

A Time to Mourn and a Time to Dance

A LOVE STORY OF GRIEF, TRAUMA, HEALING, AND FAITH

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Saint Louis, Missouri

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ChalicePress.com

Print: 9780827237308

EPUB: 9780827237311

EPDF: 9780827237322

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Dedication



Family selfie in Santa Catalina State Park, Arizona.

In memory of Anthony Derayunan Rodriguez
Husband, partner, father, son, brother, friend, and healer of
hidden wounds

And to our beloved sons, Paul and Ricardo,
my heart's blessings.

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Prologue

What happened to us is unthinkable, unimaginable. My body reacts in life or death ways. For months, I grasp the sides of pain's deep pit, hanging on with my sons as my arms grow weary. The only way out? To heal. Allow others to lessen, eradicate, make well the ravages of trauma on our hearts, souls, bodies, and minds. Because healing is the only way to honor my late husband Tony, a licensed mental health therapist certified in trauma recovery.

Words printed on these pages: my story. A story told through the lens of our first sixteen months without Tony. Events as I experienced them—fragmented—choppy—not smooth prose. It's an inside look at how my brain could not function fully when shut down in the aftermath of trauma.

My sons have their own stories, not mine to tell. Yet they, my beloveds, weave in and out of this my story. I include them here with love and respect for their privacy, while I make public my intimate self. Bit by bit unfolding my captivity to grief and trauma's grasp, welcoming others in. Into hell's chaos. Into shards of hope. Into healing's slow balm.

Interspersed throughout my story are prayers and healing practices. Some I relied on to survive. Some I created for others from a more healed state. Use them—for yourself, for others. In

including these prayers and practices, I pray my own version of the words of the psalmist: Let my words here be acceptable to God, the universe, Tony, our sons, and all who read our story.¹

¹ Based on Psalm 19:14 (NRSV), “Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you O, LORD...”

I. Standing Statue

“For anyone with a heart, goodbye is hard. For anyone with a heart, no goodbye shreds the soul to pieces.”

—Jennifer Ohman-Rodriguez

First Evening

Light falls. Wind settles. Stars pop. Crickets toll around buildings standing silent, stunned into shared tragedy.

Once back on the rented vacation farm, we separate into different spaces inside and out. Rescue team driving us back, using our car. Someone loading the kayak in the parking lot back at the beach. Maybe our sons. Tony’s body gone in local coroner’s van. Heading somewhere. Away from us. Hear Tony’s voice. One of his many therapist sayings. What just happened here?

Paul, our fourteen year-old son, crawls into his sleeping bag in the corner of the living room floor. Cocooning in safety. Perhaps still chilled by the day. Head phones silencing an already quiet house. Curling up. Entering fatherlessness. Again I hear Tony’s commentary: The guy at ground zero goes into the bunker.

Ricky, just a month into nineteen, wears weighty quiet. Pacing the farm pasture across a long gravel drive leading to the road. Moving, caged animal style. Stopping. Staring into the vast darkening sky. Questioning. Raging. Body alive with betrayal. Brain stem still fleeing the river’s swallowing grasp.

I stand on deck, bile rising in throat. Aware of my children yet incapable of mothering. Emotions frozen in my heart. Unable to

make decisions. No longer the person who hours ago loaded up the car for an afternoon of fun at local river's beach remembering towels, sun screen, nut allergy emergency kit, and a book to page through lazily.

Stand, lost. As if I'd left myself at the beach. Bringing home only my outer layer of skin. A shell. Standing statue. Thoughts moving in heavy dance. Future fuzzy. Praying for clarity. Slow motion determining my current responsibilities: What to do about them?

"What about the woman at ground zero?" Tony asks.

I wander back into the house. Check on Paul. Need to hold him. Try wrapping my shaking arms around him, but am barred from doing so. Ask inane questions in anxious interference instead. "How are you?" My words meet silence.

Ricky returns from the field's sanctuary. "We can't stay here tonight, Mom. We need to go home."

I listen because he may be right or because I need him to be right. Sounds so clear and convincing. But making decisions, making something happen, as I have so many times in the last two decades, seems a mountain too steep to climb. Decisions stall on top of thoughts. Freeze like my body back at the beach. Suspend like time. Drive? Home? Thought surfaces out of fog. "Neither you nor I can drive tonight."

Yet something pushes me toward home. My body wanting to run from the swirl of people surrounding us all day. To run from this painful place. Run toward our refuge. But how will we get home? Another obstacle to surmount.

