

ASPERGER'S, ABANDONMENT, AND GRIEF

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CAPSTONE ABSTRACT

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This project is a creative writing piece based on personal experience – fiction based on memoir/non-fiction. It is bookended with a researched preface in the beginning about a condition on the Autism spectrum known as Asperger's, or Asperger's syndrome, and a researched afterward at the end about grief and what I learned and diagnosed from my personal experience. I will reveal the physical and psychological difficulties in grieving the loss of someone through abandonment, someone you once knew but who now no longer seems to recognize you nor is he recognizable to you as the same person whose life you shared.

Dedication

To the children, whose hands we hold for a flash in time,
who we hold in our hearts forever

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Introduction

This work makes the case for the importance of diagnosing Asperger's syndrome to illustrate the significant impact it has not only on the individual diagnosed but also on the partner of someone diagnosed with Asperger's because, if unrecognized, the characteristics of Asperger's can produce devastating consequences to a partner if the relationship ends through sudden abandonment, as it does in the story described, that are comparable to the grief one feels from the loss of a partner through death.

Many people with Asperger's do not even know they have it. Some learn of their diagnosis as adults, sometimes not until they are in their 30s or 40s. In all or most of these instances, these individuals are relieved to finally have a light turned on as to why they never felt they fit in and welcome the knowledge not just as a diagnosis, but as an identity. (Jones) Many Aspies, a term some use to embrace this identity, are brilliant and talented in unique ways. Some may have successful, as well as high-powered, careers in computer science, accounting, engineering, etc. Others excel in the arts.

There are other people who may know a person with Asperger's but do not realize that this person is on the autism spectrum, never having heard of it. They will often say that he/she is quirky, or has unusual hobbies, or is socially awkward, or a variety of things along those lines. I was told all of these things about the person with whom I was involved for about two and a half years, and while I recognized all of these characteristics in him, I did not know about the condition until well after he was gone, and I was left in a confusion of grief and unanswered questions.

The diagnosis I made in trying to understand and sort through what happened and cope with the grief of being left so suddenly alone is entirely my own gleaned from my observation, experience, recollection, and many books and articles read along the way on my quest for an answer. The story I tell, about Elyse and Mel, is in the third-person. Some names, places, as well as possible details of events, may be changed in order to protect the anonymity of individuals.

What is Asperger's and When was it "Discovered?"

In 1943 Austrian pediatrician Hans Asperger (1906-1980) conducted research on children with autism, finding of particular note children with high intelligence who had difficulty with social and communication skills lacked empathy with their peers, and were physically clumsy (Dell'Osso et al. 121). British psychiatrist, Lorna Wing (1928-2014), first introduced the term "Asperger's Syndrome" in 1976 (Cole). It wasn't until 1993 that Asperger's Syndrome was recognized by the World Health Organization (WHO) and 1994 that Asperger's Syndrome was added to the *American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (Attwood 36). British psychologist Tony Attwood, who is recognized worldwide as a leading authority on Asperger's, published *The Complete Guide to Asperger's Syndrome* in 2007 (Attwood).

In 2013 the 5th Edition of the *American Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM-5)* removed the term, indicating that individuals with a diagnosis of "Asperger's disorder" should be included under the umbrella diagnostic term of autism spectrum disorder (Cole). I think this is a disservice to the Aspergian community, and based upon my readings of various proud Aspies, it is still a term used, understood, and appreciated by the community.

In their article “Better Strangers” the authors address some of the behaviors of people with Asperger’s, (the authors refer to them as “AS patients”) citing repeated mistakes in dealing with others at work (Ramsay et al. 485); cognitive rigidity and literalness (487); frequent and elaborate references to favorite movies; use of odd metaphors, as well as comments that can be concrete and literal (489). They note that many AS patients seek concise strategies and sometimes scripted dialogues to use in social situations, that they are often unaware of the rhythm of conversations – when to join in, and therefore prone to interrupt (492).

Many of these same traits are noted in the article “Treating clients with Asperger’s syndrome and autism” (Woods et al.). The authors note that individuals with AS are characterized by having social difficulties and may have restricted or special interests and hobbies (Woods et al. 4). Their patterns of conversation can be instructional, patronizing, overly formal, or pedantic (3), and they may have difficulty understanding metaphors and engaging in reciprocal conversation (4). In many social situations, individuals with AS do not understand the effect their behavior has on other people (8).

As will be seen in the story between Elyse and Mel, this inability to navigate social interactions has implications not just for the person with Asperger’s but for that person’s partner. In Mel’s abrupt departure from his two and a half year relationship with Elyse, he walked away as though he were dropping off an old car to trade it in for a new one. In fact, John Elder Robison, a prominent Asperger’s advocate who was diagnosed at age 40, makes a comparison between his skill at “choosing people” and his skill at “choosing mechanical or electronic things,” finding a car, or picking a farm tractor (Robison, *Look Me in the Eye* 247). In my story, Mel, after a curt goodbye to Elyse who

he had formerly called and insisted was his soul mate, never even looked back to see if she was alright. It was as though he was returning a library book or a movie rental that he loved while he was reading or watching it, but that afterwards had no lasting meaning whatsoever. He seemed to have no idea he was virtually abandoning her. He went from reeling her in to leaving her cold. As Tantam and Girgis state in their literature review on the subject, “An impairment of non-verbal interpretation leads to a lack of empathy...” (Tantam and Girgis 44).

Two other aspects of Asperger’s that Woods, et al. touch upon are emotionality and physicality, i.e. difficulty in understanding and compartmentalizing their own emotions or in conveying them to others, and sensory and motor problems. Individuals with AS often experience both sensory overload and motor clumsiness (Woods et al. 5).

Another trait of people with Asperger’s is their strict adherence to order and routine. “They often develop extraordinary knowledge and/or ability in systematized and circumscribed domains: classification systems, for example, or schedules, or collections of facts about a single topic” (Fein 8). People who have never heard of Asperger’s syndrome and who have no idea it is a condition on the autism spectrum often describe individuals with AS by using the term “quirky” because of these idiosyncrasies, routines, fixations, and singularized attention to a particular hobby and sometimes out-of-the-ordinary personal obsession.

All of the manifestations thus described will be brought into sharp focus in the story to follow of Elyse and Mel.

Aspies and How Their Diagnosis Changed Their Lives

Many people who have Asperger's syndrome experience a deep sense of relief upon learning of their diagnosis and report that had they, their parents and their teachers known this diagnosis early on when they were children, it could have helped them with their feelings of isolation, and with pretending and trying to be "normal," at home, at school, and at work. In the same manner, it would have helped me, as a partner to someone with Asperger's, with the intense grief I experienced in dealing with the abrupt ending of a relationship.

Temple Grandin

Temple Grandin has a Ph.D. in animal science and is on the autism spectrum. In her book, *Thinking in pictures: And other reports from my life with autism*, she recounts her experiences as she reveals her own diagnosis with Asperger's Syndrome. She was an adult before a name was given to her way of feeling, thinking, and seeing the world which was visually "in pictures." Many of the behaviors she describes in her own life are comparable to the behaviors in my ex-partner. For example, she says, "I usually interrupt conversations without realizing my mistake. The problem is that I can't follow the rhythm" (Grandin 93). She talks about being direct to the point of rudeness (106), how she memorizes how other people act in certain situations and copies them and memorizes jokes that make people laugh as opposed to those that don't (31). Grandin writes about other people with Asperger's she has met since receiving her own diagnosis and brings up examples of how some would copy other people's emotions in order to act normal, but did so as "purely a mechanical process, like retrieving files from a computer" (156). She describes instances of physical clumsiness (37); difficulty with depth perception and

going downstairs (69); micro-detailed driving directions (99); channeling fixations into a career as well as a social life (105); the need to be counseled on clothing and grooming (113); how she learns social skills systematically like a school lesson (155); and difficulty lying because of complex emotions involved in deception (156). Every single one of these behaviors I can now recall were manifested in my ex-partner.

John Elder Robison

John Elder Robison was diagnosed with Asperger's at age 40. He has a son who also has Asperger's. Robison is the author of several books about Asperger's. His writing is published in various magazines, and he is a speaker and advocate for people on the autism spectrum. He was encouraged to write his first book by his younger brother, the writer and memoirist Augusten Burroughs. Robison is the founder and owner of an auto shop specializing in servicing, restoring, and selling high-end European cars (Robison, *J. E. Robison Service*). At age 15 he dropped out of high school. He went on to work in the music business where his talent for designing electronic devices led him to creating sound effects and building exploding guitars for the rock band Kiss. He then worked at Milton Bradley designing some of their early talking toys and games. In addition to his auto business, he is currently the Neurodiversity Scholar in Residence at the College of William & Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia (Robison, "My Life With Asperger's").

Although I do not know if my partner ever received a diagnosis, and therefore I do not know how he would have reacted to the information, Robison talks about the relief he felt at learning of his diagnosis with Asperger's when he was in his 40s. He reveals how Asperger's was not even recognized as a condition until the late 1980s to early 1990s (Robison, *Look Me in the Eye* 238). In 2006 when Robison wrote his book *Look*

Me in the Eye, it was still a little known condition (283). My relationship ended in 2005. Robison says that had he known that he had Asperger's Syndrome when he was growing up, it might have smoothed his way and allowed him to work around some of his own "idiosyncrasies" (297). In much the same way, had I known about Asperger's, it may have lessened the impact and feelings of grief I had when my partner abruptly left, and I may have been better prepared to respond to his abandonment.

In his book *Be Different*, Robison explains his feelings upon having just learned of his diagnosis:

When I thought back on my life, Asperger's explained so many things. School had been hard for me, and I'd done some pretty unusual stuff after dropping out. My new knowledge of Asperger's brought those memories into focus, and I saw how the differences in my brain had shaped the course of my life in countless subtle ways. Yet I also realized that the success I enjoyed as an adult was real, and it wasn't going away. In fact, as I moved forward with new knowledge and confidence, I started to see my life get better every day.

