

The Price of Love, Sara, and then I Met Albee

Elizabeth Primamore

I lost my life partner, A., unexpectedly, in 2008. She was fifty-four years old. That December would have been our thirtieth year together.

No one ever told me grief would be the price I would pay for love, a price so unbearably painful and abiding in a way that there is no adequate emotional vocabulary available to describe it. Our lexicon tries. Dictionaries define grief as “extreme sadness.” Sorrow. Misfortune. Anguish. Heartache. Misery. Distress. When a person is in deep grief, attempts to define the feeling come up empty. It is nearly incomprehensible to those who have not grieved the loss of a loved one. But “rough patches” or hard times people go through in everyday living are so prevalent, they do give many of us a hint of this state of suffering in its catastrophic form.

Each day I learn more and more the true meaning of living alone. Opening the front door to the apartment we shared in lower Manhattan used to be one of my favorite

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things to do because once inside, A. was usually there. She could be sitting at her desk writing, talking on the phone, or making dinner. I never knew where I would find her. But find her I did. Nowadays I am met with a loud silence when I enter the apartment, living in the presence of her absence. Sometimes I still say "hi honey" when I walk through the door even though I know she won't answer me. I'll hear her voice in my mind, saying "hi" back, or, "I'm in here," meaning the bedroom. I try to convince myself that we are not over, just different.

A confidant, who I will call Sara, and who has known A. and me intimately for about eight years, called me early one evening, as she often did, to "check in." She is the type of person who likes to know what is going on. When A. was ill, Sara would call me every night on my way home from the hospital for a report of the day's miseries. A little over a year since our tragedy, this particular evening, she rang at an inconvenient time. I had just got home from work, sitting on the edge of the bed, taking my Beatles boots off, when the realization that A. is really gone jabbed me. Though I live each never ending day in grief, I never know when I will be stricken with agony of this magnitude, unbearable.

When the phone rang, I was not sure if I would answer it, but thought I should. The wonder of modern

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technology, Caller ID, revealed Sara's identity. If I did not answer my phone, friends tended to worry, and I did not want to worry her. By nature, Sara is what one would call a "worry wart." Quickly, to drain my sinuses, I grabbed tissues from a nearby box sitting on the marble coffee table in front of the Italian, orange, soft leather couch A. and I bought at Macy's two years ago. I peeled the tissues, now wet with mucous and sticking to my fingers, off me and threw them into the garbage. I spit in the kitchen sink, ran water, swallowed hard, splattered again, turned off the faucet, swallowed once more and picked up the receiver – "Hi, Sara." Unconvinced, she found my strained response of "I'm fine, I'm fine" too feeble for her simple, "how are you." She could hear my residual nasal congestion and breaks in my voice though I desperately tried to mask them by speaking in a higher pitched tone than usual.

Sara decided the solution to my sorrow was a good talking to, so got tough with me.

"For you to lose A. is unimaginable. Now the unimaginable has happened. You'll have to live with it."

Though I knew she was right, when she said that, I felt hit below the belt. Bullied. I hated having my state of affairs and the intimacy of my relationship with A., intruded upon, or dictated by the court of personal opinion.

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A little more than a year after “living with it,” my grief has hardly subsided. Each and every day I am tormented by the desire to be in A.’s physical presence again. My senses, undernourished, longing. My consciousness, diminished. This state of being does not change. How can it when the raw truth smacks you in the face at every turn?

Life is no longer what it was – transcendent, but has devolved into a crawl on a circular staircase with a boulder strapped to my back, an immovable hump.

My state of affairs does not sit well with family, friends nor acquaintances. They want me to “get better.” Sara was merely doing her bit.

Recently I saw playwright Edward Albee on the bus, the M20 that travels north on Hudson Street which becomes 8th Avenue. By chance he sat behind me in one of the single blue seats that line the left side of city busses and that are always taken first as passengers board. At eighty-years old, he was as spry and alert as men half his age. Slim and youthful, he dressed in jeans, white sneakers, and a white-buttoned down shirt, covered by a brown leather jacket, unzipped. Cut like a young boy’s, his silvery gray hair, abundant with strands falling onto his forehead, was the same color as his perfectly-groomed, brush moustache. The only sign of age was a hearing aid in his right ear.

I cannot explain what got into to me since he does not know me, but it felt natural to turn around and say to him, "I loved the Nevelson play."

He flashed a big smile that belied his infamous sober demeanor.

"Thank you," he said.

The name of the play is *Occupant*, a portrait of the acclaimed sculptor Louise Nevelson, one of A.'s heroes. I went to see it at the Signature Theater in Manhattan, with Mercedes Ruhl starring, in October 2008 – eight months after A. died, to honor her and enlighten myself. While I did love the play, what I really wanted to talk to Mr. Albee about was the loss of his partner of thirty-five years, sculptor Jonathan Thomas. For comfort, I often looked to the playwright's interviews about the untimely death of Jonathan, at fifty-nine to cancer in 2005. Mr. Albee said that one of the most painful things about losing him prematurely was to think of all of the work "he will not do."

Reading that really hit me.

I feel the same way about A., who was a wonderful poet, writer, playwright and singer songwriter. Imagining all of the poetry, prose and plays she will not write – the songs she will not sing – is truly the greater tragedy. It was she who taught me about the power of words. While going through

her files, I found a tiny notebook from the late 1970s in which she wrote: "Words are expression revealing existence forming the everlasting experience of the world we're living in." *

When I told Mr. Albee that his outspokenness in the press about his bereavement really helped me to understand better the nature of my own, he looked genuinely moved.

"Watch self-pity," he warned. "That's the tendency."

"Is that what this is?" I thought to myself as I nodded, noticing a pale brown freckle on the upper lobe of his ear.

As the bus hobbled up to Canal Street, he leaned toward me, fingers gripping the silver bar on the back of my seat. "You're young. You'll meet somebody." His voice was firm.

I appreciated his confidence in me, but living up to that expectation is another matter.

"Oh, no, no," I replied.

"Thirty-year old gay men don't even look at me." I watched his moustache as he spoke.

"Well, they should!" I said.

"This is my stop."

To steady himself in the motion of the tilt and sway of the bus, he tightened his grip on the bar with one hand, and stood up. With the other hand, he pressed the black strip

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to signal the bus driver. Stepping lively to the front door as it opened, he hopped down the steps as the bus driver lowered them with a mechanical hiss. Hands in pockets, standing on Houston Street, he hedged for a moment, and looked East, determined to reach his next destination.

I continued my journey to Chelsea where I see a Jungian analyst who is also an Episcopal priest. Often in session she will ask me, "If you had the choice between having had your relationship with A. or not having it, which would you choose?" My response is usually a smirk, but writing this piece has helped me come up with a more verbal response.

My mother confessor is asking the wrong question.

*Angela Costa