"I'm calling Linnea and Tom," my mother says as if a phone call to our dear friends might keep us all from slipping into the abyss.

I nod, knowing they will come. Get us. Take us home.

My brother Peter settles his two daughters in the upstairs room of our rented place. Their young, restless bodies find sleep. But only after hours of wiggling. Then Peter drives to the end

of the farm's long gravel drive. Smelling of an August meadow in goldenrod, cone flower, yarrow, milkweed. Parks. Waits under stars. Keeping vigil with his heart. His beaming headlights the only lighted signal for the help driving toward us.

Girls sleeping. Peter waiting. Paul cocooning. Ricky pacing again. My mother packing our things. Tony's things. Toothbrush, clothes, book. Stuff of his no-longer-life. Me, returning to deck. Remembering Tony saying just this morning, "I'd love to buy this place!"

Close eyes. Open again to truth. Feel lower arms ache. Aware fingers shake. Missing numbers on dial pad. Fighting crazy reception. No emergency number on church's answering machine. Call other pastor friends. Hear voice messages. Need a funeral home. Cannot think of one. Stomach clenches, clenches, clenches. Want relief. Want a pastor. Inaccessibility exploding with insurmountable pain. Torn apart soul rising into unforgiveness. How will I do this...whatever this is? How?

Palm buzzes. Text reads "Jennifer: Writing to you with a broken heart. Just received the news...Weeping for what this means for you and the boys."

Friend. Pastor, once ours, reaching out. Also named Peter. Cling to words. Grasping phone. Everything else slippery. Traction evaporating into distant stars. How does Pastor Peter know? Tony's family doesn't know he's gone yet. Only our nephew Joe. Paul texting Joe from the beach. Reaching out in shock and pain. Joe calling back. Right now readying for the most mature act of his twenty-something-year-old life. Taking deep breaths before telling his mother of the death of her only and beloved brother. She in turn, while carrying the weight of her own grief, telling her parents. Sparing me one unbearable job.

Pastor Peter's words typed hundreds of miles away give me breath. Much-needed hit of oxygen. Do I text back? Call? Does he? Time suspends surrounded by stars. Cloaked in night. Hear Pastor Peter's voice. Gentle tone bringing calm. Perhaps hope.

What do I say? Tony needs transportation home. That's what the coroner told me at the beach. It's the one task I'm supposed to do. Right now. Get him home. But not really home. Never to our home again. Never alive or in my arms or puttering around the kitchen or joking with the boys. Just home as in the area we live in. Until we enact the ancient ritual of laying to rest our dearly departed loved one.

Through other friends, Pastor Peter finds a local funeral home in Iowa City, Iowa. Not a place here. Not in middle-of-nowhere Wisconsin, where we sit as strangers. Unclear as to Tony's exact whereabouts right now. Coroner whisking him away with great efficiency. To a holding place. One unimaginable to me.

Soon male voice of funeral director takes over. Keeping me grounded until our friends arrive. After ten. Hugging us. Sharing tears. Silences. Heads shaking in disbelief. My brother Peter's voice, known since birth, taking charge. Loading up our bags. Hugging me as we leave. Onto roads paved in somber despair. Tom driving us. Linnea following. Caravan winding south on country roads and highways. Quiet echoing with hours of previous keening. Men's voices joining in sorrow. Plaintive, quiet timbres resonating into air. For us. For them. For one of their own gone too soon. All is not well. Nor will it be well. But right now, men's voices carry me forward into my recently rendered, torn-apart unknown.

Way Home

Ride in unlit night. Quiet as it is dark. Staring out window into what's left of our future. Now and then involuntary sighs escaping through slightly opened mouths. Lips still cracked from day's sun and accumulated dehydration. Small distress signals giving voice despite our collective numbness. Car's safety creating space to do so.

Just north of Mount Vernon, Iowa, we turn off the four-lane highway. Head south toward Solon. Two-lane roads dotted by oc-

casual farmyard light. Home thirty minutes away or so. Through silence hear Tony's voice, as if he is with us, or telephoning in.

"The boys need to be debriefed," he tells me.