Later, with the benefit of this new knowledge, I studied my Aspergian son, now twenty-one years old, and thought about how he too used to struggle in school and in social settings. He was diagnosed when he was sixteen, twenty-four years earlier than me. I look at him today, and I see how much he's benefitted from understanding how and why his brain is different from other folks'. In many ways, he's the young man I could have been if only I had known what I had.

(Robison, *Be Different*)

Robison had a hard time remembering names unless he made up nicknames (Robison, *Look Me in the Eye* 23). He taught himself to act “normal,” to fool the average person (31). He has what he calls logical empathy and is a logical thinker (32). He did not understand tact (33). Like Temple Grandin, he thinks visually, but also musically with sound (64-65). He describes himself as clumsy and as having rigid facial expressions (4). He explains his fixations with certain hobbies and likens choosing mates to choosing cars (247). Almost every one of the characteristics he describes are characteristics that my partner also exhibited.

Liane Holliday Willey

Author and professor Liane Holliday Willey learned she had Asperger’s Syndrome when she was 35 after a lifetime of “pretending to be normal” (Willey 112) and not understanding why she reacted to the world around her and many of its stimulants differently than others who seemed to take the same situations in stride. She was diagnosed when she noticed the youngest of her twin daughters having behavioral and sensorial issues and took her for testing and then and there recognized her own struggles. Many of the same patterns of behavior and characteristics Willey attributes to herself are similar to those of my ex-partner such as sensory integration problems (78), literal mindedness, impairments with socialization, communication and imagination, blunt or inappropriate responses, memorizing and mimicking other people’s behaviors to replicate a “norm” (41-42), insistence on repetitive routines, motor clumsiness, unusual habits (13), becoming riled when sense of direction is off (48-49), cluelessness in interrupting conversations and invading personal space (13). As Willey describes her interaction with others,

It was easy for me to give my opinions on things, virtually all the time. I was by far the most blunt and outspoken of our group, even when my friends suggested I had gone too far. I never knew how far was too far. Even now, I cannot find one reliable reason for keeping my thoughts to myself. (Willey 32)

In another instance of explaining awkward moments and behavior of people with Asperger's, she reveals, "We cannot help but tell people what we think the moment we think it" (104).

Ultimately, she finds relief and closure with her diagnosis. "I had finally reached the end of my race to be normal. And that was exactly what I needed. A finish – an end to the pretending that had kept me running in circles for most of my life" (112).

Additionally, she writes that it is important to let people close to you know. And that is the crux of the argument at the center of this paper and the ensuing story.

Dagger in The Heart

A Narrative of Betrayal

Prologue

Stories about deceit, betrayal, and abandonment can be depressing and melodramatic.

After all, who wants to read about someone else's heartache – unless it can help shed light and help another person see and understand something they may be going through in their own lives. That is my hope and intention with this story. I have endeavored to tell it in a matter-of-fact way and hopefully, with a little bit of humor sprinkled in.

The story starts with Elyse and Mel, and the red dress. There were many reds over the years – there was his classic red car. He bought her a red phone, many red roses, and a red robe. She bought him a red blanket. The only reds Elyse didn't see were the red flags, because she didn't know they were there all along. She didn't know about the underlying condition they suggested. Just as she did not know at the beginning, I'll not reveal anything here, and you dear reader, will discover, along with Elyse, as her story unfolds.

The Red Blanket

The red blanket was a soft, cotton woven throw. Mel and Elyse spent many evenings snuggled under the red blanket on the sofa talking about life, kids, so many things they had in common. Sometimes they'd watch a movie. Sometimes she would rub his feet. (The first time she did this, he looked at her, pursed his lips and said, "I won't do that for you," which she thought odd, and in fact, he never did.) In the end, she kept the red blanket. She is not sure why because she gave everything else back to him which was his that he had been keeping at her house. Maybe it was her security blanket. She felt warm under it. Her kids also loved cuddling under it. After deciding she would keep it, she wound up purchasing three others and selected the most similar one to it to pack up with the rest of his things as a replacement. After all, it was originally a gift from her to him. There was also another red blanket – the one he never saw that ended up in the attic. It was to be a gift for Valentine's Day. She had it inscribed with their names and the date of their meeting. She ordered it through a catalog, and because she had it personalized, it arrived late – the day after Valentine's Day – which was also the day everything came crashing to an end.

The Red Dress

“So, what’s the Leesie story?” She could hear him asking the question like it was yesterday. It was October. They were sitting in a lovely, little Italian restaurant. A few days before, he had called on the office phone. She saw his name and number flash on the digital display and thought, why is he calling me?

They had only met a week ago, at a Yankee game of all places. She’d been asked to join a group going from the executive suite. She was just a measly middle manager having worked her way up from administrative assistant. Her current position put her in touch more and more with the C-suite. The plan was for everyone to meet up in a designated parking lot, then ride together in Jeff’s van. Jeff was the Chief Financial Officer of the company. She drove up and got out of her car. She saw him leaning against one of the other vehicles. He sauntered over, and Jeff made the introductions. “Mel, meet Elyse. Elyse, this is Mel.”

There were five people. Elyse sat in the back with Mark, the firm’s General Counsel. Mel, who was Controller and Chief Compliance Officer, sat alone in the middle. Jeff, the CFO (and by the way Mel’s boss) drove, and Miranda, a co-worker from Marketing, sat up front with him.

Upon arriving at the stadium, Elyse was invited to join the group in the member’s lounge for dinner. While waiting for a table, everyone ordered drinks, and Mel picked up the bar tab. Dinner turned out to be quite a grand buffet. She had been going through a difficult time post-divorce and had lost weight, weighing just over 100 lbs., as a result of never being hungry anymore. She picked frugally from a few of the selections, still barely touching anything on her plate. She recalled Mel asking someone in the group, “Why

isn't she eating?" When Jeff went to pay the bill for dinner, she offered to contribute her share. Jeff said in a teasing manner, "Absolutely, your treat," but of course, he wouldn't hear of it and didn't accept her offer. She thanked him.

She and Mel weren't seated in the same section. Her ticket was next to Miranda's quite a few rows up in the stadium. Mel's seat was right behind the dugout with Mark and Jeff. It was only after the game that they had a chance to talk. They were walking back to the car. There was a bridge-like connection from the stadium to the parking lot. (Months later, "bridges" would come up as theme in their relationship.) Though it was late, the lights lit up the walkway. It was still warm outside. Elyse was bare-armed wearing a sleeveless top. Mel came up beside her.

"Do you play tennis?" he asked.

"I haven't played in quite a while," she replied. "I played a little when I was growing up. Why?"

He said, "I noticed your arms are toned, so I thought you played tennis." It was fall then. The following summer, he would end up taking her to the U.S. Open in Flushing Meadows, Queens. But that is getting ahead of the story.

On this day, on the ride back in the van, Mark and Elyse were talking quietly about something personal in nature, as Mark was aware of some of the struggles she had been going through around her divorce. Mel kept turning around and breaking into the conversation. He didn't seem to recognize or have any awareness that he was interrupting.

The following day, Elyse realized that while she had thanked Jeff for dinner, she never thanked Mel for the drinks. She had never been to Mel's office and didn't even

know where it was. So she looked him up in the office directory and paid a visit to his floor, one above hers. She didn't need to walk far. He was standing outside of someone's office leaning against the doorway.

He was wearing a button-down shirt, dark blue Dockers slacks, and a leather belt. She was wearing beige corduroy pants, a lightweight ivory corded shirt, and a tie. Not any tie, but her special pearl tie. She didn't wear it frequently, and maybe that's why she remembered what she was wearing on this particular day.

She walked over to him and said, "Thanks for the drinks yesterday," and that was that she figured... over and done. She had done her courtesies, said her thank you, and that was it. At the time, she had no thought or expectation that their lives were about to intersect.

So when her office phone rang and his name flashed on the digital display a few days later, she thought, "Why is he calling me?" It turned out he was calling to ask her to lunch. She was puzzled, and thoughts ran through her mind like, "Why is he asking me to lunch? Isn't he married? Is it to talk about something pertaining to work?" She did a quick mental determination. Why not? It would be a casual, business lunch; it wouldn't hurt for her to get to know some other people close to the executive suite. So she said OK.

He took her to a lovely little place with red and white checkered tablecloths called Fantastico's. She had just gotten contact lenses and was wearing them for the first time that day. She didn't know that she wouldn't be able to read the menu – in fact, she couldn't see anything up close. Mel lent her his reading glasses – it turned out he wore contacts too.

After they ordered, he asked, “So, what’s the Leesie story?” She was a little taken aback. Not only had he picked a nickname for her out of thin air on their first get-together, but his question was so direct and unexpected, she didn’t know what he meant. She quickly replied with something about her position at the company. He said, “No, I’m not talking about work. I’m asking about you, what’s your story, your personal story? Are you dating anyone?”

“Aren’t you married?” she asked.

“No,” he said. “My divorce was final last month.”

Her feelings were mixed. She had not dated anyone since her own divorce, which was a little over two years before, and in fact, had not met anyone who showed the slightest interest in asking her out. So, there she was, sitting across from a single, unattached man showing an obvious and active interest in her – although she didn’t know why. But what she did know is that she felt an elevated sense of self-worth, something she hadn’t felt for a long time. Someone, with an important position in the company no less, was interested in getting to know her. The problem, however, was she wasn’t attracted to him, not even in the slightest. In fact, something seemed a little off, and she didn’t know what it was. She found herself studying him, even scrutinizing him – what he was wearing (it seemed his jacket looked somewhat the worse for wear); his facial features (interesting but not her definition of handsome); his body type (average height and weight, but not her type at all, whatever that was she thought – he was more jock than tall, dark, and handsome); ordinary hands, short fingernails (for some reason she always admired well-groomed hands); and a bit clumsy in his movements. She couldn’t recall ever analyzing someone she met for the first time in this kind of detail before, but

there was something about him that she couldn't put her finger on that made these things jump out at her. And so, because she was not romantically drawn to him and was therefore not trying to impress him in any flirtatious way, she wasn't on her guard at all – she ended up speaking what was on her mind. Call it bold or spontaneous, but whatever it was, he obviously thought she was a lot of fun.

