

THE SECOND HEART



THE OPENING PAGES

WHERE LOVE GOES AFTER SOMEONE DIES

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Introduction

The Question Grief Leaves Behind

There is a moment in grief when the world continues, but you don't.

Morning arrives outside the window. Coffee still brews. Cars move along the street. Someone nearby laughs. The grocery store opens at the same hour it opened yesterday. People answer messages, make dinner plans, complain about traffic, and speak about tomorrow as if tomorrow remains something they can trust.

Everything continues.

And somehow, you don't.

You may still get out of bed, brush your teeth, feed the dog, pack lunches, answer emails, or stand in line beside people who know nothing about what has happened to you. From the outside, you may appear to be moving through an ordinary day, but inside, you are standing somewhere else entirely.

You are standing in the moment before the phone rang.
Before the doctor entered the room.
Before someone spoke the sentence that divided your life
into before and after.

Part of you understands what happened. You know the
person you love has died. You may have heard the words,
stood beside the bed, attended the funeral, or watched other
people carry their belongings out of a room.

You know, and still, some part of you continues searching
for them.

You hear something funny and reach for your phone.
You begin forming a sentence you want to tell them.
You walk into a room and, for one brief moment, expect to
see them there.
You hear a voice in a crowd that sounds almost like theirs,
and your body turns before your mind can stop it.

Then reality returns.

Again.

The person is gone, but the instinct to reach for them isn't.

The relationship has ended in the physical world, but it
hasn't ended everywhere inside you. Love doesn't
immediately understand what death has changed. It
continues moving along familiar pathways, still reaching
toward the place where the person used to be.

Your hand remembers the number.
Your body remembers the sound of their footsteps.
Your mind still makes room for their answer.

Grief lives inside that impossible distance between knowing and reaching.

The mind knows. The love still reaches.

No one teaches us what to do with that.

We are taught what to do with belongings. We keep some things and give others away. We choose photographs, fold clothes, and sort through drawers. We decide what should remain where it was and what we cannot bear to look at yet.

We are taught what to do after a death. There are calls to make, forms to complete, arrangements to discuss, and people to notify, but no one tells us what to do with the love.

The everyday love.

The love that knew how they took their coffee.

The love that noticed when they sounded tired.

The love that called to ask whether they arrived home safely.

The love that remembered their stories, expressions, silences, and the small changes in their voice that told you something was wrong before they admitted it.

The love had somewhere to go every day because they were here to receive it.

Then they die, and the love remains.

It may be one of the loneliest truths of loss: death can end a life without ending the love attached to it.

The love doesn't disappear when breathing stops.

It doesn't leave the room with the hospital bed.
It doesn't know what to do when the phone remains silent.

It stays inside the person who is left.

It may remain as longing, anger, guilt, or a physical ache that rises before you understand what your body has remembered. It can appear in the middle of an ordinary moment. A song playing overhead, an empty chair at dinner, good news arriving with no one left to call first, and sometimes it is so quiet that no one else can see it.

People may tell you to be strong, ask if you are feeling better, or encourage you to stay busy, find closure, look forward, or begin moving on.

Often, they are trying to help. They want to believe there is a place beyond the pain where you can return to who you were. They want to believe grief follows a path that can be completed if you walk it correctly, but grief doesn't always behave that way.

It returns through sound, scent, memory, seasons, birthdays, and ordinary Tuesdays. It can sit silently beside joy, disappear for an afternoon, and return before dinner.

That doesn't mean you are grieving incorrectly.
It doesn't mean you are broken.



Grief exists because love exists.

Without the love, there would be no reaching. No searching. No empty place at the table that feels different from every other empty chair. No sentence you would give anything to hear one more time.

Grief isn't evidence that there is something wrong with your heart. It is evidence that someone mattered enough to change it.

This book won't ask you to forget them.

It won't ask you to let go of the love, erase the relationship, stop saying their name, or pretend the life you shared no longer matters, and it won't give you a deadline for being finished with grief.

Love doesn't follow a deadline simply because the outside world is ready for you to be okay.

You may be reading these words soon after the loss, while everything still feels unreal. Or years later, surprised that one memory can still undo you. You may be grieving someone whose body is gone or someone illness began taking from you long before death arrived.

Your grief may be loud today.

It may be quiet.

You may be crying, angry, numb, exhausted, relieved, frightened, or unable to name what you feel at all. You don't need to arrive here in a particular way, or read this book quickly, or agree with every sentence. You don't need to turn your loss into wisdom, gratitude, meaning, or transformation.

For now, you only need to know this:
You aren't wrong for still loving them.
You aren't weak because your body still remembers.
You aren't failing because life has continued and some part of you hasn't yet learned how to continue with it.

There may be no way to make the loss small enough to explain, but there may be a way to understand what remains, because something does remain.

