

The Holy Longing

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

Tell a wise person, or else keep silent,
For those who do not understand will mock it right away.
I praise what is truly alive,
What longs to be burned to death.

In the calm water of the love-nights,
Where you were begotten, where you have begotten,
A strange feeling comes over you
When you see the silent candle burning.

Now you are no longer caught
In the obsession with darkness,
And a desire for higher love-making
Sweeps you upward.

Distance does not make you falter,
Now, arriving in magic, flying,
And, finally, insane for the light,
You are the butterfly and you are gone.

And so long as you haven't experienced this:
To die and so to grow,
You are only a troubled guest
On the dark earth.

Chapter One





Bonny & Justin Meyer, Lower Blue Lake, CA, August 6, 2002

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The love of my life is slipping out of my arms.

On a gorgeous day by a pristine mountain lake, unfathomable gravity tugs my husband, Justin, out of my embrace and takes him down to the ground.

There was no warning. There is no time for thought. I go to my knees and blow into his mouth with long, full exhalations, then push hard on his chest, hoping against hope he will start breathing again. Hoping he will show some movement. Some sign of life.

When I am exhausted with the effort and shaky from the adrenalin coursing through my body, I ask Ruggero, Justin's dear friend, if he can take over. Ruggero kneels down next to Justin's body across from me, lovingly looks at his friend and begins to administer chest compressions in a steady, rapid rhythm.

I get to my feet, watching Justin and Ruggero, hoping against hope. And then I hear the sound: a peculiar, rattling exhale coming from the depths of my husband's body. Somehow I know the meaning of that sound. Whatever life force was left in him has ridden that exhale right out of his body.

Slowly I back away, shaky on my feet but never taking my eyes off Justin. Ruggero continues to try to force his lungs to breathe and heart to beat. Someone has called for an ambulance, but up here in the Sierra Nevada mountains it will have to come from a distant town on two-lane roads. The local heroes will not reach us in the nick of time. The drama unfolding in front of me will not wait.

I become aware of myself, sitting on the top of a picnic table and able to see everything: Justin lying still, Ruggero focused and pushing hard on his chest and breathing into his mouth without stopping. Somewhere nearby, Ruggero's wife Gina and other picnickers keep a measured distance. They do not assist Ruggero, or comfort me. It seems they do not even move. Are they waiting for me to become frantic, to

rage or cry?

In this eerie stillness of shock and disbelief, I know intellectually that the worst I could imagine is happening before my eyes. But something stronger than my mind keeps me focused on Justin. His face, always naturally ruddy, begins to take on some unnatural patches of purple. First his nose, then his cheeks. Now the bystanders take a couple of steps back, separating themselves from death by a pretty lake on a summer day.

I want the ambulance to arrive, but not because anyone can save Justin now. The extravagant physical effort of CPR already feels morbid, a travesty. Nevertheless I force myself to return to Justin's side to relieve Ruggero. We don't need to speak. We wordlessly agree we will not stop our efforts until we are assured by an emergency professional that Justin is dead. After a while I feel exhausted again, but now it is not solely from the physical effort. I can feel my emotions backing up inside, threatening to overload. My body feels heavy, like Justin's did from one moment to the next, as if my life force exited in the same moment as did his. I look up at Ruggero. He understands. He takes over again.

Finally, the ambulance arrives. I say to the attendant, "Please tell us that he is dead so we can stop." His look means I have said something strange, perhaps even suspicious. Not the usual greeting from the wife of someone who has just died.

He walks over to where Justin lies. Ruggero, Gina and I watch carefully, holding our breath. It takes only a moment to confirm that Justin is indeed dead.

Everything alters. What was surreal is now a fact, a routine medical event that turns my beloved over to administrative processes. I feel like I have been hit by a sledgehammer, too crushed to cry.

Our efforts to revive Justin have forced some saliva out of his mouth and onto his face. With moistened paper towels I carefully clean Justin's face, taking my time and attending to every fold of skin, his ears, his eyes, carefully washing his face and neck. I run my hand over his bald forehead and close-cropped hair. I prolong the process until I feel the others around me, silently waiting. Finally, I stand up and back away.

Justin has belonged to me in music, life, romance, marriage, parenthood, business, phenomenal success... Now he belongs to the ambulance man. He summarily squats down, grabs the bottom of Justin's grey t-shirt, and raises it up so that it covers his face. This is another shock, like a gut punch in its intensity. With Justin's face covered, he is

transformed from my beloved into a faceless corpse.

