sit and look out at the ocean and talk about eating lobster rolls as children in the summer sun at the Bay of Fundy, Nova Scotia, en route to visit our grandparents in Lunenburg. Or about the Christmas he got the red tractor and I got a glockenspiel. Or the time our Mountie father went to Arizona to chase a "bad guy" and brought back a cowboy outfit for him and a cowgirl outfit for me.

One of my best memories of Steve was on a Christmas day walk that we took together, about two and a half years before he died. It seemed simple and inconsequential at the time but I treasure the moment now and I'm glad I still have the journal entry:

Steve and I took an afternoon walk through the back roads near my sister's acreage in the Okanagan. It was a crisp sunny day, the sun was glinting off snow packed fields, and his dog, Koko, named after the blues singer, a mutt of indeterminate breeding, loped along beside us. I felt a bit shy. I was afraid that we wouldn't find anything to talk about, but Steve started telling me how he had always felt drawn to remote rural places. He said he liked living in makeshift homes that he fashioned from his own ingenuity and from whatever materials he could scrounge. He admitted that he felt people judged him for living so eccentrically, especially family friends who were generally quite conservative people. I told him he should trust what

appealed to his heart, other people's judgments be damned. He seemed to take comfort from that. We walked along quietly for a while and then he starting talking about a woman he had been close to, although he was concerned that she might be pulling away from him. I shared some of my experiences with men who had drifted away from me. He talked of the characters in the community where he lived, of his role as a confidante for them, of the enjoyment he got from playing harmonica in a blues band. We commiserated about being middle-aged, single, and childless at Christmas. We spoke about how, to please our mother and at a loss for an alternative, we found ourselves repeating customs left over from childhood that made us feel like kids who had never grown up but had just grown old. Depressing though it might have been for an observer to hear us admit to such feelings, it felt great for each of us to speak the truth to one another and to be heard and understood without needing to explain.

MY TRUEST ALLY

Two years after Steve's death, I went to a talk about bereavement by suicide at the Vancouver School of Theology (VST). The speaker, Shiella Fodchuk, a professor at the VST, as well as a Registered Clinical Counselor and Spiritual Director, said, "Losing a loved one to suicide plunges you into a depth of soul that few others share."

It helped a lot to hear that. It helped to explain the fear, confusion, and loneliness I felt so much of the time, despite supportive friends and an intellectual understanding of the grief journey I was undertaking. It was as though losing the boy born two years after me, my first friend, my comrade in a paramilitary childhood in which we were continually uprooted from homes and friendships, laid bare the young girl in me who is helpless and inconsolable in the face of life's sorrows. The ferocity of this girl's suffering astonishes me; it takes my breath away at times.

Much as I didn't want to, I often saw that intensely wounded child in Steve as well. I feared that part of him as much as I wanted to somehow provide comfort. But when his suffering took him down a lonely dead-end road that I could not prevent him from taking, I realized that I was and am powerless in the face of it. Not just his suffering, but my own as well. Perhaps my fear arose from some kind of expectation that either the pain should not be there, or that I ought to be able to do something about it.

Steve's suicide taught me that I can't and don't need to do anything about that pain other than bear witness to it. So why fear it? If there is a blessing in consciously facing Steve's death, and I believe that there are many, it is the bitterly won freedom from fear of this wounded child's distress. It is the realization that I must instead embrace her as that part of me who is most in need of my love. I now see her as the most raw and honest expression of my humanity and my greatest spiritual teacher. She will be with me as long as I need her and she needs me, and in my grief journey, which is ongoing, ever changing, and full of revelation, she is my truest ally.

CARRIED BY GRACE

When I began writing this book three months after Steve's death I wrote a letter to him to help orient me, to give me a focus, and to include him in the process. I didn't want to go it alone. Here is a brief excerpt:

I do feel that you have found your place now — you have found peace. I'm not speculating as to the form of your current dwelling-place. Whatever it is, knowing you, it will be unlike any other.

At the same time, I don't see how you could help but feel regret about leaving this earth and the gift of life you were given. You loved it here in many ways. You connected with the natural world more profoundly than anyone I know. You had a deep appreciation of music and literature, you loved animals and quite a few humans. You knew how to have a good time, and you loved to laugh. When you left this Earth, you left a lot behind. Why wouldn't you need to reconcile yourself to losing us, just as we must reconcile ourselves to losing you?

This book, which is intended to reach others who have lost loved ones to suicide and to help them heal through journaling, could be our way of finding reconciliation. Maybe it will help those bereaved by suicide find the courage to explore their loss and to come to terms with it in their own way. And maybe it's a way for you and I to bring meaning and perhaps even beauty to the grim and lonely ending of your life next to that gravel pit in Saskatchewan.

Just as I will eventually scatter the ashes of your body as a way of nurturing new life, in this book I want to scatter the ashes of our old relationship, wounded as it was. Maybe this scattering will make room for a new relationship for you and I, and offer new life and new hope to others.

Reading that letter now, more than two years since I wrote it, makes me feel that, for much of the time in the immediate aftermath of Steve's death, I was carried by a kind of Grace that protected me from having to feel the depth of grief that I have since experienced. Perhaps it was the same for him. For me, Grace is synonymous with The Beloved, The Divine, Higher Power, God, the Holy Mother, The Creator, Divine Consciousness, and hundreds of possibilities both secular and religious – no word is adequate. Grace is what helped me to see beyond my loneliness as a bereaved sister, and my brother's loneliness as someone who chose to end his own life. Grief and grace are inseparable in this journey; grief is our feet and grace is our ground.

∞ FOR YOUR JOURNAL

1. If it feels safe to do so, write your account of your loved one's death. If you can, try to write about it in the third person, from the point of view of a compassionate, objective observer. If you can't do that yet, don't force yourself. You may find that you can at a later point or perhaps you never will. The most important thing is to respect what's true for you.
2. After your loved one's death, did you experience moments of losing it with family members or close friends and saying things you later regretted? What happened? Write about it now. If you weren't able to resolve it with them, do so in writing, perhaps in the form of an unsent letter (instructions are in the Journal Guide). You may then find that you can clear it up with them in person, but if that's not possible, the writing will help a lot. Also, if you weren't able to forgive yourself then, forgive yourself now in the pages of your journal.
3. Who has/have been your biggest source(s) of support in this time of loss? In what way(s) has/have this person/these people helped you?
4. In your grieving, did you ever get a feeling of receiving support from a supernatural source (as in my sense of having been guided by Raven)? Describe your experience.
5. If you feel able, imagine yourself as a kind stranger with whom your loved one feels comfortable confiding his/her feelings prior to his/her death. You can do this in the form of a dialogue (see Journal Guide for directions), a poem, or a monologue. Allow yourself to respond to their words from your heart, without judgment.
6. Does Steve's poem, *Bow to the Waves*, speak to your experience as a suicide survivor? What does bowing to the waves mean to you?

7. Describe your relationship with your loved one. Was it a close one? Was it a complex one? Do your best to be as objective as possible.

8. Are you aware of a young and vulnerable part of you who has been profoundly distressed by your loved one's suicide? Allow yourself to write to him/her and offer your love and support as you would to your only child.

9. Did you experience, or have you experienced Grace in the aftermath of your loved one's suicide? Describe how Grace has shown up for you.