The week before their lunch date, she was in Washington for her brother's wedding. That was what led to her mentioning the red dress. You see, Elyse was in the wedding party, and her sister-in-law told her she could wear whatever she wanted. So Elyse, her seventy-four-year old mother, and her twelve-year old daughter had gone out shopping for a gown for her to wear for the wedding. Elyse's mother and daughter spotted the red dress and pulled it out of the rack – sparkling floor-length, sheath-style, slit up one side, and completely backless. When she tried it on, she protested, "I can't wear this. No one will be looking at the bride!"

"This is the dress for you, mom," her daughter pronounced with authority. And so it was.

So, after telling Mel the story about the dress, and her brother's wedding, Mel looked at her and said, "Leesie, I've been invited to a fundraising gala later this month. Will you come with me? Sounds like you have the dress already." She laughed and said yes.

They finished lunch at Fantastico's, and Mel suggested they stop for coffee at Starbucks. This was to be the first of many coffees at Starbucks. Little did she know it would turn out that their last meeting and conversation would also be at the same Starbucks.

And so the red dress would come out of her closet for a second time. First the wedding, now the gala.

During the week, she started getting nervous about having accepted. She confided in Mark that Mel had asked her to the gala. Mark would be there too. In fact, there would be a huge company presence at this event.

She said to Mark, “What am I going to talk about with him. I hardly know him. He’s not even my type. Do you think he’s going to pick me up, or am I supposed to meet him somewhere? I haven’t dated anyone in such a long time. What do people do?”

Mark smiled and gently said, “Just have a good time.”

The night of the gala, it was raining – no not raining; it was torrentially pouring. She was dressed when the phone rang. Mel was calling from his cell phone. He was lost. He said he took a wrong turn. He sounded annoyed. It was dark, and she could tell he did not like being lost or being late. She re-directed him and told him when he got to her street to call and she would open the garage door, one – to help him identify her house – there wouldn’t be too many, if any, houses with their garage doors open in the downpour, and two – so he could pull his car right into the garage so he wouldn’t get wet getting out and neither of them would get wet getting in when they left. Her garage was two cars deep, so she just pulled her car all the way to the back.

She really wasn’t keen on having him enter her house for their first date via the garage and through the kitchen. But it seemed the right thing to do considering the weather outside. And that was her – always thinking of how to make things work.

He arrived. She opened the door, and he stepped inside. She had made sure not to put on the black evening jacket (also bought for her brother’s wedding to go over the

backless red dress) until he came through the door and they were ready to go, for maximum effect.

No reaction. No compliment on the red dress. No appreciative look in his eyes. No sense of flattery or recognition that here was a woman he hardly knew standing before him in a dress that drew stares just weeks before at her brother's wedding.

This was part of a string of many unheeded clues that Mel was on the spectrum with a condition known as Asperger's syndrome. She couldn't have known then, but it would portend that their relationship was doomed from the start. However, at the time all she thought was, well, it must be a heck of a storm out there tonight. Or he really has a thing about getting lost.

Braking Late

As Mel backed out of the garage, it was still coming down in buckets. Reaching the bottom of the driveway, still in reverse he inched slowly into the street. Then... a slight bump – he had tapped, really backed into, a car parked in front of the house across the street. He didn't say anything. Elyse wondered if she should say anything. Was he hoping she didn't notice? She thought to herself, "I hardly know him – should I say, Mel, you hit the car across the street. Didn't you feel it?" Or was he pretending that he didn't hit it. Should she pretend that she didn't know he hit it? She decided that, well, it was a very light tap. He probably didn't make a dent.

It was not mentioned until months later, when Mel said, "You know Leesie, the first time we went out, I was so nervous I bumped the car across the street backing out of your driveway. That's never happened to me before. I was so embarrassed I didn't know what to say."

"I know you hit it, Mel," she said, "I didn't know what to say either."

"You did?" he paused. "I want you to know I checked the car across your street a few days later, and I didn't cause any damage."

The gala was being held at the Liberty Science Center in Jersey City. This was right around the time that it was about to close its doors for major renovations. They got to the New Jersey Turnpike. During the ride, she noticed Mel's driving and that he left less space between his car and the car in front of him than she would have, especially considering the weather. She didn't feel worried or afraid. In fact, she had been feeling so depressed for such a long time she was used to having an almost devil-may-care feeling about her well-being. Still, something prompted her to speak up.

“You brake late.”

“What?” he said.

“You get really close to the car in front of you before you brake. You brake later than I would.” In fact, she had found herself pressing a phantom brake with her own foot on the passenger side as an automatic reflex.

“No, I don’t. I leave plenty of space, and there’s more than enough time,” he insisted.

She didn’t realize at the time that Mel’s response would be a portent to his reaction to most criticism involving his role in taking responsibility for his actions and the outcome of events in the future. He did not like to be told he was wrong. A standard response of his was, “Well, that doesn’t have anything to do with me.”

Upon arriving at the Liberty Science Center, safe under the awning at the entrance, the valet took the car and they hurried up the steps. Once inside, everyone they passed in the lobby and as they ascended the escalator said hello to Mel, and he to them, as though it had been a while since they’d seen him. In fact, these were people he saw almost every day.

“What do you want to drink?” Mel asked.

“I’ll have a glass of wine,” Elyse replied. They mingled while Mel introduced her to his colleagues.

They found their table and Elyse put her purse on her chair. Music was playing. Mark and his wife were seated at another table, along with Mel’s boss, Jeff, who was the honoree. They walked over to say hello. After exchanging some pleasantries, Mel noticed that Mark’s wife spoke with an accent, and he asked where she was from. When Mark

answered that his wife was of Polish descent, Mel blurted out that he knew only one phrase in Polish which he had learned somewhere, and he proceeded to say this phrase. He then translated that it meant something along the lines of “I want to sleep with you.” He must have repeated this several times over the course of the evening, every time he was near her. It was more than a little bizarre and most embarrassing.

They got up from their table to dance. Elyse mentioned to Mel that she loved dancing. Mel responded that he did too. The band was playing an Enrique Inglesias song that goes, “You can run, You can hide, But You Can’t Escape My Love.” As soon as they hit the dance floor, Elyse could see that not only was Mel clumsy in his movements, but he did not appear to realize just how awkward he was. The music was playing, his body was somehow moving, but not to the music. Thankfully, a slower song, Phil Collins “Another Day in Paradise” came up next. He circled her waist with one arm and her shoulder with the other and they did a slow shuffle holding each other. She had been trying to make conversation, remembering Mark’s advice – just go, have a good time, talk to him. So, she asked Mel about his family. He told her his sister had recently died, perhaps not even a year ago.

“Oh, I’m sorry. What happened?” Because they were slow dancing, she was close to his ear.

“She choked to death. She was eating alone at home, and there was no one to call for help or do anything.”

Silence. He continued, “My sister had a weight problem.” Silence again. “She had been helping me out after my divorce.”

There was no sign of sadness, or of missing her, in his voice. It was all said in a matter-of-fact way. Elyse thought, at the time, that he was putting up a “masculine” front. However, over the whole time that she knew him, which turned out to be for a little over two years from the date of the gala, whenever the subject of his sister came up in conversation, he never expressed any further emotion about her than he did that day.

At the end of the evening, he drove Elyse home. She invited him in and they sat on her couch for a little while talking. It was late by then. She walked him to the front door. He turned to her and asked if he could kiss her. For the first time since meeting him, all his awkwardness faded away, and she felt her heart melt just a little. She thought that was so sweet – asking if he could kiss her. Plus, after more than two years post-divorce she thought, now or never. She said yes. He took her head in his hands, pressed her lips to his, and firmly moved her head from side to side as she experienced the most meaningful, purposeful, and wonderful kiss she had ever received in her life.

At that moment, her whole perception of him changed, and she knew she would go out with him again.

The One That Got Away

Mel asked Elyse for what he termed an “exclusive” relationship with her, meaning they would not see anyone else, just weeks into their dating, long before she felt ready or anything near like what he felt for her. Then, in under two months, he wanted to do things together that included both sets of their children. When Elyse wondered whether this was a good idea, Mel saw no problem with it saying they had a “committed” relationship.

Mel often referred to an earlier relationship in his life as “the one that got away.” As his relationship with Elyse grew, he started referencing this earlier relationship as “the one that paved the way,” inferring that he learned from his past in letting that first one slip away, and he wasn’t going to make the same mistake again.

That was just about all he ever said about the woman from his past, except to mention a photograph he had of the two of them staring into each other’s eyes. One day shortly after Elyse and Mel had met, they were sitting in his living room, when he made it a point to pull out that photograph to show it to her. Elyse asked him what happened to the one that got away. He said he didn’t know. He never saw her again.

The only other thing he said about her was that when he married someone else, his friends, family, and colleagues asked him, “Do you know what you are doing?” Apparently, the relationship he had with this earlier woman was such that it seemed to others that it was true-blue, and those who knew him were stunned when he met, turned around and married someone else. This is exactly what ended up happening at the end of our story with Elyse.

