

Chapter 1  
Unknown Grace

*“In a real dark night of the soul it is always three o’clock in the morning....”*

— F. Scott Fitzgerald

After the Twelve-Step meeting that Sunday morning, Pierre, a family friend, encouraged me to join him and a few of our mutual friends for coffee at a sweet outdoor café, so I did. They felt that Nils just might get sober because of what had happened the night before. As I was finishing my coffee, a chaotic energy surged through my body, and I felt as though I were being summoned home. So I excused myself and off I went. Nils and I hadn’t spoken that morning which was unusual. When I left, I thought he was probably still sleeping. I called my sponsor and she encouraged me to stay grounded when I spoke with him. A *sponsor* is a mentor, someone you trust implicitly, typically the same gender and has been in recovery for a good length of time. They help guide you through challenging times and celebrate the good times as well. Her parting words to me before I left home that morning were, “I will pray for him.”

The Twelve-step programs are mutual aid organizations for the purpose of recovery from substance addictions, behavioral addictions, and compulsions. The fellowship is a set of guiding principles outlining a course of suggested actions to take to recover. Being a spiritual process, one is encouraged to believe in a higher power. It can be God, the sky, the stars, the fellowship, anything you can turn to when you need help, clarification, or simply to say thanks. It’s also called a “power greater than oneself.”

When I arrived home from the meeting, I parked outside the driveway gate, which was unusual; normally I opened the gate and parked inside. As I walked up the walkway, I saw Nils in the carport near his exercise equipment and felt a sense of relief that he was working out. But when I took another step, I saw that he was hanging from the rafter. To this day, I remember exactly what he was wearing: the short-sleeved pink T-shirt I had purchased for him in New York just a few months before, his favorite Gap blue jeans, his black travel socks he was famous for, and his white Adidas tennis shoes, of which he was quite proud. He and I were given matching pairs by my mom several years earlier, which we both loved wearing when we were together.

I dropped my purse and ran to him, and at the same time phoned Pierre and begged him to call an ambulance. I wrapped my arms tightly around Nils's thighs and lifted him up as high as I could to ease the tension on his neck. I just screamed—for help, for God, for pure expression—for what felt like a lifetime. Our housekeeper came running from the guest house toward us, and she began screaming too. I asked her to move my car so the ambulance could get through. It was all so overwhelming, only later did I realize I could have asked her to help me get him down. With my phone still in hand, I frantically called Nils's ex-wife, told her what was happening, and asked her to come immediately. I continued to hold onto Nils, easing the pressure on his neck, and imploring *someone* to come and help. A tall muscular man and a woman came running up the walkway, and they were able to get Nils down. Immediately, the man began to administer cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR).

It felt as if my heart was being ripped from my chest. I cried tearless cries in utter silence, and could barely stand or breathe. Pierre came running up the driveway, but the man told him to move aside. The woman asked her husband to stop the CPR because it was clear that Nils wasn't breathing on his own, and he told her, "You don't stop CPR until the ambulance arrives," and he persisted.

The police and the ambulance arrived at the same time. Paramedics ripped off Nils's shirt and began doing CPR themselves. At that point, I walked out to the front yard and *screamed*. I couldn't speak. I couldn't cry. I was shaking convulsively and having a tough time standing, and I just fell to the ground. A female police officer came over to console me, but I didn't want to be touched. She was desperately trying to calm me down, saying he was going to be all right. Just then, Nils's ex-wife arrived, and we sat on the stairs holding each other's hands, crying as we watched the paramedics continue to work on Nils in the carport. She was sitting between Pierre and me while holding my hand, and told us she had spoken to Nils that morning, twice, and that during the second call he said something about jumping into the lake and drowning. She told him to go ahead and do it. She was frustrated with him at the time and was now beside herself with guilt. I, too, was feeling somehow responsible for leaving him alone that morning.

The paramedics were able to get Nils's heart started, and they rushed him to the Hôpitaux Universitaires de Genève (HUG), the nearest hospital. I still couldn't think, speak, or feel anything rational. I just kept repeating to the officer and to Pierre, "I was going to tell him how much I loved him when I got home. I was going to tell him how much I loved him when I got

home!” I spent the rest of the day at the Intensive Care Unit, where doctors were trying to save Nils’s life.