The ambulance attendant and Ruggero carefully maneuver Justin's body onto a stretcher and then to the ambulance. I stop them before they slide him inside. Tenderly I lift Justin's shirt from his face and take it in my hands. It is still warm. I kiss him many times over, smoothing his skin, brushing his closed eyes with my lips. Finally, it is time for the ambulance to take him away. As I watch it pull away, a realization hits my heart like a hammer: I will never touch or lay my eyes on Justin again.

And so, a new journey begins. Though I am deep in grief and physically fragile, the memories of what has come before contain the fire and grace that will sustain me.

Wanting to Run

I slide into the front passenger seat of Ruggero's Jeep, where Justin had been sitting on the drive to the lake earlier. It is the first of countless times that I will take Justin's place, in arenas too numerous and various to recognize now. As we head back to Ruggero and Gina's house, they encourage me to spend the night with them before I return home to Napa Valley. But they cannot persuade me. I want to be with my children. I need to tell them about their father.

At the house I quickly shove my things into a duffel bag. As I prepare to do the same with Justin's things, I stop and stare at them. They have no owner now. He won't need these pants, this toothbrush, this beautiful sweater I gave him... My awareness shifts to a bulky object in my pocket. It is Justin's wallet, filled to overflowing with the essential and the precious. He doesn't need this anymore either. Catching myself in reverie, I remind myself that I must keep moving if I am going to get out of the Sierras before sundown.

As soon as I am in the car, it floods with memories of the day before, when Justin and I had driven up to visit Ruggero and Gina. The car itself is a cascade of memories: a BMW convertible Justin gave me for my 50th birthday. Driving up into the mountains, we had reveled in the sense of freedom that comes with the feeling of wind in our hair. We had breathed in the fresh air and the stunning mountain vistas as we made our way over Echo Summit and Carson Pass, descending into Alpine County on the east side of the mountains.

Now I am driving west through the mountains, not east. My passenger is Gina, not Justin. Ruggero follows close behind in the Jeep. They have decided that it is not safe for me to travel alone. Perhaps they consider me emotionally fragile. In reality I feel mightily determined. I make my way up Highway 89 to the summit then down Highway 50 to the west, into the sun, top down, jaw set, tears in my eyes. Gina asks me how I am feeling, and I tell her I am feeling like a mama bear absolutely possessed by an imperative to protect her cubs.

Nevertheless, a strange thing starts happening as the miles fly by. My eyes are repeatedly drawn into the conifer forests of deep green that line the highway. Every time I see a dirt road or half-abandoned track that cuts through the green curtain, I imagine a remote little cabin, some sanctuary of stillness far from civilization. I could stay there for months, years maybe. I could be alone to cry and curse and scream my heart out.

I am mystified by this urge as I race toward Napa to be with my children. The temptation to veer off the highway is fierce. But then I see Gina, looking straight ahead, focused on the highway. Or I look in the rearview mirror and see Ruggero following close behind us. The two of them are energetically holding me to the road.

My sons Chad and Matt and their wives have been told to meet me at my home later that evening. But they don't know yet why. I need to look into their eyes when they learn about Justin.

Still fresh in my mind are phone conversations with all three children early that morning. Justin had followed the conversation with keen focus, without joining in. He could tell from my side of the conversation that everyone was fine and happy. Now I am flooded with remorse. If I had insisted that he take the phone as well, his children would have had the gift of one last conversation with him.

An even earlier conversation comes back to me, during the drive into the mountains the day before. Justin had sensed anger in me and asked why. I was frustrated that he would not restrict his diet to keep his diabetes in check, and told him so.

His response had cut me to the core. "Don't you know me by now, after all these years? Don't you know that I love to eat and drink whatever I want and enjoy what I want? I would rather do that than be careful. I'm going to die at some point, and I would rather enjoy every minute than eat nothing but a bunch of rabbit food!"

That took the heat right out of my frustration. Indeed, Justin had always been that way, savoring every morsel and minute of life. Careful

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was not part of his personality or approach to life. I glanced over at him, feeling deep love and admiration for his honesty.

“Yes, I know you,” I had told him.

Silence pregnant with deep connection had filled the rest of our drive. Now I am grateful for that conversation. It would have been a terrible burden if I had been holding myself away from him, in anger, when he died.

I look to my right again, into the deep woods. The cool green forest calls to me. My life as I knew it is over. It ended the moment Justin’s heart stopped. Now I want to run away from everyone and everything, hide from everyone I know, hide even from my children as I rush to meet them.

