

The Widower's Notebook

a Memoir

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Penguin is committed to publishing works of quality and integrity.

In that spirit, we are proud to offer this book to our readers; however, the story, the experiences, and the words are the author's alone.

For Joy Santlofer: wife, mother, sister, writer, friend. You are greatly missed.

Between grief and nothing, I will take grief.

—William Faulkner

Part II



After

Chapter 9

Unmoored

We all think we know what grief is going to be like. We know the clichés about losing a loved one—shock, sadness, loneliness, to name the obvious—and they are all true. But it's not until we actually lose someone that we experience it from the inside, that the clichés have any meaning.

Grief was not like anything I had imagined.

Mine came in waves of exhaustion. I would be walking down the street or up from the subway and think *I just can't make it. I will have to stop and sit down on these filthy concrete steps*. My legs were like dead weights. I often felt as if I were trudging through half-set cement. For the first time in my life I felt old.

I had no energy, though I pushed myself to go out every night. I could not be alone in the loft, especially in the evening.

Everywhere I looked I saw my wife. I was going to say, Everywhere I looked I saw Joy, but it struck me as ironic because I saw Joy everywhere, but did not see *joy* anywhere.

I flip-flopped between thinking the worst had happened, so nothing could affect me, and feeling the complete opposite: I was a weakened slob that *everything* affected too much.

The days were long—I felt raw and exposed, as if people could see through me and into me—the nights interminable.

There are images stored in my brain like half-developed negatives: myself in bed wide awake or wandering my loft in the middle of the night, of seeing friends and putting on a show of good humor, of waking up and longing to talk to my wife so together we could make sense of all this.

If asked for one word to describe how I felt those first days, weeks, months, even year, I'd have said *unmoored*.

I had lost my anchor. I was at sea, floating and floundering.

Grief's terrain was unfamiliar to me, rocky, perilous, and unstable. I never perceived nor felt any prescribed set of moods or stages to my grief, only unexpected moments of paralysis, sadness, or confusion. I slogged through the days as if in a dream where nothing connects.

I've taught writing for a number of years since publishing my first novel and have often given my crime writing students an exercise: put a character into complete darkness with the thought that something bad has happened or is about to happen and make the reader *feel* it.

I no longer had to imagine it. It was as if I had stumbled into a black room and was trying to find my way out without a guide, and with only half of my senses.

My life had changed forever, though it had not yet registered. On the surface, things remained unchanged: my home was still there, so was the outside world—all the physical circumstances of my life appeared normal.

Joy was there too, her cosmetics in the bathroom, clothes in the closets, the pottery she collected, the furniture she chose, the book she was reading still on the glass-topped side table in the living room.

I lift the copy of "Wolf Hall" and note where Joy has turned down the page; she had only twenty pages to go.

In the bedroom, on her bedside table, a small porcelain dish, in it an antique silver neck chain. I hold it in my hand and think, *Memento mori*, a term I first learned in art history class when

we studied Christian art, crypt ornamentation, portraits of people holding skulls and still life paintings of dead rabbits—such obvious images of death they had term for it, “nature morte.” Literally: dead nature.

I did what was necessary, what I needed to do, by rote, though my usual cognitive skills and defenses did not seem to be working. I was never sure if I was reading situations or people correctly, my reactions either too extreme or nothing at all.

The process of grieving was, for me, filled with self-doubt, my normal insecurities magnified, the best and worst close to the surface.

Am I doing a good job of grieving was not a question I asked myself but was a free-floating sensation. It was difficult to know: Is this the way one is *supposed* to feel, or just *my* problem? An impossible question to answer because we are individuals with our own set of problems and psychological make up, though I think grief puts us all in the same lost-at-sea boat.

Past experiences with death came to me unexpectedly and in vivid detail. One, from when I was a teenager, began to haunt me.

My high school friend Linda had been ill and out of school for a while though none of us knew the severity of her illness. I don't know what I expected when I went to visit her, nervous I would find a skeletal version of my buoyant smiling friend. She was in bed, but upright, and looked the same, dark hair, olive complexion, light green eyes, an unusually pretty girl, smiling and chatty as ever and we talked of school and things that were going on, nothing special. I visited a second time and she stilled seemed okay. I think we played cards. I remember she was so alive.

It wasn't long after that Linda was in the hospital and there was talk of transfusions. I knew this because my father was going to give blood, they had the same unusual type, my parents speaking in whispers, so that I knew it was bad, though still, I was sure she'd be okay.

We got the news of her death at school, and what I remember most are her many girlfriends clinging to one another, sobbing and staggering through the corridors like drunkards, a display of emotion I couldn't, wouldn't possibly allow or demonstrate. It was a stunning reality for those who knew her and been her friend, to lose her, to lose one of *us*, sixteen years old, though I don't remember any of the boys crying.

Did the girls feel better because they did, because they let out all of that sadness in a way the boys could not?

Not long ago, I met up with a high school friend, who told me that Linda's mother had refused to see any of her daughter's girlfriends. It had seemed cruel to her back then, though she understood it now: the idea of seeing all of those young, open faces with their lives stretching in front of them.

This was the only person in my youth, someone my age, I knew, who had died, and it started to recur in my mind and dreams in a way that it hadn't ever before, though it was not my first experience with death.