Dr. Gasche, Nils’s primary physician, encouraged me to go home for the night. I begged him to let me stay, to crawl into bed with Nils, to read to him all night long and play his favorite music and remind him that we had so much more to do together. He looked at me gently and said, “Please go home with your friends and get a good night’s sleep.” *A good night’s sleep?* I wanted him to make it all go away. I wanted him to fix Nils. I begged him for a miracle. He said he couldn’t perform miracles, but he was doing his best. I collapsed into his arms and just cried. There was nothing more to be said.

I wanted to take refuge in “a power greater than myself.” At the time, I was a practicing Catholic, *so I referred to this power as God*. I had thought my faith was unshakeable, but almost immediately I was a morass of conflicted feelings about God and my many spiritual teachers. It surprised me that I didn’t lean into God, and instead held Him accountable for the accident and preferred not hearing a word about God or faith.

I did go home that night, and the next morning, I walked into our living room, grabbed every book about spirituality I had off the shelves, and threw them in the garbage can outside. Then I walked up the stairs, grabbed audiobooks by Wayne Dyer, Esther Hicks, and Eckhart Tolle, and threw them away too. *I’ve wasted decades studying about love, service, compassion, living in the present, focusing on what you want, and being a good person. And they’re all full of crap!* Since I couldn’t have a sit-down conversation with God about why good people die brutal deaths or why He was too busy to intervene that day or whether He simply discarded Nils like trash, I took my powerlessness out on books about God and spirituality. I was enraged at God. Nils’s suicide was God’s ultimate betrayal. If He was all-powerful and loving, He failed Nils’s kids, his family, and everyone who loved him, including me!

I appreciated when people told me they were praying for me, but I asked them to pray for Nils. It upset me when they suggested I pray to God. *The God that watches people suffer? The God that would let a husband and father commit suicide? Where was God when Nils climbed up on the paint bucket and wrapped the dog’s leash around his neck? Where was God when Nils was calling for help? Where was God when I found him? Where was God when a stranger giving CPR and then the EMTs and doctors were working on him?*

I needed answers...

Shortly after tossing the books away, I rushed to see Nils who was still on life support, and Paul, a friend from the Geneva Fellowship, joined me at the hospital, so I would have someone to lean on. I was also receiving text messages from others offering to help. I spent as much time as I could sitting with Nils, running my hand through his hair, reading about a world event, holding his hand. When I took a break, Paul and I would sit together crouched on the floor in a quiet corridor of the hospital. On the third day in ICU, Dr. Gasche called me in to a small private room and told me Nils was brain dead and would need to be taken off life support, that there was nothing more they could do. He held my hand and just looked at me with his gentle brown eyes. I told him he was mistaken and demanded that he collect Nils's things and discharge him. I was adamant and said I'd be taking him home. He looked at me and said, "That will not be possible, Kimberly." I felt paralyzed, trembling, mumbling, and crying. He grabbed hold of me and held me tight.

Nils's mom, sisters, children, and ex-wife arrived shortly after I received the news, and we all spent time with him, saying goodbye. I begged Dr. Gasche to let me stay with him until he took his last breath. He stressed that he was brain dead and wouldn't know I was there, that it would be unpleasant once the breathing machine was removed, and that it'd be best if I go home and wait for the hospital to call. I felt a responsibility to stay. I didn't want Nils feeling abandoned. Dr. Gasche and Paul, on the other hand, wanted my last memory of Nils to be of him looking very much alive with color in his cheeks, and I reluctantly agreed.

Before leaving the ICU, the head nurse asked me to collect Nils's things—sneakers, T-shirt, jeans, watch, belt, wallet, and wedding ring—but I couldn't bear the thought of receiving all that was left of the man who had been my husband. I thought that if I didn't collect his things, someone in the hospital would come to their senses and tell me it was all a big mistake. Paul grabbed my hand and we walked together down several long corridors while passing doctors, nurses, visitors, and patients. There was a lot of commotion, and there was also utter silence as though everything was happening in slow motion. As we stood at the window, Paul explained to the administrator why we were there. She asked for my identification before handing me the brown paper bag. Then Paul kindly but firmly guided me to the hospital chapel to pray for Nils.