Words to Live By

Although Mel confided in Elyse about his sister's death without seeming to express any sadness, there was one time that Mel showed emotion regarding a family member. One day, when they were sitting at Elyse's dining room table, he was talking about having just heard from his mother. It was her 92nd birthday. All of a sudden, he choked up and shed a tear right then and there and reflected that someday, sooner than later, she would be gone. It seemed like he was feeling how alone or adrift he would be without her who, as it appeared, was his guide in life. He often alluded to what he regarded as life lessons she passed on to him. However, these life lessons, the words of advice he recalled and shared with Elyse, were platitudinal phrases such as, "A stitch in time saves nine." Or "Don't cry over spilled milk." Or "The early bird catches the worm." Things along those lines. His mother provided him a script to memorize and to live by when he lost his way. In the days before Asperger's was a diagnosis, did she sense this about her son? Elyse often wondered how he, who ran a financial department overseeing hundreds of employees, hung on to these teachings as though they were great pieces of wisdom. But for him, they were. They offered him guideposts on how to behave and even feel and react to certain situations. He thought back to them often. He tried to live by those clichéd phrases.

Common Planet

Elyse and Mel were sitting in their favorite place to go for lunch, Penang, a little Malaysian restaurant, cash only. They had ordered their usual mango chicken. It was delish – two halves of a mango scooped out and refilled with chunks of mango, chicken, and veggies.

Eating out was something they did often – dining at favorite spots, trying out new ones both in the city and locally. In New York some of the standouts were Amarone in Hell’s Kitchen, The China Grill in midtown Manhattan, La Metairie in the West Village, FireBird, the renowned Russian restaurant famous for its beauty and opulence located on restaurant row in the theater district. Unfortunately, all except Amarone are no longer in business. Locally, in and around north and central New Jersey, their go-to’s were “their” Italian restaurant Luigi’s in East Hanover, Girasole in Bound Brook, Brix and The Beacon Hill Tavern, both in Summit and both since closed, Penang in East Hanover, and the chain bakery-café Panera. On each occasion, they would look over the menu, mix and match what they wanted to share, and almost without exception, Mel would say, “Good pick, Leesie.” Her standard comment when something tasted good was, “Yum,” said in a sing-song two-note cadence, first note high, second note low.

On this particular day over lunch, Mel had just gotten his PSA test results from the doctor, which is a test for prostate cancer. The results were inconclusive, and Mel had to go back for further tests.

“Damn,” he said. “I finally meet someone who I can really connect with and now,” he trailed off. Possible adverse side effects of treatment were impaired sexual function.

Elyse was prepared to see him through this. They not only connected physically, but on many other levels, as he often pointed out. He would say that what makes a lasting relationship is one in which the conversation never runs out. That was his litmus test. And that, so it seemed, applied to them all the way up to the last days of the last weeks to the last second of the last minute of the end.

These connection points were extensive. While Elyse didn't feel they were exactly soul mates, as Mel had started referring to how he felt about her, she eventually was drawn in to feeling that when she was with him, she was home. And when she wasn't with him, she felt blessed in the knowledge that someone cared for her, that she made a difference to another person on the planet. In fact, there were countless, uncanny coincidences that seemed to point to the rightness of the two of them being together.

Her birthday was the same month and day as his daughter's birthday. His birthday was six days before hers – making them both Libras – and the same date as her younger brother's wedding anniversary (the wedding to which she wore the red dress)! His daughter and her son were exactly the same age (three months apart) and in the same grade. His son was a couple of years older than her daughter. They talked a lot about issues that came along on the road to being a good parent. They shared what was going on in their children's lives and how to best handle each situation and relate to the individuality in each of their children. He sought her advice often, calling her "wise," which made her feel valued and esteemed. The only other person he called "wise" was his mother when referencing what he regarded as her sage teachings (which to Elyse sounded like simple clichés such as "a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush," etc.)

But to him they represented hooks or guideposts on which he could hang his hat, fit in socially, and get through each day.

More commonalities and coincidences – Elyse’s parents spent the winter in Florida. Mel’s parents lived year-round in Florida, and it turned out they lived less than five miles from each other!

Workwise, not only did they end up working for the same company, but her first job at the company was open because the woman who had the position before her didn’t work out and was let go. This woman just happened to be Mel’s neighbor, and she had gotten her initial interview for the job through Mel!

Here’s another one – Mel exercised in his basement where he had a treadmill and various other workout equipment. Mel had been extolling for quite some time about this great CD he listened to while he did his morning workout. It was called “Common Planet.”¹ Elyse was not familiar with it. He said he had discovered it while listening to the jazz station on the radio, and though not widely available, he managed to get a copy. One day when Elyse was over his house, they went down to the basement. He showed her the Common Planet CD cover and took the CD out to play a few tracks for her. She had the CD case in her hand and was looking at the name of the artist, Brian Keane. She knew a Brian Keane in college. In fact, she knew him pretty well at the time. Brian and his best friend Walton used to play guitar and sing as a duo around campus. Elyse’s roommate dated Brian, Elyse dated Walton, and they made up a foursome going on gigs together and just generally hanging out and having a good time. There was a picture of this Brian, with a beard, on the CD cover. She had not seen Brian in almost thirty years and thought it was a long shot that it could be him, but it sure looked like the Brian from her college

¹ (Keane)

days. She looked him up on the web, found an email address for his production company and contacted him. Sure enough, it was him. They got back in touch and even met up one day in the city with the some of the old gang. Long after the end of her relationship with Mel, Brian and Elyse continued to send each other annual updates around the New Year.

PS: Mel re-took the PSA test, and it was negative. He didn't have prostate cancer.

Quirks

Order and Routine

Mel was very methodical, or one could say obsessive-compulsive about certain things. He was rigorous to a fault about brushing his teeth always with an electric toothbrush, rinsing his mouth, and picking his teeth with dental picks after eating. He always carried these around in his pocket and always brought them out and used them – even in public while sitting at a table at a restaurant. It was an absolute must to do the dishes, always and immediately after eating. His routine for getting dressed was to always put his clothes on in the same order. He would put his pants on and zip them up. Then he'd put his shirt on, unzip the pants to loosen and lower them so he could tuck the shirt in, then zip the pants up again.

Elyse had noticed his clumsiness with movement before, but she also noticed how he came down steps. Rather than the toe of his shoe pointing perpendicular to the step, he always walked down on a diagonal. She didn't know if he did this to make sure his whole foot made contact with the step, which she could understand if it was a narrow step, or if it was because he thought he would lose his balance, but he always did this regardless of how steep the incline or how wide or narrow the steps.

Mel had many interests. Although he was very sensitive to loud noises, particularly to high frequency sound, he loved music, especially guitar music. And although he was not coordinated when it came to dancing, he played golf. He loved to watch ice hockey and had season tickets to the New Jersey Devils. He was into classic cars, of which he had two. He was exceptionally handy in the house and outside in the yard. But one of his more unusual pastimes was scrapbooking a collection of newspaper

stories about sports. He didn't personally know anyone on the teams in these stories. He had files of articles he would cut out of the newspaper and put in a photo album the way someone would display favorite family pictures. At one point during their time together, he had gotten so backed up with these articles, that for several weeks in a row, his dining room table was covered in them while he took time after work and on weekends to file them in the album, saying once these were done, that was it – he wasn't going to collect them anymore.

The Schedule

His sense of routine and order extended to dating. Mel and Elyse had date nights – what he called “the schedule.” These were structured around the nights when Elyse didn't have her kids during the week as well as every other Saturday. And like the proverbial mailman, neither rain nor snow nor sleet nor hail, during their first year of dating, would keep him away. Mel would show up, to Elyse's sheer surprise, at her door even in a snowstorm when the roads were barely passable. This made her feel special and wanted in a way that she had never felt before.

Meet the Parents

Mel wanted to meet Elyse's parents soon after they started dating. Elyse thought it was too soon since they had only been seeing each other for a few weeks, but Mel insisted he had to meet the parents. So, they all went out to dinner, then back to Elyse's parents for a quick tour of the house. The evening turned out better than she had expected.

The following day, her mom called. "Elyse, I have to tell you, Mel is head over heels for you. He took me aside and went on and on about how overwhelmed he is with you. He was talking like a starstruck fan smitten with the woman of his dreams. I was a little taken aback at his enthusiasm since I barely know him! But if he meant all he said, I am so happy for you."

"Thanks, mom. Yes, he really does seem to like me!"

A few weeks later, they all had dinner together again. This time they ordered Chinese takeout over the phone. Elyse's dad started for the door to go and pick up the food. Mel offered to go with him. Upon their return, Mel rushed Elyse aside as though he were bursting with a secret.

"Leesie, you're not going to believe what your dad said. We were talking about allergies and how mine always crop up in the spring, and your dad said whenever he is bothered by any nasal discomfort he takes Flonase. I told him I already use it, but then he recommended I use it before I feel any symptoms – for the prophylactic effect. I nearly lost it, but I held it in. I couldn't believe he said that – the prophylactic effect! Can you believe it, your dad talking to me and I'm trying to keep a straight face because I'm going out with his daughter, and he's using the term, prophylactic!"

As he related this episode, Mel could not stop laughing, going on and on about Elyse's dad using the word prophylactic so matter-of-factly in a conversation with him. It was bizarre. It was as though the only context in which Mel could conceive (and that word would have probably set him off too) of using the word prophylactic was in a sexual one meaning a contraceptive, preventing conception or impregnation, rather than the broader definition it holds in meaning preventing illness or disease. Looking back, it was a very narrow and immature interpretation and showed a complete lack of nuance which on many occasions resulted in awkward interactions and reactions that were closer to schoolboy humor.