In identity, I'm still a good psychotherapist's wife. Only eight hours or so a widow. I know about intervention protocols and techniques from listening to Tony for years. Especially the two years he worked for an employee assistance program in suburban Milwaukee. Tony provided debriefings after workplace traumatic events: post office shootings, murder in a company's parking lot, train accident. After traumatic events, people need something. As soon as possible. Within forty-eight hours. I don't know what exactly. Or whether this term—debriefing—is still used. But I know there is something out there in trauma therapeutic interventions minimizing our possible long-term traumatic responses. Because trauma left untended or ignored develops into bigger problems such as PTSD.

Combing through trauma recovery books months later, I learn something. Trauma first aid at the beach had been necessary but was not given. Simple techniques minimizing the accumulation of stuck life or death energy in our bodies. As manageable as asking us to count ten trees along the shore line. Or feel the bottoms of our feet on the dirt. Or even asking us to look into their faces instead of away. Another wrong layered on this day. From driving into a packed parking lot at the beach. To being driven home now. Wrong. Not right. Just wrong.

Cling this night to Tony's voice. To his knowing voice. His voice I love. His voice I cannot live without. Know in my gut our sons need something. Focus on them. Forget about me. Do not realize I am in post-traumatic shock, needing intervention as well. Tony's voice fades, leaving me again wondering what I heard. Thinking God forgive me. I don't know what I am doing. Not capable of planning ahead.

Two in the morning. Almost home. Ten minutes away. Driving on Mehaffey Bridge Road. Along the lake. A large, antlered deer

leaps out onto our path. Tom swerves. Grazing the deer. It runs into the woods. We sigh in collective chorus. Each thinking, what awful thing next?

Home. Crawl into bed. Alone. Insides spinning. Saying over and over and over again “I forgive myself. I forgive myself. I forgive myself.”

Anything to ward off the last moments of Tony already haunting me.

Sleep fitful. Tears sliding. Pillow wet.

Sunday

House throughout night full of small noises. Pain and shock audible through closed doors. I doze toward morning. Sun beginning predictable ascent into the sky. Phone rings early. Around seven. Waking our collective broken sleep. “Got your message. What’s going on?” Pastor Ron asks.

What message? Vague, fuzzy memory pokes me. He doesn’t know. Can’t respond. How do I tell him? Have no words. “Tony.” Silence. “Tony. Died. Yesterday.”

“What?”

Body retracts into stomach, swallowed within, denying his disbelief. I hang up. Enter closet. Strip off all of yesterday. Stand naked, cold. Touch dress on hanger. Slip fabric into hands. Slide arms in and overhead. Cloth falling down. Covering what is left. In black. A shell.

House heavy in quiet. Linnea makes tea. We sit on green couch downstairs. Talking. Not talking. Sipping tea. Silent tears sliding down our cheeks into cups. Sons staying in their rooms. Sleeping or escaping or both. Think Ricky’s dearest friend stayed the night. Talking into wee hours of morning out on trampoline. Found them there in my wanderings, unable to sleep. Calmed by Ricky’s voice. Soothed by Paul’s rhythmic breath.

Linnea makes plans for others to stay with us. Reinforcements for when they leave. She's conscious I can't be alone. Just the three of us. Constituting a family. She having witnessed through the last decade the countless hours we spent without Tony. He traveling. Building career and business. Working long hours away from us. Understanding we operated together or apart as a family of four. Until yesterday.

Midmorning, therapist friend Patrick shows up. He knows something about abruptly becoming fatherless too soon in life. Patrick spends time with Ricky and Paul. Gives a sort of therapeutic debriefing. Combined with a walk with Ricky. "A walk and talk," as Tony called it. Sits on the front stoop with Paul, then me. Before going with Ricky to Tony's clinical practice, The Men's Center, to help Ricky send out notifying email to clients, or perhaps he just bears witness to what Ricky must do. As a son. As a son doing administrative work for his therapist father. Now in the worst circumstances possible.

People travel toward us. Mom and cousin Naomi on their way. Naomi driving. No one thinking my mother should drive under the circumstances. Tony's sister, our nephew, and some of our nieces packing their bags. Peter's wife boarding an airplane on another continent. Our home's quiet is about to unravel. Cacophony approaching. Know our people must come. Fear what little control I have left will vanish in the noise.

Afternoon. People congregate in living room. Mom, cousin Naomi, Pastor Ron, Ricky, Paul, me. Recently arrived people working at internal calmness but radiating discomfort instead, colliding with my frozen anguish. Pastor Ron's voice too grating. Naomi's laugh too loud. Mom's chatter too much. I close my eyes, pray for silence without praying. Hold in my heart the person I most need for survival—another sudden widow. Someone with already acquired first-hand knowledge of this unstoppable pain permeating every fiber of my existence. A first-line savior traveling toward us. En route from Minnesota. My aunt, Linda.