I watched Paul get down on his knees, fold his hands, and devoutly bend his head in prayer with the brown paper bag sitting between us. He looked so sincere and emotional. *Where the hell is God, Paul?* I thought. *How are you able to keep your faith at a time like this? If I were*

*to pray, who would I pray to? Not Paul's God; He's the One that bailed on Nils.* Though we were both Catholics, he seemed to have a connection to the Divine. I thought that because of Paul's ability to pray coupled with his faith, it might all become undone. Perhaps the doctors would come and tell us it had all been all a big mistake.

Paul and I left the hospital and connected with Nils's family at our house, and we waited for the call. The kids were playing table tennis and the others were sitting at the kitchen table talking. Paul and I sat outside quietly. The call finally came around 10 p.m. on May 10. Paul prayed for Nils's soul and thanked God for taking care of him. I sat next to Paul suspended in time and speechless. It took half an hour before I could muster the energy to walk into the kitchen to tell them. You could have heard a pin drop.

Obviously, Paul's prayers hadn't worked, at least not the way I had hoped. No amount of prayer was going to bring Nils back. Prayer simply doesn't work that way.

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I was no faith novice. I was raised in a religious home. My mother was Catholic, my dad Lutheran. When I moved to Santa Monica at age five, we lived near St. Paul's Lutheran and St. Monica Catholic churches, which were a block apart. We attended St. Paul's most often, but I loved the lavishness of the mass at St. Monica. Attending services was mandatory for us kids until we turned eighteen. The emphasis was on tradition and ceremony rather than spirituality.

In college I started exploring other spiritual practices. I learned about Judaism, Orthodox Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism. When addictions to cocaine and prescription pills took hold in my early twenties, my interests in spiritual matters took a back seat to getting high and being consumed with my weight. Still, I always kept a picture of Jesus in my house. When I was using, I was oblivious to the possible dangers I was exposing myself and others to. I was so busy getting loaded that when the Los Angeles riots started in April 1992, I was unaware of any of it. I called my brother and asked him to help me score some coke on the streets, because I had run out and my dealer was on vacation. I only purchased drugs through reputable sources.

My brother was sober at the time (for which I had no regard). He and I jumped into my beautiful new Mercedes and headed directly to Venice. The streets were like a ghost town, and a little man on a bicycle rode by and told us to get the hell out of there. We didn't listen and

proceeded toward a group of people standing in the street. As we arrived, someone started shooting at our car and someone else threw a Molotov cocktail through the window, and it hit my brother in the head and splattered blood everywhere. The windshield was shattered. I stepped on the gas, but I didn't drive my brother to the hospital. Instead I drove back to the hotel where I'd been staying, put a damp cloth on his forehead, lay him on the bed, and continued looking for cocaine. It was a miracle we survived. I had put my life and the life of someone I loved at risk for a fix.

My parents tried many times in many ways to help me get sober, to no avail. They thought I might end up a statistic—dead from using and from my eating disorder. One intervention included getting involved with an organization called Youth With A Mission (YWAM) for six months. YWAM is an international, movement of Christians of all cultures, age groups, and Christian traditions dedicated to serving Jesus. Their common purpose is to know God and make Him known through missionaries throughout the world. My dad helped me complete the application, so I could be approved for the Discipleship Training Program (DTS) that seeks to bring you closer to God. Phase One of the training is the “lecture phase,” and Phase Two is the “outreach phase.” I was approved for a six-month commitment, three months in Honduras and three months in Jamaica. The night I left, I'd been up for several days doing cocaine and pills. My parents knocked on my door, packed some clothes, drove me to Los Angeles International Airport, handed me a one-way ticket, and said, “Go get well.”

As I walked off the plane the next morning in Norfolk, Virginia, I saw my name on a sign held by two very energetic people, Debbie and Bill. I wasn't sure whether to run away or acknowledge that I was Kimberly. Despite my trepidation, I walked up to them and introduced myself. I was too exhausted not to. They drove me and several others to a large ship, the *Anastasis*, which we all boarded. There were people of many different ethnic backgrounds and skill sets, from doctors, dentists, disaster-relief specialists, and lots of enthusiastic young people. I was feeling seriously uncomfortable, coming off of a cocaine high and unsure about being there or what was going to happen.