Ballet Blunder

Elyse was working on an initiative to get her and Mel's company interested in funding an educational program based on dance. Elyse had been invited by the founder of the dance institute, who also happened to be a very famous, former principal dancer with the New York City Ballet, to attend with a guest, a dance performance by students participating in the program. She asked Mel to go with her. He said he would love to go. Elyse had always loved the ballet, and this initiative was close to her heart. The institute was for children in the public schools, whether they intended to pursue dance as a profession or not. It was a program to get kids moving and inspired.

After the performance, this famous dancer, now dance educator, invited her to say hello backstage. She introduced him to Mel, and the three of them started chatting about the show and the education program. The dancer was talking about his love for dance throughout his career, going back to when he was a child, and how he wanted to light the same kind of spark in children no matter where they lived or what economic background they came from, when all of a sudden Mel interjected something like, "Oh, I've never liked ballet."

Silence. The expression on the dancer's face froze. Elyse wanted to sink through the floor. This was in front of one of the premier ballet dancers in the world, one of the most acclaimed dancers of our time, and someone to whom Elyse was trying to provide funding from her and Mel's company for his education program. She couldn't understand how Mel could say something so out of place like that. She didn't know he didn't care for the ballet. When she asked him to come, he was delighted. And even if he didn't like

ballet, how could he say such a thing to our host, to someone whose life is the ballet, and to blurt it out right then and there after they had watched the children perform!

The dancer, after a moment of being obviously taken aback, quickly and graciously pivoted, smiled, and moved the conversation along before Elyse humbly thanked him for the two of them and they said their goodbyes.

The Greatest Movie Ever Made

Mel insisted that Elyse watch what he called the greatest movie ever made with him – the entire trilogy of *The Lord of the Rings*. She was happy to and she ended up loving it as well. So at least on three separate occasions, they snuggled up together and watched this epic fantasy. This in and of itself is not so unusual, as many people love this story – the books and the movies – and many have re-read and re-watched them over and over again. What was revealing was, who knew at the time that the internal struggles faced by Gollum and his two-fold personas would take on a personal meaning for Elyse as the Mel she knew became the Mel she did not know who was completely unrecognizable to her.²

² J.R.R. Tolkien, the author of *Lord of the Rings*, was both a scholar of language and religion and may have taken the name Gollum from the character of Golem in Jewish and Christian folklore. A golem can be either villain or victim and in *Lord of the Rings*, Gollum is the monstrous side of the character Smeagol, born a simple hobbit. (Ramella)

In her manuscript on role-playing and the autism spectrum, author Elizabeth Fein writes of a hero named Aedril, his dark side Golem, and how Aspies relate to these characters.

The co-existence of strength and vulnerability encapsulated in these narratives captured essential features of the experience of living with Asperger’s Syndrome—a condition that itself brought valued strengths (the ability to hyperfocus on a topic of interest, strengths in systematic thinking, an occasionally exquisite sensitivity to sensory input) as well as disabilities. Just as Aedril needed to be reconciled with the Golem, these stories provided an opportunity to bring together these different elements of the autism spectrum experience and provided a meaning-making system within which they could co-exist. (Fein 11)

Stay Close

Mel was big on nicknames. He had nicknames for each of his kids, for Elyse, for Elyse's kids, for other family members and for most of his colleagues at work. He also had all of these expressions – “Stay close.” “Don't backpedal away from me.” “Don't start what you cannot finish.” “Adding to the chemical mix” was one he used upon meeting Elyse's kids. “A change in the dynamics of our relationship” when they had been going out a few months. “What is happening to us, Leesie?” “Making deposits into my account” to describe (remember he's a finance guy) how everything Elyse did filled his heart with more attachment and love. “I can't get enough of you, Leesie” when he had to go home after a date or after spending the night. He told her he had “crossed the bridge to a new life” using the phrase metaphorically and also referring back to the day they met at the Yankee game walking from the stadium back to the car over the parking lot bridge.

Somewhere into the second year of their relationship, after Mel had fully won Elyse's heart, she occasionally would sense him pulling away from her, and she developed an expression of her own when feeling a little insecure, “Is the bloom off the rose?” But at the time, she never tuned into these hints and clues because he would still always say to her, “Stay close. Don't backpedal away from me.” In truth, as soon as she met him at his level of affection – which took some time but little by little with all of his quirky attentiveness, she did – he was the one backpedaling away.

Holding Hands

Elyse and Mel snuggled all the time. They held hands all the time. Elyse seemed to have a second sense, in the millisecond when Mel started to reach his hand out to hers, she was already on the way to clasp it. They held hands at the movies, walking in the street, at concerts (when sometimes his hand was on her knee). On long drives, even going down to Cape May, he held her hand and drove with one hand on the wheel – it amazed her – his need to be connected to her. And something in her met this need with a recognition of something similar, deep within herself. They would often look around and comment when they were out in public on how they were the only couple holding hands.

I Know You're Out There Somewhere

Music played a big part in their relationship. On their third date, Mel asked Elyse out to a Hall and Oates concert, the first of many groups they would see over the next couple of years. She hadn't attended too many concerts outside of a few in college. This too was something special to her. Even though she wasn't a big Hall and Oates fan, she still knew all the songs. On this occasion, they sat up high in the balcony. She felt so at home and warm that she spontaneously reached over to Mel and put her arm around him along the back of the seat. The look on his face was something akin to gratitude. He later told her how much this gesture meant to him.

The best concert they went to was to see The Moody Blues. Their signature song was the one entitled, "I Know You're Out There Somewhere."³ Mel believed, and often told her, that he had found "the one" in Elyse.

I know I'll find you somehow
 Somehow, somehow
 I know I'll find you somehow
 And somehow I'll return again to you
 The secret of your beauty
 And the mystery of your soul
 I've been searching for in everyone I meet
 And the times I've been mistaken
 It's impossible to say
 And the grass is growing
 Underneath our feet.

Justin Hayward, 1988

³ (Hayward)

Radio City Christmas Spectacular

There was another instance that involved music, and this one included both sets of kids. It occurred around the December holidays. Mel wanted to take his kids and Elyse and her kids to see the Radio City Christmas Spectacular featuring the Rockettes. It is an annual event in New York City running about 90 minutes with singing, dancing, comedy sketches, and a Nativity scene featuring camels, sheep, and donkeys utilizing well over a hundred performers. The theater is huge with over 6,000 seats. There are usually shows at 11:00am, 2:00pm, and 5:00pm. Mel bought tickets for the 2:00pm show. They took the train into the city, then walked from Penn Station which is at 34th Street and 7th Avenue to Radio City Music Hall at 6th Avenue and 50th Street stopping along the way for pizza at a small pizza joint. They made it in time for the show. Everyone enjoyed it. At the very end right after the finale, Mel stood up as the applause was starting and directed Elyse and the kids to exit the row and follow him. They squeezed themselves out, and Mel started dashing for the lobby towards the theater exit doors. Once out in the street, Mel raced his way down 6th Avenue dodging and weaving through the throngs of people. At that hour, Broadway matinees were just ending, and theatergoers were crowding the streets making their way to restaurants to have dinner before the evening curtain times. Manhattan is packed this time of year around the holidays. Mel did not once look back to see if Elyse and the kids were keeping up with him, and it was all Elyse could do to make sure all four children stuck together with her so they didn't get lost in the crowd. Fortunately, Elyse knew the city, but still, it was challenging. While Elyse herself was also not one for big crowds, she could not understand what seemed to be Mel's single-focused dash to make it back to Penn Station while paying no heed to her, nor his or her

kids. In hindsight, the anxiety and sensory overload he may have felt at the time made the circumstances of the situation fall into place.

The Best Gift Ever

Mel and Elyse had been together about a year and a half when she started to feel that the closer he drew her to him, after he had propelled their relationship forward at a speed faster than she had been ready to accept, and the more she felt him becoming a part of her life, the further away he was now moving. He had told her over and over again how special she was, how she was his soul mate. When he was falling for her during those first few months, he had often looked at her and said, “What is happening to us, Leesie?”

The care and concern he showed towards her, her kids, her parents, her work, her interests in art, theatre, and music, and how he seemed to always be there to fix things that broke around her house or talk through life’s issues made her feel blessed. She would feel this way when they were together, and it would extend to when they were apart. And when she felt his love ebb and move to a different place, she still felt assured that though it had changed, change is a constant in life. Things never stay the same. Relationships are always in flux, and she still felt blessed to have him in her life.

It was around this time too that he started talking about a gift he was going to give her at Christmas. He called it “the best gift ever.” He must have mentioned it a dozen times between early summer and into November. She had no idea what it might be. All he would tell her about it was that it was “a one of a kind.” Over the course of their relationship he had given her many gifts – a diamond bracelet, various other jewelry, perfume, lingerie, flowers, chocolates, a red house phone, a red bathrobe, an exercise stepper, stereo equipment, car accessories, a comforter and bedding set, a manicure gift card, kitchen items which he also installed, and ultimately a refrigerator!

When Christmas rolled around, he presented the gift. “Leesie, here it is... your Christmas gift... the best gift ever.” It was wrapped in white tissue paper, about the size of a book. The paper made soft, crinkly sounds as she opened each thin smooth layer. Inside was a brown leather journal wrapped with a brown leather tong. She opened it. The first page, handwritten as all the pages were, said, “To “E.” The next page was a preface explaining that this journal documented, if not all, most of the big events and turning points they experienced on their journey together since they met. Subsequent pages included tickets from sports outings, movies, concerts, restaurant receipts and address cards, lyrics from some of “their” songs. On pages opposite some of these items were some of the sayings and terms of endearment he often said to her over the course of their time together... “still holding hands,” “to have and to hold,” “the conversation never runs out,” “So, what’s the Leesie story?” “new chemicals enter the mix” (referring to the kids), “the path I choose,” “exclusivity,” “So, what am I going to do with you, Leesie?” He ended the journal by saying the remainder of the story was theirs to write, and signed it “Love, *always*, Mel.”