Obituary

There are things I must do now. “I’ll need an obituary,” the funeral director tells me. Sit on our bed. In another black dress. Laptop open. Arms shaking. Words forming slowly. Capturing Tony’s presence on this earth. Mind spinning with cruel chant. I can’t do this. I can’t do this. I can’t do this. Then I write,

Anthony D. “Tony” Rodriguez, 53

Anthony Derayunan Rodriguez died suddenly and unexpectedly on Saturday, August 13, 2016. Those who knew and loved him called him “Tony.” He called everyone “friend.”

Tony was born on May 7, 1963, in Manila, Philippines, to Rick and Hope Rodriguez. The family immigrated to the United States in December of 1968 for Rick’s work as a civil engineer. They settled in Chicago to be near extended family.

A professor at the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee where Tony earned his bachelor degree recognized his innate abilities to serve others through the art and craft of mental health therapy. With this support, Tony went on to graduate from Loyola University Chicago with a Master of Social Work degree. He then became a Licensed Clinical Social Worker, which was his calling and passion.

Tony met his wife, Jennifer Ohman, on October 1, 1994. They married on August 5, 1995. Tony and Jennifer welcomed two beloved sons into their union. Ricardo Rodriguez and Paul Rodriguez. Tony and Jennifer were married twenty-one years.

In 2003, Tony felt called to serve as a therapist to adult men surviving childhood sexual abuse and violence. He opened his business, The Men’s Center, with the tagline “A place for healing, mindfulness, and possibilities” the following fall. During this time Tony served as a board member for the international group, Male Survivor. He expanded his work a few years later to serve people living with and suffering from sexual addictions and compulsions. In 2011, Tony and two colleagues wanted to fill a gap in the therapeutic literature realizing the need for a resource

for partners of people suffering from sexual addictions. They wrote and published *Facing Heartbreak: Steps to Recovery for Partners of Sex Addicts*. This book is widely used throughout the world. Tony presented workshops, too many to name, for other therapists throughout the United States. Tony's work, the work he felt called and compelled to do, impacted many lives.

Tony leaves a great hole in his passing. He was a man of great faith in a loving and grace-giving God, as well as in the ability of people to heal, and the primacy of relationships in our lives. He loved with a whole heart, worked to eradicate the shame surrounding sexual violence and sexual addictions, and lived each day with integrity, a warm smile, and the willingness to keep loving and building his relationships and to help others to do the same.

Monday

Sit at table's head. In another black dress. Gaunt from shock, lack of sleep, poor intake of nutrients. Legs wound tightly around each other. Once. Twice. Arms armoring me. Upright. Still. Oxygen stealing through skin. Avoiding lungs.

I am the only known person bearing witness to Tony's last moment alive. Trying-to-make-sense-of-what-happened. I am still at the beach. Not here in a meeting room full of people. Sons, me, Pastor Ron, Aunt Linda, mom, Peter, funeral director. At a long conference table. Sitting in coolness. Outside cloaked in August heat. Planning the unplannable. Bumpy dynamics ricocheting off wallpapered walls. Noting too many people present. Too many opinions guised in helping postures. Forcing tiptoes in widowed diplomacy. Resentment rising. Mine.

Blog Comment

Phone buzzes with texts. Social media traffic soars. Email inbox fills. Thoughts from friends, family, and death business communications. Resent it. Avoid it. Want to throw up on it all. One

message persists. Stands out. Response to a blog post I posted weeks ago. Message written two days after Tony's death. Words from woman praying. With husband on beach. Waiting for first responders. Stranger with toddler looking at us kneeling in the sand. Strangers surrounding my pain. Shielding me from all else.

"Hi Jennifer,

I'm the stranger who prayed with you Saturday afternoon. I looked you up and found your beautiful blog as well as learning about Tony's impact on so many people on his website. You and your boys are in my prayers every day, along with my family and the other family who was with us that day. Your comments in this article about what Lillian's stitches teach you – to keep breathing stitch by stitch – brought tears to my eyes. Keep breathing..."

Undone

Hear small snippet of sung liturgy. Over and over in my head. "Spirit intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words to express."² Based on a text from the apostle Paul's letter to the Romans.

