

Walking With Grief
by May Cotton © 2021, 2022

How did I arrive at this place where grief is so much harder now that I'm older? Is it because with each loss of a friend, I come closer to my own death?

I have read the obituaries for years, though I rarely know the names or faces of the deceased. Perhaps that is why I was so stunned when I encountered Teresa's obit. The picture just didn't look like her. It was taken years earlier when she was younger and thinner. I spent some time comparing it to the one photo I have of T, as she called herself in email and text messages. It was not until I posted the obit on our writers group's Facebook page, and Kari responded with "yes, that's our Teresa," that I began to grapple with her death.

I'm confused by this experience of grief. I thought I knew T, but apparently I didn't, based on all the glowing accolades listed in her obituary. I did not know she was a Civil Engineer who had accomplished so much for women in her field, or that she had traveled so extensively. When she joined us, she called herself a technical writer and later she had to return to Seattle for one last project which ended up taking two years instead of the expected one-and-a-half. I stayed in touch and when she came back, she rejoined the group.

I loved T's writing and her stories. She had such a great imagination and shared at least three different novels I couldn't wait to hear more of. I will always remember images from her mystery about the Blue Taxi which ended up in a lake, and the hilarious antics of six women traveling together in her book whose working title was *The Bathrooms of Europe*. Her science fiction novel was fascinating, and I'm disappointed that I will never know what was really going on with the heroine. At least we have her short story "Gnomes" in our published collection, *Dawns of Exordium*. I bookmarked Teresa's bio page with the obituary I cut out.

There was more to our relationship than stories, though. Teresa was so generous. She visited me in rehab after my surgery, bringing me gourmet cookies in case the institutional food wasn't to my liking. Once she came to Writers Group with a gift of assorted flavors of low-sugar peach jams she had made, including one with jalapenos. After we moved to our new house, she brought me an orchid, which I have, surprisingly, managed to keep alive. I'm glad I was able to show her the lovely white blossoms recently when she called into a Zoom meeting from her summer home in Arizona.

Everywhere I look, I see Teresa with her big smile and a glimmer in her eyes. The other day I saw her face in a cloud laughing down at me. And last night she was quite present in my dreams.

Experiences like these have not surprised me in the past, as I have often seen people after they have gone on to the next life. Sometimes I see them in my dreams, and sometimes I catch a glimpse when I am fully awake. I saw my brother after he died — he was flying down the Centennial Trail on a bicycle, hitching a ride in someone else's body. I see my sister fairly regularly, both in dreams and in meditation, and now and then I see my mom.

My daughter visits me as a dragonfly, and when I see my dad, he always has his back to me, as though he's not yet ready to turn around face me.

The first time I encountered a friend from the other realm was when Leif died. He and his fiancé had gone down in a small plane together and a group of us had gathered at the airport

in the rain to celebrate his life. I was sure he was delighted that he and Lynn had died together, probably in each other's arms. But it was a heavy blow to lose someone I'd worked with daily for several months, sharing the joys and sorrows of business ownership. I was there because I found it necessary to supplement my self-employment with temporary work through an agency.

As we strode across the tarmac in the pouring rain, a gust of wind rushed up behind me and flipped my umbrella inside out. I turned toward the fellow next to me and saw Leif, laughing at his own antics as a ghost. He jolted me out of my sorrow and made me laugh. And I was delighted to see he had carried his vast sense of humor into his next life.

I am usually stoic and philosophical in the face of death. There is nothing to fear. From what my sister lets on, the next life is pretty awesome. I often step up with words of assurance for the those left behind, it being easier to share from a place of knowledge than of fear. I also have a nice collection of sympathy cards that go beyond the usual platitudes, and some nice sayings to add when more is needed.

I see grief as a journey, even as a blessing in some ways. I know in my own life, beyond the shock and sadness of losing loved ones, there has also been a sense of relief. Now that I am the only one left from my nuclear family, I feel a sense of freedom. I no longer have responsibilities for these people, other than sorting and disposing of items they left behind.

Still, I want to know if Teresa left her manuscripts for her husband or someone else to sort through, finish and publish. I want to be able to talk to him and tell him how much she affected me in the seven years we knew each other. I want to acknowledge that in some ways, she affected me more than people I've known decades longer.

On Saturday, the day after I learned of Teresa's death, my pastor said, "Grief is a journey that walks with us always." I found that so profound, I wrote it down and have contemplated it often. I'm just not sure I'm prepared to walk always with grief, because the sadness and emptiness it leaves is so pervasive. It's too much like depression and not enough like the rejoicing I want, knowing that the next life is even more incredible than this one.