He gave this to her on Christmas. By Valentine’s Day, seven weeks later, he abandoned her with no explanation.

The Rhythm of the Sea

Going back in time, Elyse could actually pinpoint when she first felt the distance between them. It was about six months after they met and around the time when Mel first professed what he communicated as his great love for her. He often wondered aloud about how he never believed in soul mates until he met her.

One time, he said, “I wonder what it would have been like if I had children with you.” Elyse was sitting at her piano. It was the first time, and one of the only times, she had played for him. He seemed smitten with the fact that she could play, and he just blurted out of the blue the comment about children.

Mel had been talking for months, soon after they met, about wanting to go away on a long weekend with Elyse to Cape May. Although she thought it was too soon, come spring, they started making plans. They searched online for bed and breakfasts, googling different websites, checking out the prices and room décor. Most of them were all flowery and full of knickknacks. She would say, “Oh no yuck, we can’t stay there. It looks like someone’s grandma’s house.” This would make him laugh to no end.

They ended up going with Elyse’s find - a mission-style B & B called The Rhythm of the Sea. The exterior resembled a Swiss chalet, and the interior was simple, uncluttered elegance with handcrafted wood, wicker furnishings, and glass lanterns. All of the rooms had beach and ocean views. There was an antique billiard table in the bright and open living room.

They drove down in Mel’s car. It was a little under a three-hour drive, and they held hands almost the whole ride down. This was something Elyse got used to, even

cherished, and never took for granted. In fact, Mel used to say how he loved holding hands... with the right person!

They were enchanted from the moment they arrived. After dropping off their bags, Mel shot a few balls on the pool table, then they walked out to stroll around. Cape May has an outdoor walking mall with shop after shop of clothes, jewelry, chocolates, gourmet foods, art galleries, and crafts. They walked in and out of some of them, all the while holding hands. One shop they lingered at was a jewelry store selling estate jewelry. Elyse loved looking at all the gemstone jewelry in the window, and Mel suggested they go inside. She did not own a lot of fine jewelry. Most of hers was costume. But she had recently seen some pieces of tanzanite and been drawn to the color which varies from blue to violet to purple.

The inside of the shop was tiny with glass jewelry display cases on either side of a narrow space from the door at the entryway to the other end of the shop not more than a few dozen feet deep. With her recent interest in tanzanite in mind, she spotted a ring in the case, three small stones in a row with a light purple hue, and happened to remark, "I wonder if that is tanzanite."

The shopkeeper, ever attentive, as they were the only customers in the small store, said, "Why yes, it is. Would you like to see it?"

Elyse started to reply, "No, that's okay, just looking," when Mel responded, "Yes, please."

The shopkeeper, an older woman with graying hair and a bit of a twinkle in her eyes, brought the ring out and placed it on the counter.

“Try it on,” Mel said. Elyse slipped the ring on her finger. It fit perfectly.

“The stones are tanzanite, and it is set in 10K white gold,” the shopkeeper explained. Elyse knew that 10K was not as expensive as 14 karat or 18K, but still she felt she shouldn’t have pointed the ring out in the first place. It was not her intention to have Mel buy it for her.

Elyse took the ring off her finger and handed it back to the shopkeeper. “It’s nice. Thank you very much, but we’re not interested.” Mel looked at her but didn’t say anything, and they left the shop. They continued their walk and a bit later went back to the inn, picked up some beach blankets, and then sauntered over to the beach where they found a spot and watched the sun go down. From their vantage point, they could see the ocean and the horizon on one side, and the shoreline row of properties – inns, hotels, private homes – on the other. They chatted about how beautiful, fun, and relaxing it was, and that they should do this every year.

For dinner later that evening, Mel had made reservations at a romantic spot called 410 Bank Street, recommended to him by some of his colleagues from the office, who he had told about his coming down to Cape May with Elyse. In doing so, he was making their coupledom official. The restaurant was a transformed carriage house from the 1840s. A winding path led to the entry with a canopied garden and a semi-enclosed veranda. The cuisine had a French-New Orleans flair. They each ordered an entrée, and Mel suggested they share a shellfish appetizer with clams and oysters. Elyse had to confess to him that she was not really partial to clams and oysters because she found them to be too chewy for her taste.

“Just give them another try,” he said.

When the dish arrived, the waiter presented it with a flourish, placed it on the table, and said, “Bon appétit!” Mel looked at the plate and pointed to one of the smaller clams on the platter which was partially closed.

“Why don’t you try that one?” he said.

“Well, okay,” she said carefully plucking it up from the dish and moving it over to her small plate. She lifted up the top shell, and there nestled inside was the tanzanite ring she had tried on earlier in the day!

“What!” she gasped.

“Put it on,” Mel smiled. She put it on her finger, where again, it fit as perfectly as it had when she tried it on in the store. Mel then proceeded to tell her of his scrupulous little plan. As he laid it out, she remembered earlier in the afternoon after they left the shop, he asked if she would mind waiting for him for a moment... he had to make a call or something. She didn’t mind at all as it was so charming on the street. She sat on a bench and within minutes he was back. So it turned out he went back to the little jewelry shop and purchased the ring. Then when they got to the restaurant, after they were seated she recalled he got up to say he was going to the restroom, when he was actually going to commiserate with the waiter about putting the ring in the clam shell!

Needless to say, she was touched in a way she had never been before.

This moment, and many others looking back, were part of why the feeling she had later that night resonated with such discord. Back in their room after dinner, they had

been talking when out of the blue Mel said, “I never told you the last chapter of the story about ‘the one that got away’.”

“OK, what is it?” Elyse asked.

He hesitated. Then he replied, “No, I’m not going to tell you. Not now.”

“That’s unfair,” she said. “You shouldn’t say there’s something you never told me, and then say you’re not going to tell me. Especially since I didn’t ask you to reveal it, whatever it is. You brought it up. Unless you want me to know something, don’t say anything.”

“I’ll tell you sometime. It will be on a day when the sun is out, and we’ll be sitting together, maybe somewhere on a park bench, and I’ll tell you then.”

That night, their first weekend vacation alone together – at this wonderful bed and breakfast at the shore – they went to bed and, though he was next to her in the queen-sized bed, she felt as far away from him as she’d ever felt from anyone – a great divide had quietly and mysteriously descended between them. She couldn’t quite figure it out. It was nothing tangible she could describe, only a feeling that he had pulled her in, and then he had cut her off. Even then.

She still has the tanzanite ring. She never wears it. After he was gone from her life, she put it on once. She took it off.

A Touch of Lipstick, No Frumpies
(or You Made Me Love You, I Didn't Want to Do It)

One might ask, why was Elyse so taken in, in the beginning of their relationship? And why did she fall so apart at the end?

She was a bit of an introvert and never one prone to easy romance. Her boyfriends in college were more like friends to her than boyfriends. Of course, there was her husband, with whom she had two beautiful children and who, although it didn't work out, had loved her. Otherwise, she didn't think many people even liked her, really saw her, really wanted to listen to or hear what she had to say. It's not that she didn't think highly of herself. She did. She just didn't have a circle of people around her who thought so too. She didn't know why. She just figured she was different.

As a child, she was a loner, not one to have a bunch of friends. Every year it seemed she would find one kid in the class to be friends with, or that kid would find her, and the next year, it would be someone else.

Later in life she found herself drawn to men who were either much older or unavailable in some way or another. Fortunately, something would happen to set her free before she got too mired in any of these unhealthy relationships.

So when she met Mel, although not at first, she eventually allowed herself to be drawn in because here, she thought, was an available, single, responsible man who wanted to have a relationship with her. She couldn't believe it. Someone who actually wanted to be with her; wanted to meet her children, and her parents; liked being at her house; liked being seen with her in public; introduced her to his colleagues – He'd say,

“Hello so and so, say hello to Leesie.” He asked her to join him in the things he loved to do. She started learning about golf, ice hockey, classic cars.

In other ways, that she thought at the time were thoughtful and caring, he would notice things that needed fixing in her house and would fix them. In the beginning, she didn't even ask him to; he would just do it. He would pick up parts for kitchen appliances, parts for her car, light bulbs. One time, in the middle of a thunderstorm, her basement was flooding. He identified that the problem was a gutter in her backyard pointing down to the ground, and right then and there, during the storm, went out to re-direct it, getting thoroughly soaked in the process. She said maybe they should wait until it stopped raining so hard, but there was no deterring him once he set his mind to do something.

He insisted on installing a pull-out garbage bin under her sink. He bought the pieces and went ahead and did it. Another time, he added a spray nozzle to her kitchen faucet, and he was like a little boy, so pleased with himself at the improvement.

There were also times when he wanted to do things that she didn't want done – like changing all the doorknobs and locks in her house so they all opened with one key. He thought she should replace her furnace and switch from gas to oil. She did not want to do either of those things. He would be pretty adamant about wanting her to take his suggestions, and it seemed to bother him a great deal when she wouldn't just go along with what he was convinced was the best way to do things. One of the last things he told her she should do was change the printer settings on her printer, which he said would save ink. It's a good thing she didn't. She would have had to find out from someone else how to set it back.

Some other things that bothered him were – if he saw that her lipstick had worn off, he would tell her she needed “a touch of lipstick.” If she changed into her comfortable pajamas while he was still at her house, he’d say “no frumpies.” If she forgot to stock her fridge with half-and-half (she used regular milk in her coffee), he’d be sure to point it out.

Five months before he walked out of her life, without so much as a glance over his shoulder, she updated her kitchen. She had lived in her house for 14 years, and the kitchen was 50 years old. It was a big project. She probably would not have embarked on it without having a friend, a partner, by her side. Part of it was that Mel was doing some refurbishing in his own home. While it emboldened her to undertake her own project, it also gave her a clue that he was rooted in his own house, fixing it up his own way, and that way did not include her in the plans. So she was partly thinking, ok mister I can do the same thing with my house.