I arrive home to find Chad, Matt, and their wives just driving up to the house. When they realize that Justin is not with me, they immediately ask why. I suggest we sit on the sofa together. After we are all settled, I close my eyes and take a long breath before telling them quietly how their father has died that afternoon. I tell them about being with Gina and Ruggero and having a picnic lunch by the lake. I tell them about how much fun we were having, until Justin got shaky on his feet...

Ruggero chimes in and tells about our lunch of cold pasta with a bottle of Zinfandel. He is lamenting that Justin’s last meal was cold pasta because Ruggero forgot his propane stove. He is sad also that Justin, known as the King of Cabernet, had to drink Zinfandel for lunch. “We should have been drinking Silver Oak!”

Then I tell them how Ruggero and I needed to help Justin walk, and how he slipped to the ground like a rag doll, his legs no longer able to hold him, his heart no longer beating.

When there is no more to say, nothing feels real or right, as if our world has just shifted on its axis. But slowly it sinks in. Chad and his wife Aimee have news of their own – she is pregnant with her first child, shortly after their honeymoon. This joyful announcement morphs into agony as Chad cries out, “Our baby will never know his grandfather!”

Matt keeps staring at me, hard. He knows that I have a rare form of cancer. I am still recovering from major surgery at the beginning of summer. After learning he has lost one parent, Matt seems already afraid he will lose the other.

Early the next morning, Ruggero drives me and Chad to the airport in San Francisco to pick up my daughter Holly and my niece Vanessa. They have been on a cross-country road trip and rushed home at the

news of Justin's death. When they finally descend the escalator, Holly is clutching a tear-stained pillow. We embrace in a blurring field of grief and disbelief. Time stops. Waves of emotion course through our entwined bodies.

At some point the others reach in through the fog. Holly and Chad hug and cry together. With tender sadness I embrace Vanessa. Ruggero, despite having lost his best friend, is the most practical of us all, keeping an eye out for the girls' luggage and then shepherding us home.

Touching In

That evening, I am tenderly tucking Holly into my bed on the side Justin has always occupied. I am sitting on the edge of the bed stroking her hair, comforting her, when a pebble strikes the floor.

There is only one place it can come from: a niche in the adobe wall of our master bedroom, about ten feet from where I am sitting on the bed. Years before I had placed a small fountain in the niche, which includes pebbles for the water to splash onto, creating natural music. Somehow one of these pebbles has propelled itself through the air and landed at my feet.

Holly and I catch our breath, startled. Then we look up at each other, wordlessly asking, "Did you see what I saw?" We both stare down at the mysterious pebble again. But the second time we raise our eyes to each other, it is not in surprise. Holly's expression softens as she says in a small voice, "Hi, Daddy."

After a while, I pick up the pebble and hand it to her. We sit there trying to think of another explanation for a pebble flying across the room. We can't. All we can surmise is that it must be Justin's way of saying that he is here with us.

Eventually I walk around the bed to the other side and climb in next to Holly and hug her tight. Despite the flying pebble of re-assurance, it is a restless, grief-filled night.

The next morning, the hair dryer goes off in the bathroom without anyone touching it or using it.

Our king-size bed sits up against a room divider that separates the bedroom from the bathroom. There is a counter on the bathroom side with a double sink. Just inches from where Holly's head lies on the pillow

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is Justin's sink, and next to it is the hair dryer with a magnetized base for the nozzle that blows the hot air. Pull the nozzle away from the base and it goes on. Put it back and the hair dryer shuts off.

While I had always considered this pretty clever, Justin hated the thing. He was always bumping into it with his elbow, causing the hair dryer nozzle to pop off its base, then buzz loudly and dangle until he caught it and replaced it to stop the infernal noise.

Now, the morning after the mysterious flying pebble landed at my feet, the hair dryer has fallen and started buzzing all by itself. When I put it back on the magnetic base it doesn't turn off. Nothing I do turns it off. But when I give up and turn to leave, it stops of its own accord.

But that is not the end of it. The hair dryer seems to have acquired some kind of awareness or intention. When Holly or I walk into the bedroom, it goes on for a little while then stops. A close friend staying with me in the house notices a pattern. When I am feeling particularly bereft, the hair dryer goes wild. As I calm down, it settles down to a purr, and then stops.

We begin to wonder if the pebble and hair dryer incidents are somehow related, directed and controlled in some mysterious way by Justin. It seems impossible, but one thing keeps challenging my disbelief: What a classic example of Justin's wry sense of humor that would be, comforting me with that silly hair dryer he hated so much.