It is there when you instinctively turn to tell them something.

It is there when you say their name aloud in an empty room.

It is there when you remember the way they laughed, the questions they always asked, or the words that once seemed too small to preserve.

It is there when you miss not only who they were, but who you were with them.

The person is no longer here in the way you need them to be, but the love is still here, and that leaves a question most of us were never taught to ask.

Where does all the love go after someone dies?

Not the photographs.

Not the belongings.

Not even the memories.

The love itself.

The love that still reaches for them.

The love that still wants to call.

The love that doesn't know what to do with the silence.

That is the question at the heart of this book.

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The life you thought would continue

For more than sixteen years, I called my parents in Norway almost every day.

I lived in Arizona with my husband and children, more than five thousand miles away. For most of the year, nine hours separated us. By the time my day began, theirs was already half over. When I started thinking about dinner, they were preparing for bed. Their morning arrived while my house was still dark.

We learned to live with the distance.

There was no perfect time to call, so we called anyway.

Sometimes I spoke to them while making dinner, holding the phone between my shoulder and ear as I opened the refrigerator, trying to decide what to cook. Other times, I called while driving, folding laundry, cleaning the kitchen, or waiting for one of the children to finish an activity.

The calls didn't require preparation. I didn't need to have news. There was no expectation that something important had to happen before I could pick up the phone.

“What are you making for dinner?” Dad would ask.

“Something simple,” I would say. “You probably wouldn’t like it.”

“I like anything if I don’t have to cook it.”

Then he would laugh.

He wanted to know what the children were doing. He asked about school, activities, whatever project I was working on, and whether anything new had happened since our last conversation.

Usually, not much had.

That never seemed to matter.

My parents told me about the weather in Norway, what they had eaten, who they had seen, something that needed to be fixed, or a person from home I hadn’t thought about in years. Dad might tell me about an appointment or complain about something on television. My mom might repeat a story or ask a question she had already asked.

We filled the distance with ordinary things.

At the time, I thought that was all they were.

Ordinary conversations.

Ordinary questions.

Ordinary days passing between Arizona and Norway.

Nothing about those calls felt fragile. They belonged to the structure of my life so completely that I rarely considered the possibility that they could end.

They were simply there.

Like the clock on the kitchen wall.

Like the sound of the garage door opening.

Like knowing which light would be on when you came home late.

Some forms of love become so dependable that we stop recognizing them as events. We experience them as part of the world itself.

Dad calling was one of those things. If I didn't call, he would. If he missed my call, he called back.

Always.

Sometimes only a few minutes later. Sometimes after checking the time and deciding it wasn't too late in Arizona. Occasionally, I would look at my phone and see his name after I had been busy with the children or unable to answer.

I never felt afraid when I missed him.

There would be another call. I could call tomorrow. We would speak again.

That belief lived inside me so quietly that I didn't know it was a belief. It felt more like a fact.

Dad will call back. Dad will be there. There will be more time.

My dad had been sick for as long as I could remember. For nearly forty years, illness had been part of our family's life. There had been hospitals, surgeries, medications, ambulances, emergencies, and moments when we didn't know what would happen next.

Again and again, his body brought us to the edge of losing him.

Again and again, he returned.

He survived things that frightened all of us. He came home from the hospital when we weren't sure he would. He recovered when the situation had seemed impossible. Just when we thought his body had reached its limit, he found a way to continue.

We began joking that he had nine lives. The joke made the fear easier to hold. "Dad survives everything," we would say and for a very long time, he did.

His survival became part of how I understood him. I knew intellectually that he wouldn't live forever. I understood that his body was fragile. I knew every hospitalization carried risk, but underneath that knowledge was another conviction, one I had never examined closely enough to challenge: He had always come back before.

Why would this time be different?

That is one of the ways a family adapts to long illness. What would feel like an emergency to someone else slowly becomes familiar. You learn the language of hospitals. You learn which questions to ask. You know what to pack and whom to call. You become accustomed to waiting for updates.

Fear and hope begin living beside each other. Eventually, you may even mistake familiarity for safety.

We knew Dad was sick, but we also knew Dad survived. Both things were true until suddenly only one of them was.

Before that happened, I asked him a question during one of our calls.

I don't remember what made me ask it. Perhaps we had been talking about the children. Perhaps something had reminded us of the years when my sisters and I were young. It wasn't meant to be a profound conversation.

It was simply another question inside another ordinary call.

"What is your favorite memory from when we were children?" I asked.

There was a pause. Longer than usual. I could hear him breathing on the other end of the phone. For a moment, I wondered whether he had heard me.

Then he answered. "Everything."

One word. That was all.

I had expected him to choose something specific: a vacation, a Christmas, a birthday, a place we had visited, or one particular day he still remembered clearly.