She found and met with a contractor and designer, José, all on her own. She worked with José to develop the plan, choose the cabinets, and the layout. She knew exactly what she wanted in a floor tile and found just the right one at Home Depot. But it was wonderful to share all this with Mel. He offered some advice on placing the tiles diagonally on the floor instead of straight; he recommended pull out shelves. He had an astute eye for detail, which she had noticed when they went to art museums. (Though not an artist himself, he could see patterns not evident to most people. It was the same with music. He wasn’t a musician, but he would hear beyond what most people heard, particularly with the guitar.) When her kitchen was complete, the first thing he noticed,

immediately, before even taking in the room or commenting on the finished renovation, was that the installation of one of the cabinet doors did not match the rest.

As part of the kitchen renovation, Elyse bought all new appliances – except for her refrigerator, which she planned to keep. Her son, about twelve at the time, was particularly not too happy about this because he wanted one that had an automatic water dispenser.

Around this time, during the renovation, Mel took her out to dinner for her birthday, to Luigi's, "their" Italian restaurant. He handed her a large envelope – inside was the paperwork and delivery date for a new, sleek, modern refrigerator! Some little voice in her had misgivings – a refrigerator is a permanent fixture in your home. Don't accept it. But she didn't listen.

The worst part of his leaving was – actually one cannot put a finger on the worst part because it was all of these things – that she no longer had someone to talk to; she lost her best friend; she didn't have a chest to lay her head upon; having to tell her children; figuring out what to tell her children when she didn't really know herself what happened; that her children couldn't understand why she wasn't eating; that she couldn't sleep at night; that she saw him afterwards a few times and he behaved as though she wasn't there; that the two and a half years they spent together were as though they never existed; that she didn't know how to grieve given her partner did not die. His body was there, but the soul she knew simply vanished into thin air.

Looking back on it, she wished she understood whether she had the same right, the same legitimacy to grieve as someone who grieves due to losing someone through death. She wished others could have recognized that she felt a loss as great as, maybe

even greater than, someone who had lost someone through death. Because her memories were clouded by Mel's abandonment, she could not think back fondly of their time together. Her loss and his absence were incomprehensible to her, as she could not make sense, at the time, of what seemed a sudden and complete change of personality. He became an unfamiliar being within a familiar being's form. She wished she could have mourned the loss of a partner, the loss of a relationship, even though the human being still existed in the world. The human being was the same in an outward physical sense. After he left, she saw him a handful of times... he was dressed the same, wore the same trousers, belt, shoes, shirts she recognized. She saw the same waist she used to put her arm around. But the inner being, the soul inside the body, was gone... transformed... unrecognizable, and for some reason, unable to recognize her.

Friends and relatives of hers, and his, were in disbelief when they learned he disappeared. His own nephew had told her she was the best thing that ever happened to him. Everyone had thought of them as a pair, a sure thing, a solid couple, Elyse and Mel, Mel and Elyse. They all had no clue. Imagine if they had no clue, how she felt. Yet after a few months, she could tell they could not understand why she wasn't back on her feet. Why wasn't she eating? They would actually say, "Elyse, it's been three months. You've got to get over this."

On her own, she analyzed, researched, and came to her own diagnosis and conclusion based on hints revealed during their relationship, had she been looking through the right lens, of why the relationship ended, what was wrong, and what she didn't know about Mel at the time.

Disney World Ending

Mel and Elyse had been seeing each other for about a year and a half when they started planning, on Mel's suggestion, to take both of their kids to Disney World. They went ahead and booked the plane fare and tickets to the Magic Kingdom. She paid for the flight for herself and her kids, and he took care of the rest – the passes, the hotel, and the food. They also made plans to stay with Elyse's parents for a couple of nights and to stop by and say hello to his parents who lived, as coincidence would have it, just a few miles away from her parents.

It was around the same time that Elyse started feeling the relationship was changing, that it was becoming more a matter of convenience and comfort for Mel – seeing Elyse on weekends and every other Saturday, dating, and staying at her house on the nights when her kids were at their dad's, sharing moments of intimacy until he went back to his house to tend to his life and she stayed at her home to tend to hers. The closer he drew her in and the more he made her feel part of his life, it seemed the farther he moved away. He had an expression when they first were going out, during those times when he was becoming more smitten with her by the day. He would call each step they took as they became closer as “a change in the dynamics of our relationship.” Now she was feeling a change without being able to put a finger on it, but it seemed they were moving apart. She would say to him, “Is the bloom off the rose?” And he would reply, “Don't back pedal away from me now,” and whisper in her ear, “stay close.”

He had another expression he often used when they were sharing a moment of closeness together. He would tilt his head, purse his lips, nod slightly from side to side, stare into her eyes and say, “So, what am I going to do with you, Leesie?” The question

always hung in the air with an aura of anticipation for something great to come.

Somewhere along the way, around this time, he stopped asking the question “so what am I going to do with you, Leesie?” It seems he answered it and forgot to tell her.

They were scheduled to leave for Florida a few days after Valentine’s Day. One morning a week prior, Elyse hurt her knee badly enough that she was limping around her house. When Mel called, as he did by rote every evening, she mentioned it to him and worried that it might impact their upcoming trip with all the walking they’d be doing at Disney. His reaction was complete silence on the phone – an abyss. Was he not listening or did he not care? He had always been so attentive even when he was busy with high-level meetings. She broke the silence by saying she was probably overreacting and it was likely nothing at all.

Two nights before their trip, and what was the day after Valentine’s Day, Elyse knew something was wrong. Mel had left a thoughtful message on her home phone earlier in the evening saying he was on his way to an appointment with his son and that he’d call again later. He didn’t call. She tried to reach him, but he wasn’t answering his cell phone. In fact, it was off for hours, ringing straight through to voicemail.

In that moment, she knew they had lost everything they had. After many panicked calls over and over to his cellphone, her intuition led her to leave a message, “Mel, you should have told me. You should have talked to me. You should have said something.”

When he finally returned home sometime around midnight, he called and said, “I don’t love you anymore.” Just like that. He didn’t say he didn’t think he loved her anymore. His exact words were, “I don’t love you anymore.”

The following day Elyse cornered him in the cafeteria. “Is there someone else? Did someone catch your eye?”

He replied, “It’s not that. It’s us.”

Elyse was in a tailspin. She wanted to believe there wasn’t anyone else. How could there be? Up until that last week or so, when he seemed to be somewhere in outer space, and despite feeling the distance, he had still been making plans with her, following “the schedule.” She thought he was under a lot of stress at work, or maybe he was going through some midlife crisis, or maybe taking medication or drugs that were altering his behavior. They had promised the kids this trip to Disney and were geared up to go. His kids had already been. Hers had never been.

She went on, “Because if that were the case, if you did meet someone, you can’t stay at my parents’ house as my boyfriend.”

He played along, allowing her to believe there was no one else. Her thinking was that maybe things would work out. If he was going through something, maybe he would come out on the other end of it.

They went to Disney. The entire trip was a blur for her. She didn’t want to let on to the kids that something was wrong. There were moments when he was detached and distant, and others, sometimes at dinner, when they all sat together and talked and laughed just the way things were before. In a moment of feeling sorry for him, that maybe he was lost and going through depression or anxiety or something, Elyse hugged him spontaneously right on the spot while on the platform waiting for the monorail. They walked and walked and walked as people do at Disney. They stood on lines, took the monorail, went into various themed pavilions, and even snapped a few pictures. They

went on rides. Well, she didn't, but they did. Rides made her queasy, but he convinced her to go on one ride saying it wasn't the type that spins or does anything crazy, and he told her she'd be fine and that he'd be there. And she did it. She went on the ride, and he was right. She didn't get sick. It was as he said.

After Disney, they went to her parents' house. That night, once they were alone, he revealed he had been struggling with where their relationship was going for a while. He told her things like, "You're my best friend," and "I don't like to think of you being hurt. I still care about you," and "I still want to talk to you." He told her when they got back from Florida, they should take a break from each other. To her it seemed like he was confused, that he needed some space.

They flew home. At the airport, he got a taxi for her and her kids. They said goodbye, and he turned and walked away with his kids. He called that night, one more time, to make sure the taxi got her home safe, and that was the last call she ever received from him. Ever.

“I Feel Pain”

“What happened to you Mel?” Elyse posed the question in one of the last conversations they ever had.

Weeks had gone by since their return from Florida. Mel hadn’t called. Elyse hardly saw him at work. He was staying away from the cafeteria. The few times she glimpsed him from afar, he turned away with what looked like a sense of shame.

She didn’t know what to make of it or what he was going through – was it a mid-life crisis, a mental breakdown? She wasn’t eating or sleeping. Her therapist advised that she contact him to let him know she was having a hard time processing what happened and to suggest that the two of them come in for a session to help her understand why their relationship had to end.

As much as Elyse didn’t want to make the first move – she had never been the pursuer in their relationship; she was, from the beginning, the pursued – she did. She went up to Mel’s office. He was there, sitting at his desk. She stepped inside. He looked up. It was obvious from the moment she walked in he didn’t want to see her. He rose from his chair, came around the desk and said, “Close the door.” She did.

There was an awkward pause as they stood facing each other. She mustered up the courage and asked if they could meet some time for a cup of coffee. He said, “I don’t know. No, I don’t think so. I’m busy all this week.”

“What about after work, today?” She wanted to take care of this right away, get it over with. She needed to know.

He hesitated. “Well, I don’t have a lot of time this evening.”

“That’s OK. Can we meet at Starbucks for just half an hour or so?”