"Likewise the Spirit helps us in our coming un-done-ness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with groanings too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit."³

Am undone. No longer know how to pray. Only sigh, sob, hear these words praying for us.

Tuesday. Maybe Wednesday

Morning. Ease out of our bed. Another night of sort-of-sleeping. Falling asleep last night with nerve endings pinging through-

² "The Spirit Intercedes for Us" in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2006) #180.

³ Romans 8:26–27 (NRSV) combined with Dr. David Frederickson's class translation and translation from Accordance Bible Software.

Survival Practice

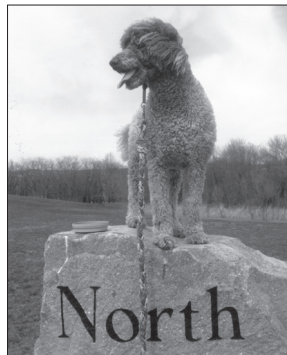
Journal: Find, buy, ask for a journal. You don't even have to open it. You can just look at it. But keep it close by. Write in it if you need to.

Prayer

What next, God? What next?



Tony's parents' fiftieth wedding anniversary, 2010.



Thunder.



Tony's office showing his attention to the therapeutic environment at The Men's Center.



Tony was studying couple's therapy with Dr. Stan Tatkin. The chairs set up here show how couples faced each other during therapy, not the therapist.

III. Unbalanced Realities

“Do you want to feel better or do better? Because if you want to do better, you have to do the work.”

—Tony Rodriguez

Car Safety

Before Tony, Chicago’s gray morning followed me. Driving south on an almost empty Ashland Avenue. Protected from quiet world by blaring music, closed windows, and metal frame. Lesson plans, homemade play dough, and a jar of leftover minestrone soup filled my bag. Smock dress covered my thin frame. Cassandra Wilson’s velvet voice blanketed air. Soulfully singing, “Got to find me an angel in my life.”

Hit replay over and over again. Day after day. Same drive. Same voice. Same prayer for filling my empty heart. On weekends, ride my bike along lake front. Feel a presence close. Felt sense saying, “Do not worry. Do not be afraid.”

Know my someone, my angel draws near. Proximate essence haunting me for months on this ride. Often stop along path. Gaze off into clouded horizon hovering over Lake Michigan. Others on bikes whizzing by me. Homeless men snoring on benches. Children running in sand with wide smiles and happy shrieks. Ride until universe shifts one day revealing my human angel. Gentle, serious man living a mile or so north of me on Olive Street between Clark and Glenwood. Who doesn’t like Cassandra Wilson much or any jazz for that matter. Not for another decade or so. Prayer answered. Cassandra’s cassette tapes gathering dust in my car. Cast aside.

Lost my angel. Other music keeping me safe during this time. In different car after owning nine together. Morning drive under clear Iowa skies with smell of harvest in the air. Driving in silence. Until dropping Paul off at high school. "Have a good day. I love you," I say.

"Sure," he replies.

Pull car up a bit. Know Paul won't last long at school. Grief's time for overtaking me only a few short hours. Find CD, one from Tony's office. James Blunt's "Back to Bedlam." Remember how many times Tony sang his song "You're Beautiful" to one of us. Jokingly with the boys. Lovingly with me. Now bask, unwillingly, in many songs. Repeated with push of button. "Goodbye my lover. Goodbye my friend. You have been the one, you have been the one for me," sends tears shaking through every limb.

But "Tears and Rain" becomes one song to which my heart sticks. For months. Enveloping me with sound's sanctity. Fencing me off from world. Holding sorrow captive in melody and chordal progressions. Words not speaking to me. But sounds building over and over again. Opening a deep well. Producing deepest pain I've ever known. As Tony would say, "I'm in the pit."

Resistance

Can't write. Feel dried out from day's convulsing sobs and sighs. Writing, like other former basics, falls into abstraction becoming a concept aspired to rather than practiced. An absurd exercise when comprehending written word is like reading an unknown foreign language. Sudden grief and trauma's shock render me illiterate sending writing far away into another reality. Body contracts as each new, empty journal arrives via hands of friends. "I thought you might want to write," they say.

Why? I think. Why relive my pain in literary flashback?

Walk marshy grassland with Abbey one day. Fall sun cracking open milkweed pods. Butterflies drying wet wings. Air full of summer smells heading for winter. She asks, "Are you writing?"