The following day I was escorted to a room of about thirty men and women sitting in a large circle introducing themselves. They all shared a love of God and the desire to become ministers or missionary workers. Sitting there coming down off a several-day run, I wondered what I would say when it was my turn. I wanted to come up with a really great story, because the

thought of telling them that I was a drug addict did not seem to fit the situation. I was extremely nervous and grateful I would be among the last to share. I couldn't run away; the ship had already left port and we were sailing toward Honduras.

A miracle occurred that morning. By the time they got to me, I told them the truth. I burst into tears and told them that I was suffering from a cocaine and pill addiction and frankly wasn't quite sure why I was here. They all jumped up, laid hands on me and prayed for me. It was a bit overwhelming, but I felt safe and knew I wouldn't be rejected because I was suffering. Bill and Debbie had to confer with a few others to decide whether I should stay or go. They agreed there was a reason I was there, and I was allowed to stay. The organization and the individual members' passion for God and being of service turned out to be life-transforming for me.

It reconnected me with God in a space that was both intense and playful. The worship music was contemporary, soulful, and joyous. Being exposed to poverty and being of service to the locals in Las Mangas, Honduras and the Black Hills of Jamaica helped me understand the difference between a need and a want. It taught me about being of service to those truly in need, sharing one's faith and hope, and loving unconditionally. The villagers and the volunteers I met during these six months had a profound impact on my life and on my using.

I would like to say this was the event that got me sober, but it wasn't. My family came to the port of San Pedro, outside of Los Angeles, and picked me up. It was an emotional reunion. Mom and Dad looked peaceful and were happy I was home and sober. Within a few days of being back, they whisked me off to a meeting to celebrate my six months of sobriety. I stood at the podium and received my six-month sobriety coin and thanked God and my family for my sobriety.

Within forty-eight hours I was back living with my old roommate and cocaine dealer. My using escalated and my eating disorder became extreme during the next couple of years. My immersion with YWAM was still in my heart and haunted me. My using was never the same, because I'd had a taste of freedom and what it was like to have a personal relationship with God.

Fortunately, my dad did not give up on me and did one final intervention, and I agreed to get help. I literally crawled into treatment at age twenty-eight. You hear about people who are highly functional for long periods despite their using. Oftentimes, these people do finally hit the wall and get sober. I was not a high-functioning addict, which helped me get sober at a young age. I was in a recovery home for four months and lived with eleven other women, most of

whom had spent time in prison for drugs, prostitution, and crimes they'd committed while under the influence. I was scared straight.

I was formally introduced to the Twelve Step Fellowship during this time, which helped me become reacquainted with my faith. After completing treatment, I made attending weekly meetings a priority and began going to early morning masses again at St. Monica. I loved the pageantry and grandeur of this beautiful Catholic church. It was calming and grounding. I also had a friend named Vegas who was a Soka Gakkai Buddhist, and he encouraged me to chant the mantra *Nam-Myoho-Renge-Kyo*, assuring me it wouldn't interfere with my Catholicism. At first, I was concerned I would be struck dead for exploring another path, but instead, my ideas of faith and spirituality began to expand. I was no longer in fear of God; for He became my friend. He became accessible, had a sense of humor, and was easy to communicate with, much like my YWAM adventure. For me, this was transformational. The two faith practices seemed to coexist perfectly and even balance each other.

At the time of Nils's death, my higher power was still God, and I also believed in karma as I understood it. Nils wasn't what I'd call a believer, but my talk of God and faith never seemed to bother him. We had long conversations about the role of faith and prayer in our lives. Nils hadn't grown up in organized religion, so he didn't raise his children in any particular church either. But he was a seeker, always open to growing. A few years before we met, he was introduced to Kabbalah, an ancient wisdom that reveals how life works, and he devoted a fair amount of time learning about it.

The word *Kabbalah* means "to receive." It is the study of how to receive fulfillment, addressing ontological questions—the nature and purpose of existence—and presents methods to help in attaining spiritual realization. Nils found Kabbalah to be an intelligent practice and enjoyed wearing a red string on his wrist to remind himself that there is a power greater than himself. Several months after we met, he offered to put some red strings around my wrist, which I eagerly agreed to wear. It reminded me that I'm not in charge, but God is. I still wear a red string on my wrist.