My uncle died when I was eleven. I was twelve when I lost my maternal grandfather, Sam Brill, the sweetest, kindest, funniest man I ever knew. In many ways, the most important man in my young life, who loved me unconditionally and defended me against my father. When he died I felt more alone than ever before though I never talked about it, not to my mother, surely not to my father, who expressed no emotion about the loss, though I think he loved his father-in-law—everyone did. I don't remember my mother showing much emotion either, though I know she adored her father. My parents were a stoic pair, and obviously good teachers, or at least, compelling examples.

I did not know how to mourn these past losses and still didn't, though I would have to learn. When it comes to loss we do not get a choice. It happens. One minute your partner, your loved one, is right there beside you, the next they are gone.

I don't believe any of us are prepared for this kind of personal loss and surely I was not, no warning, no major illness, no way to prepare for the impact, as if Joy and I had been driving and sideswiped by an out of control car and only I had survived the crash.

I could not stop thinking: If only we'd had time—a day, a week, even an hour—all the things I might have said. But there are no second chances to say goodbye, only chores to be done that offer little solace, and one of them had to be done now.

Chapter 14

Starting to Draw

I started drawing around the same time I started writing in my notebook.

Unable to sleep, I am once again in my studio. For a while I sit at my L-shaped plywood desk, and do nothing. The studio feels foreign, as though I have no idea what I ever did in here.

I note that the photograph I have had of Joy and Dorie on my desk for years is missing and for a moment I forget that I was the one to remove it. I hate the fact that it's gone but can't bring myself to put it back, to look at it.

A friend who lost her husband told me that she put a large blowup photograph of him in the living room so that she could see and feel his presence. I did the opposite. Only days after Joy died I hid all of the photographs. I couldn't look at them without feeling unbearable grief, guilt and a tumult of unsorted emotions.

I get up. I sit down. I get up again. I spend a long time lining up dozens of pencils on my drawing table, in order, from hard to soft, 2B through 8B. I put a new eraser refill into one of the plastic eraser pens I like to use. It feels good to organize things when everything in my life feels out of control.

On impulse, I go into Joy's office, the first time since her death. I stand in the dim light and feel totally disconnected, weightless. I do not feel sad or bad or emotionally overwhelmed. I feel nothing until I realize I am holding my breath and my lungs are aching and I begin to shake. I want to bolt but I'm frozen, taking in the papers and books on Joy's desk, her pens and pads, her open laptop. I tap the keyboard and the screen lights up to a page of text, the cursor throbbing midsentence. I jerk back, once again wanting to flee but I am riveted, reading the typed words then the Xeroxed page of research beside the computer, a few sentences highlighted in yellow, everything exactly as Joy left it, as if she is on a short break and will be back any moment.

I spy the mock-up cover for her book, the title in bold, "**Food City**," and the phrase that came to me in the hospital, *life's work*, flickers in my brain, and then I am feeling things: regret, sadness, a deep hollow aching inside me. I make a vow that no matter what, the unedited 400-thousand-word manuscript Joy has left behind will be published.

Among the many papers on her desk is a grainy black and white picture Joy has printed out from her computer. I stare at it a moment but it is too much for me to take in, not like this. I pluck it off the desk and head back to my studio where I prop it up on my drawing table, study it for a moment, then begin to approximate it in pencil on paper. I go back and forth between the printout and my drawing, conscious of what I'm doing until I lose track of time. Soon, I have enough "information" in my drawing so that I no longer need to look at the source. I keep drawing, filling in details, unaware of the time. Then I sit back.



I stare at the drawing I made from the printout—it is from an author photo Joy had taken not long before her death.

Surprisingly, it has not been difficult to study the facsimile and make a drawing from it. I'd look at the source material for a few seconds at a time, dissect it, then reassemble and recreate the image on the page. Without thinking, I knew Joy would want me to soften her chin and make sure her eyes did not look puffy, and I did those things while the other half of my brain concentrated on the mark, the line, the tone, as I would any other drawing.

I am able to draw my wife because drawing is abstract, because you can't really draw something until you stop identifying it. You can't think: this is an eye, or a nose, or lips, or you will not be able to draw them; eyes, a nose, lips are all the same, simply marks on a page.

Drawing has made it possible for me to stay close to Joy when she is no longer here. It is a way to create a picture of her without feeling weird or maudlin. I am not sitting in a dark room crying over a photo of my dead wife; I am at my drawing table, working.

Grief is chaotic; art is order. Ironic, as most people think art is all about *feeling* and *emotion*, when in fact the artist needs to be ordered and conscious to create art that will, in turn, stir feelings and emotion in others.

Artists are perpetually engaged in the act of fixing their broken worlds and this has been the case with me for most of my life, and now more so than ever.

I was trained as a visual artist and it is the way I see the world—in pictures. When I want to write something I usually picture it first, then find the words to describe it.

When I am drawing, time is suspended and it calms me, forces me to stop whatever I am doing—fidgeting, worrying—to get my hand and eye coordinated.

Drawing not only makes me pause, catch my breath and look, it allows me to make something out of my sadness.

My graduate school painting teacher, the wonderful artist George McNeil, a founding member of the American Abstract Artists way back in 1936, a man I adored and admired, always told us, his students, to take our anger and sorrow, all of our angst and “put it into your work.” Good advice. It is what I am trying to do now: take my sorrow and grief and give it form.

Of course there were many instances, actual events where drawing was of no use, where I could not suddenly whip out a pencil, stand back, observe and document the moment in a sketch. Sometimes the stunning reality of what had happened did just that: it stunned me.