Elyse sized up the person she was talking to, the person in front of her. She recognized the physical body of Mel – the hands she had held, the chest she’d caressed, the shoulder she had fit her head into, the feet she had rubbed, the forehead and lips she had kissed – but the person she had known for almost two and a half years was no longer inside. Her brow furrowed with concern and using the nickname he had made up for her, she said softly, “Mel, it’s me, Leesie. What happened to you?” and she put the palm of her hand on his chest. He had no reaction other than a slight stiffening of his whole body. There was no recognition that they had shared over two years together.

Countless times when they were together, whenever she would seek his advice on something, she would begin by saying, “So tell me something, Mel.” He would respond with, “Yes Leesie.” This had been a standard exchange they’d had since the beginning. She would pose a question ending with his name. He would answer, his reply gentle but eager to please, ending with her name. And it worked both ways. He would often ask her advice, especially about his kids. She always tried to answer from her own parenting perspective, taking into account the different needs and personalities of his own children. She knew he appreciated what she had to say because after hearing her point of view he always called her “wise.” Although at the time she thought it was unusual for a boyfriend to call a girlfriend “wise,” she was flattered. The only other time he used that word was when he spoke about his mother.

Now, in his office, it was like she was talking to a stranger. To firm up that they would meet later that day, she said, “So Starbucks. After work today.”

“Well, OK,” he acquiesced with about as much reluctance as could be possible.

The air hung heavy and still. “Don’t you feel a void... an emptiness?” Elyse asked.

His answer stung and confused her as he turned away and said, “I feel pain.”

She shot back, “So what am I? The second one that got away?”

“If that’s the way you’re going to talk to me, forget it. I’m not going to meet you,” he said, as though it was she who had wronged him.

In desperation, almost pleading, she said, “No, no, I just want to talk. I can’t sleep. I’m not eating. Can’t you see I’ve lost weight? I’m down to 100 lbs.” It was amazing to her that he seemed to take no notice of her physical condition nor her mental anguish.

She continued, “I’ll follow you over in my car.”

Again he hesitated. “I’ll just meet you there,” he said.

“I’d rather follow you out of the parking lot. I’m pretty sure how to go, but you know my sense of direction,” she said. Mel was always the one who drove on their many Starbucks rendezvous.

“Fine. I’ll meet you at the side door at 5:00,” he said.

She started to go, then turned to him. “Be my friend,” the words escaped before she could stop them.

The Last Starbucks

Elyse followed him to Starbucks as arranged earlier, in separate cars. Once inside, they sat opposite each other at a small table. They ordered tea. She had a letter she had prepared with some of her thoughts. She handed it to him. It said,

Mel,

I am so sad... the Mel I knew has left me, with no explanation. I am trying to be strong, but I can't help feeling hurt, angry, and betrayed. I have not heard from the Mel who planned his weekly calendar around me, helped me around my house, and was my partner – sharing thoughts with me and I with him about the world, music, work, children, home – the Mel who called me almost every night from the day we started dating – since we returned from Florida. The man I thought I knew and I were always holding hands. And now I hardly know him. His personality has changed overnight. He cannot face me. When he sees me at work, he crosses to the far side of the hall. The hurt of losing someone who was so present in my life is almost unbearable. The hurt of betrayal is like a stab wound.

I know you have a lot of stress in your life right now, but of all the things that are on your plate, why was it me that was taken away? I was there for you as much as you were, until recently, there for me. I need help processing our current situation and would like to understand why our relationship needed to end.

Elyse

Upon reading the letter, he started to cry. Elyse looked him in the eyes and asked again, “Did you meet someone?” And this time, the answer was yes. He said he met someone just a few weeks before the trip. But she didn't know the truth anymore – it may have been longer ago than that.

He said he had to go. They hadn't spent more than half an hour in Starbucks. He had nothing else to say. It was after work hours and soon to be dinner time. Elyse knew his routine. She knew he had a date and didn't want to be late.

Elyse paid for their tea since she had insisted on the meeting. They left, and that was the end.

Epilogue

Elyse went through a period of grief, depression, and despair. She lost weight. She was unable to sleep. She couldn't go a day without crying whenever her children were not around. Her parents were concerned for her. They had the deepest disdain for Mel and how he had walked out on her after telling them how he held their daughter in such high esteem. She took a sleeping pill one night before bed to see if it would help. She had never taken medication aside from an occasional aspirin or antibiotic in her life. The following day, she went to work and thought she was going to freak out. She couldn't focus. She felt like she was high. She threw the rest of the bottle out. She saw her therapist. It didn't help. The therapist suggested she take a mild anti-depressant. For the sake of her children, she had to pull together. She took it for about ten months and eventually stopped not sure if it helped or not. She alternated between anger and despair all the while trying to be strong for the kids.

She remembered back to the night they had returned from Disney World when Mel had suggested to her that they should take a break from each other. This was before Mel admitted he was seeing someone else without her knowing. The cab had brought her and her kids home. They got into the house and brought their suitcases into their rooms. She and her son (twelve at the time) and daughter (just turned fifteen) came down to the living room and sat on the couch together.

Elyse had to say something. "Kids, Mel and I are going to be taking a break from each other."

They looked stunned. They had just returned from a vacation together! Her daughter's eyes opened wide as she said, "Mom, I don't understand. What are you saying?"

Kids say the darndest things sometimes, and Elyse will never forget the look, the hurt, and the confusion in her son's eyes, when he said, "But mom, he just gave you a refrigerator!" As though this was an indicator of a solid relationship! But he was right. Who does that... gives you a refrigerator and then just leaves?

Several months later, around April, Elyse brought up to her therapist that she still had some of Mel's belongings in her house. She had packed everything up and wanted to return it all to him. But she didn't know how. They had not spoken to each other since the meeting she had requested at Starbucks. Any time he saw her in the cafeteria or in the halls, which was rare because he was spending more time in his office, he avoided her, moving to the other side of the room or the hallway. Her therapist suggested she send him a straightforward email saying she wanted to return his things and set a date and time to do so.

She did. He suggested meeting in the parking lot where he could get everything from her car and transfer it into his car. She had put everything into a couple of boxes. Stuck in between all of his stuff, she had wrapped up the journal, "the best gift ever," in tissue paper and included a note, "Keep the journal in a safe place. I can't keep it now."

He was there in the parking lot at the appointed day and time. He actually put a smile on his face when he saw her and said, "Hi how are you?" He put the boxes in his trunk, shut the trunk hood, and started to turn to go back into the building, without saying a word! In what appeared to be an afterthought, as though he just remembered something

he was supposed to say, with absolutely no touch of remembrance that he had called her every night for almost two and a half years to wish her a warm and tender goodnight, he offered, "I hope you are doing well. Tell your family I said hello."

The End

Afterword – Mitigating Grief

Because of the grief I experienced when my partner abandoned me suddenly due to my ignorance of and inability to recognize Asperger's, it is important to understand and recognize the characteristics of Asperger's. Asperger's syndrome is a kind of high-functioning autism on the autism spectrum. People with Asperger's have difficulty navigating social situations, expressing their own emotions, and understanding other people's feelings. These and other characteristics of Asperger's have an impact on relationships with others. My lack of knowledge about Asperger's produced a situation where I was confused and devastated by the manner in which this relationship ended. Had I been aware of the diagnosis of Asperger's in my partner, I would have responded differently and been better prepared to emotionally heal and deal with the grief of this type of loss. The failure to be aware of the presence of Asperger's created the conditions of feeling abandoned and grief-stricken when the predictable manifestations of Asperger's showed up, and these signs were misunderstood.

Licensed Clinical Social Worker, June Tyson, in her literature review on "Creating Meaning After Loss of a Loved One" describes the effects of grief from the death of a loved one as exactly the same as the grief I experienced through the loss of my partner through abandonment, "major physical, emotional, and cognitive changes" (Tyson 326). However, unlike the grief one experiences through the death of a loved one, certain ways of dealing with that grief are not available to someone whose loved one is alive but who abandoned them. For example, people who lose a loved one through death "may experience positive emotions by looking at pictures of their deceased loved one. They may create meaning in this act by understanding that the memory and love of their

lost loved one will continue to be with them even though their loved one is not physically present” (333). This is not a possible coping technique for one who has been abandoned.

Psychotherapist and founder of Abandonment Recovery, Susan Anderson, borrows a concept from the Japanese language called “akeru” which crystallized into its essence is both an empty space that is created when someone leaves as well as a new beginning where something new can enter (Anderson). She uses this concept in her work in abandonment recovery. In support of my argument that grief through abandonment is traumatic and little understood, she rightly classifies abandonment grief as having a particular life of its own, but one that is more unrecognized, unstudied, and untreated than other types of grief (11). As she aptly puts it, “abandonment is psychology’s neglected stepchild” (121).

I did not know I was in a relationship with someone with Asperger’s. He may not have known himself of that diagnosis, as evidenced by the examples cited earlier in this paper. However, during the time I was in that relationship I felt cherished and blessed. Anderson talks about how we as human beings need to feel we belong... “belonging to someone was essential to your sense of well-being. It felt good to know that you were an important part of his or her life – that someone loved and cherished you” (Anderson 75).

Not knowing then what I now know about Asperger’s intensified the grief of abandonment into a profound betrayal affecting the core of my being. “Just because the object of your attachment is no longer available to you does not mean that your need to bond goes away. On the contrary, it pulls with all of its might to regain what it has lost” (100).

Anderson compares the experience of being abandoned by a loved one to being stabbed in the heart (2). This is a prescient description to my own experience. When I started writing my story to work through the grief that I felt, the working title I used for my piece was “A Dagger in the Heart.” This was before I ever found Anderson’s book. I decided to keep the title.

Conclusion

Just as many Aspergians feel a sense of relief when they become aware of the diagnosis, there may be the same dynamic of relief for people who are or were in relationships with an Aspergian when they become aware of the diagnosis of Asperger’s in their current or former partner.

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