Nils's main "spiritual" practice, though, was science. He believed in parallel universes and multiverses. He studied quantum and string theories. He believed one could be dead in one universe while living a full life in another. Reading about the significance of the atom in Bill Bryson's *A Short History of Nearly Everything* brought Nils to tears. He found his "God" in the



wonders of the universe and its perfection, and was overcome by our miraculous planet and the grand, creative design of the universe. He looked as radiant when he talked about science as others do when they talk about faith. Since he thought praying to God was silly, I asked him, *What do you do when you struggle? Who do you pray to?*

“I just say the problem out loud,” he told me. “I let the universe know what’s going on.” For him, the universe was there to support us, even though he believed we lived in a universe that was unfriendly at times. I, on the other hand, lived in a convivial universe and was always surrounded by kind, brilliant people and phenomenal opportunities. I was conscious of the many miracles in my life. Nils believed that we as individuals have to take responsibility for our own lives. And when he died, I wondered, *Where were you, science? Where were you, universe?*

Nothing prepares you for the spiritual abyss you are likely to enter when a loved one commits suicide. Nothing prepares you for the feeling of someone you love being ripped from your life. Before Nils’s death, prayers helped to resolve the issues I had. But I had embarked on a new journey, with a new level of despair. *How can I pray to God if I don’t believe He’s there? How can I find my way out of this darkness? If Nils doesn’t “believe,” what’s to become of him?*

I became obsessed with where his soul is. I wondered if he might be trapped in some multiverse, and if so, *how would I find him in the afterlife?* And speaking of the afterlife—*Can someone who commits suicide go to heaven? Is there even a heaven?* I was terrified that, because he had killed himself, his soul would be damned for eternity in a dark, cold, mean-spirited place filled with the souls of Hitler and the like.

Another belief that challenged me arose from my study of Buddhism. *Karma* is the spiritual principle of cause and effect, where intent, thoughts, words, and deeds influence outcomes. Every cause brings an effect. I had practiced Sokka Gakai Buddhism (chanting *Namu Myoho Renge Kyo*) for ten years, and I wondered, *What karma had Nils set in motion with his manner of death?*

I sought assurance from Buddhist adepts and was told that death is the last state of existence in this body. When the eternal energy leaves the body, it returns to the universe as potential energy waiting for the right circumstance to reappear in this or another universe. Buddhists are grateful to be born as a human, because it is in human form that one can plant positive seeds for the future. In so doing, past causes that may manifest themselves in this lifetime can be resolved. I felt comforted that Nils’s spirit was probably not suspended

somewhere unpleasant. He had been a kind and generous man in this lifetime, and I believe he had planted a lot of positive seeds despite the way he died.

Vegas encouraged me to start chanting again, even a few minutes a day, because through chanting *Namu Myoho Renge Kyo*, he said, I could still have a positive impact on Nils's karma. So I chanted a little each day. It's a vigorous practice. You hold beads between your palms while reciting the words. I struggled with demonic visions and needed assurance that Nils's spirit had gracefully moved on to wherever it was supposed to go.

Finally, I decided to meet with a Catholic priest, Father Richard at the Notre Dame Church in Geneva. I explained the situation and asked him point blank if he thought Nils's soul was in hell or was somewhere in limbo. He assured me that God is loving and forgiving, and that God knew his heart at the time of his fatal action. He also suggested that some actions humans take that aren't voluntary. I burst into tears and sat quietly for several minutes knowing that Nils's spirit was not shackled in some scary, dark place and he was not being tormented for not having a personal relationship with God, or Jesus.

Father Richard could see that I had a heavy heart and was feeling guilty for not being able to prevent Nils's death. He asked me if I wanted absolution. I shared and confessed all the irrational thoughts I'd been having since Nils had died and asked God to forgive me. It seemed appropriate since I was with a Catholic priest and desperate. I also shared with him a moment that had been haunting me. While on a ski trip in the French Alps just a few months before he died, Nils skied up beside me and told me he occasionally thought of hurting himself. Wanting to make sure I heard him, I took off my ski helmet and asked him to repeat himself, which he did. I asked what he meant, and he said that sometimes he wanted to ski so hard that he would harm himself. I asked if he had thoughts of killing himself, and he said, "*Nej*," Swedish for no. He said it was more like pushing his abilities to the limit, that he loved the rush when he took calculated risks. Nils had done a fair amount of heliskiing, which can be very dangerous. It's off-trail, downhill skiing from places reached by helicopter rather than by chair lift. I thanked him for being vulnerable with me, gave him a bear hug, and encouraged him to consider seeing a therapist to explore further what he had confided in me. He declined and said that sharing his thoughts just then was good enough.