Instead, he gave me an entire childhood.

Everything.

The noisy mornings. The family dinners. The arguments. The laughter. The trips. The ordinary evenings when no one thought to take a photograph. The days that had seemed too unimportant to preserve because we assumed there would always be more of them.

At the time, I smiled.

I may even have laughed and asked him to choose something more specific. Then the conversation continued. We moved on to another subject, as people do when they don't yet know which words they will one day return to.

I didn't write the answer down. I didn't pause long enough to understand it. There was no reason to.

I believed I could ask him again.

That is the innocence grief takes from us: the assumption that an ordinary moment doesn't need to be held carefully because another one will follow it.

Before loss, we rarely know which details will become sacred.

We don't know that one day we will long to hear someone ask what we are making for dinner.

We don't know that a voicemail containing no important information may become impossible to delete.

We don't know that the phrases we hear repeatedly will one day be the words we are most afraid of forgetting.

We don't know which photograph will be one of the last, which holiday will be the final one, or which goodbye will have to carry everything we didn't think to say.

If we knew, perhaps we would listen differently.

We would study the sound of their laughter.

We would remain at the table a little longer.

We would pay attention to the way they said our name.

We wouldn't rush to end the call because dinner was ready, someone needed us, or we believed there would be time to finish the conversation tomorrow, but life doesn't usually tell us when an ordinary moment is becoming irreplaceable.

It lets us live it as if it were nothing unusual. Then, later, memory returns and shows us what was there.

Love was there.

It was there in the questions that sounded like small talk.

What are you making for dinner?

How are the children?

Did you get home safely?

Did anything happen with your books?

Those questions weren't merely requests for information.

They were how my dad entered my life from five thousand miles away. They were how he stood for a few minutes inside my kitchen, my car, or the middle of an ordinary Arizona afternoon.

I didn't understand the full weight of that while the calls were still coming.

This is one of grief's cruelest revelations: it teaches us the value of ordinary love after we can no longer receive it in the same way.

A grand declaration is easy to recognize. We remember the important conversations, the celebrations, the milestones, and the words spoken during moments everyone understood mattered, but most love doesn't arrive grandly.

It arrives through repetition.

The same person asking the same question.

The same voice on the phone.

The same message reminding you to drive carefully.

The same presence returning so faithfully that you begin to believe it is permanent.

This is why ordinary moments can become sacred after someone dies. Death doesn't add love to them. It reveals the love that was already there.

The moment itself hasn't changed. We have.

We finally understand that what seemed repetitive was devotion. What seemed predictable was safety. What seemed ordinary was a person choosing, again and again, to remain part of our life.

For years, I had evidence of my dad's love almost every day.

The phone would ring.
His name would appear.
We would talk about nothing important, and because it happened so often, I believed it would continue happening.

That is how deeply we trust the lives we know.

We may understand that human beings are mortal yet still construct our days around the assumption that the people we love will remain.

We make plans for next month.

We save stories for another conversation.

We postpone visits, questions, apologies, and words of affection because life appears to be giving us an unlimited number of ordinary tomorrows.

Even when someone has been ill for years, part of us can continue believing there will be another recovery.

Another return home.

Another phone call.

Another chance to say what we didn't say today.

I knew Dad was sick.

I knew his body had been fighting for a long time.
I knew, in the abstract way we know unbearable things, that
one day he would die, but knowing someone will die
someday isn't the same as believing they can die now.

Not this week.
Not tonight.
Not before the next conversation.

Grief doesn't begin only when someone dies. Sometimes it
begins with the dawning realization of how completely you
believed there would be more time.

More dinners to describe.
More stories to hear.
More questions about the children.
More chances to ask him what he remembered.
More opportunities for him to say, "Everything."

We don't only grieve the person.

We grieve every ordinary moment we thought was still
coming.

Every unfinished conversation.
Every question we assumed we could ask later.
Every future call that will never appear on the phone.

For all those years, distance had taught me that being far
away didn't mean being absent from each other's lives.
A telephone could cross the miles.
A familiar voice could enter my home from the other side
of the world.
No matter how far away I was, I could still reach him.

If he didn't answer, I left a message. If I missed his call, I
called back. There was always another attempt. There was

always a way across the distance.

Until there wasn't.

I called.

And this time, Dad didn't call me back.

The rest of the book

That is the introduction and the first chapter, exactly as they are printed. The rest of The Second Heart follows through five parts and thirty-one short chapters, each ending on one short line rather than a summary.

It is non-linear. You do not read it in order and you do not finish it. You open it when you need it, read what you can hold, and leave what you cannot.

It is also non-denominational, so it suits someone of any faith or none, and it is written for anyone who has lost someone they love rather than one kind of loss.

You can find it, and a free 14-day journal, at thesecondheart.com.