If I could turn back time, I would have insisted he see someone. Father Richard prayed for me and made it clear I had done nothing wrong and now I had to forgive myself. "Kimberly,"

he said, “Forgiving yourself will take time as will reconciling how you feel about God. Just give it time.” Even though I knew it was perfectly normal to feel disillusioned by God’s unwillingness to intervene on that fateful day and to feel guilty even if there was nothing I could have done, I was grateful for his perspective. Being encouraged to feel whatever I needed to feel was hugely important and healing.

A few days after meeting with Father Richard, I was fumbling around the internet, still wondering about the whereabouts of Nils’s soul, and I came across a book titled *Life After Death*, by Deepak Chopra. I had attended a talk by Deepak about what happens to the body and soul when we die. He’d said that a part of us never dies, a core consciousness (soul) that is eternal—timeless—and non-local. The physical body dies because it’s “local,” in space and time. Deepak said that he believes life as we know it is a projection created in our minds and that we have to die to the past in order to create a new future. His eyes lit up as he told us that he himself was looking forward to death. Remembering his sentiments brought me some comfort and a brief respite from worrying about Nils’s soul, because I was able to see death as a transformation into something new, and from this perspective, I could begin to believe Nils’s soul was free.

But moments like those were fleeting. In the ebb and flow of grief and confusion, one minute I’d feel comforted knowing where Nils’s soul was and then suddenly, waves of panic and doubt would overwhelm me. During one of these times, I went to see a London clairvoyant who was staying near Geneva. I knew it was a bit odd, but I felt pulled to do so, and I simply had to know where Nils was. I brought Nils’s wedding band with me. As she opened the door, it felt as though I were walking into a time portal. Her reddish-blond hair was pinned up but still wild and unkempt. She could have been a caricature of a fortune teller, or a hippie who’d just stepped out of 1969.

She invited me into the living room, and asked me to sit across from her at a table with a jeweled cloth draped over it. Without speaking, she pulled out cards and began reading them aloud. It was uncanny how spot-on each card was, how much it related to my life, and I was immediately drawn in. She told me someone very close to me had recently died, and I said I’d just lost my husband and was concerned about his soul in the afterlife. She asked if I’d brought anything of his, and I handed her Nils’s wedding band.

She closed her eyes for a moment, then opened them suddenly. She’d had a vision. She was able to recount Nils’s last day—including his final moments—without me sharing any of the

details. It was similar to the vision I had had of Nils's final moments. She said he had desperately tried to correct his actions but was unable to stop it. I was stunned.

Then she moved me toward a massage table, where she did a kind of energy clearing. At one point, she moved away from me and sat on the edge of a credenza, where she began swinging her legs back and forth like a child on a large chair. I was taken aback. When Nils would sit on a ledge, he'd swing his legs exactly like that. Then she told me: *Nils is here. He's in the room right now*, and she spent a few minutes talking to him. For a moment, I felt his presence, maybe because this clairvoyant was so adamant that he was there, but I don't think so. *I felt him*. He whispered ever so softly in my ear that he was sorry for leaving and causing me so much pain and suffering. He explained that he had tried to stop it but couldn't. He asked for my forgiveness and reminded me how much he loved me and that he would always be with me.

This was no hallucination. We hear what we are ready to hear, see what we are ready to see, and feel what we are ready to feel. I must have been ready, as I so wanted a connection with him. No tears were flowing from my eyes, but my heart was filled with the gentle rain of my soul. I softly expressed my eternal love for him and that I forgave him. I knew my friends would think I was crazy, but it was what I needed to do to feel some peace and comfort so I could get to the next moment, the next day, and the day after that.

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I had so many profound experiences of healing and peace during the first year after Nils's death—but they were like butterflies in a windstorm. They were just *moments*, but they added up and helped me take tiny steps toward healing, despite the lingering frustration, doubt, and confusion. I call these surprising moments of peace, clarity, and volition—even in the darkest of times—*Unknown Grace*. Although I was unaware of it at the time, Grace was with me throughout these dark times, guiding, comforting, holding, and steadying me.

One morning in particular just three or four days after Nils died, I found myself overcome with grief and collapsed on the kitchen floor against a cabinet. As if pulled or pushed, I can't say which, I reached over to the doggie drawer and opened it. I put my hand in the drawer and pulled out a piece of paper with "The Promises" from the Big Book, the main text describing the Twelve Step Fellowship with forty-two stories of men and women who have recovered from

addiction. I had no idea why this copy of *The Promises* was in a kitchen drawer, let alone the doggie drawer; I had no recollection of putting it there. I began reading it aloud:

If we are painstaking about this phase of our development, we will be amazed before we are even halfway through.

*Promise 1: We are going to know a new freedom.*

*Promise 2: We will not regret the past nor wish to shut the door on it.*

*Promise 3: We will comprehend the word serenity.*

*Promise 4: We will know peace.*

*Promise 5: No matter how far down the scale we have gone, we will see how our experience can benefit others.*

*Promise 6: That feeling of uselessness and self-pity will disappear.*

*Promise 7: We will lose interest in selfish things and gain interest in our fellows.*

*Promise 8: Self-seeking will slip away.*

*Promise 9: Our whole attitude and outlook upon life will change.*

*Promise 10: Fear of people and of economic insecurity will leave us.*

*Promise 11: We will intuitively know how to handle situations which used to baffle us.*

*Promise 12: We will suddenly realize that God is doing for us what we could not do for ourselves.*

Are these promises extravagant? We think not. They are being fulfilled among us—sometimes quickly, sometimes slowly. They will always materialize if we work for them. Even in the darkest of days, I knew I was being held and I was going to stay sober throughout the grief process. These moments I call Grace.

The Promises reminded me that despite the unspeakable pain and grief, this experience would ultimately benefit someone, that at some point, something good would come of this nightmare. I felt as if I were being hugged or placed in the palm of someone's hand, wrapped in a sense of security, knowing I would survive. I realized in that moment I would not allow myself to become a bitter widow. I also knew I had to let myself experience the dark emotions. I was assured it wouldn't happen overnight—I would have years ahead of me—but somehow, some way, I knew deep down I was going to be okay.

Grace is like that. It's given freely and unmerited. Grace arises for sinners and saints, with the lonely, suffering, and the bereft, as well as the joyful, the happy, and the hopeful, for

junkies in the bowels of the city and yogis secluded in an ashram, for those who committed suicide, considered suicide, and those sitting on the kitchen floor deciding to live.

I have come a long way since those early days, weeks, and months. Some days, all I could manage was to sit on the floor in silence. Some days I quietly raged; some days I prayed. There is no linear path or timeline out of grief. What I've known for a long time even though I had a lot of doubts during this period, is that I was being held by an Unknown Grace. My body and mind were weak, but my spirit was wide open to receive all the Grace pouring into me. My higher power now feels like *Energy*. It's unifying. It's in everyone and everything. In essence, we are God. God is no longer outside of me. It's a beautiful energy that can be experienced in all living and non-living things. And this Energy was with Nils, too. Even in his darkest moments, even in his despair, he was being held.

In latter part of 2012, after nineteen months of recovering, I met an amazing man named Craig, who patiently and lovingly gave me the space and support I needed to continue to move through my grief. With Craig, I began to explore a new dimension of spirituality through Hinduism. He invited me to Laguna Beach, California, to meet his friend Swami Vishwananda, who is considered a holy man. He thought that having a private meeting with him may help me, so I went. In addition, there was a small private *Satsang* (spiritual gathering) that involved some singing and receiving a *Darshan* (blessing) from him. Leanne, a close friend of Craig's, was kind enough to guide me through the experience. Today, she is one of my dearest friends, too. We are transparent with one another and laugh every time we speak. I love the wonderful surprises that come from blindly saying yes.

A month or so later, Craig was traveling to India with some friends and encouraged me to come along. My heart was already there, but not always trusting my decisions, I contacted Cynthia, my current sponsor, and asked what she thought. Without hesitation, she said, "It's India!" I shared our itinerary, which would include Varanasi, Rishikesh, and the Maha Kumbha Mela, and she responded, *Go, go go!*" She told me India is the most spiritual place on the planet. I also wanted my mom to feel comfortable about me traveling so far from home with someone I hardly knew, so she agreed to speak with Craig in a kind of interview. They had a great conversation, and before I knew it, I was on a plane to India with Craig and his friends, Huner and Beverly. It was early 2013.

Our trip began in Varanasi, on the banks of the Ganges River, one of the most sacred sites in India. Hindus go there to die and be cremated on the river's banks, which is considered a great blessing. Thousands arrive every morning at sunrise to bathe in Ganga's waters, believing they will be blessed with good luck, and others come to pray. Some tourists believe visiting Varanasi brings blessings to them. The area is quite death-positive and full of rituals for accepting and even celebrating death.

We connected with Swami Vishwananda at a small local shop. The streets were teeming with people walking, riding bikes, motorcycles, and rickshaws, considerably busier than midtown Manhattan. There was so much energy in the air, and a beautiful spiritual stillness as well. Swami Vishwananda invited us to join about fifteen of his devotees on a boat ride on the Ganges to offer flowers in remembrance of loved ones. A *devotee* is someone who shows respect and interest to someone or something. I've been a devotee of self-improvement and inner development most of my life. We felt fortunate to be invited to join this auspicious ceremony and to spend the time with Swami Vishwananda in this holy place.

Early in the evening, we boarded a large wooden boat and pushed off into the holy river. Standing next to me was a lovely devotee, elegantly draped in a white sari. Her name was Anuprabha, and she asked, "Who will you be thinking of when you set that beautiful dish of flowers on the Ganga?" I briefly shared what had happened with Nils and that I was taking a leap of faith that this small action might help him find his way home. We made an immediate connection, and we're still close.

As the bright-red Indian sun was setting, we stopped in front of the sacred staircase alongside the river, called a *ghat*, where the dead were being cremated in an open fire. I could hear the beautiful bells ringing in the distance, as bodies were brought to the site and burned in sacred ceremony. People, each holding a handful of flowers and a candle, were praying and celebrating their loved one's life and death. It was a gorgeous ritual; I was in awe of the simplicity and purity.

Time stood still. Then the captain of our boat gave us each a dish of colorful flowers with a lit votive candle and encouraged us to celebrate our loved ones who had died by placing our flowers on the river as a symbol of our love and faith that their spirits had moved on. I looked across the boat and saw Craig standing there all in white with his right hand on his heart. He was smiling from ear to ear as he gently nodded to me. I could feel a divine energy in that

moment—it was electric, it was Grace. Several people on the boat were singing a Hindu *mantra* (a song repeated as a meditation) that elevated the purity of the experience and seemed to welcome the presence of those who had passed away. They sang *Om Namah Shivaya* over and over in a slow, almost hypnotic way. This mantra's meaning is to know and understand our deepest self, and its sound vibration attunes to our deepest nature and intention. I was able to feel all this while witnessing the rituals at the burning ghat, and it was all deeply consoling.

Then I placed a dish of flowers on the water and thanked Nils for loving me and for all he had taught me—how to laugh, be in the moment, and treasure every experience. He loved me with passion and fervor. He was funny and kind, magnanimous and adventurous. He was and always will be my love. He was and always will be pure light and joy. The candle I lit in honor of him was so bright that it lit up the water. This was no coincidence; for Nils's light always shone brightly when he was alive, and it was clear that it was still shining like a sparking sapphire in the sun. I smiled as I looked up at the full moon and felt Nils's presence all around me. After years of searching for Nils's soul, I was surrounded by pure love, energy, and Grace. And in that moment, many years after Nils's passing, I realized the answer to my question: *Yes, there is life after death*. Life for me. Life for Nils. Life for his children. The darkness I thought Nils was trapped in disappeared, and all that was left was light and energy—pure, beautiful, and bright. And I *knew* this experience of light was possible because of the darkness I had experienced for so long. How best to see the light, but in the dark?



