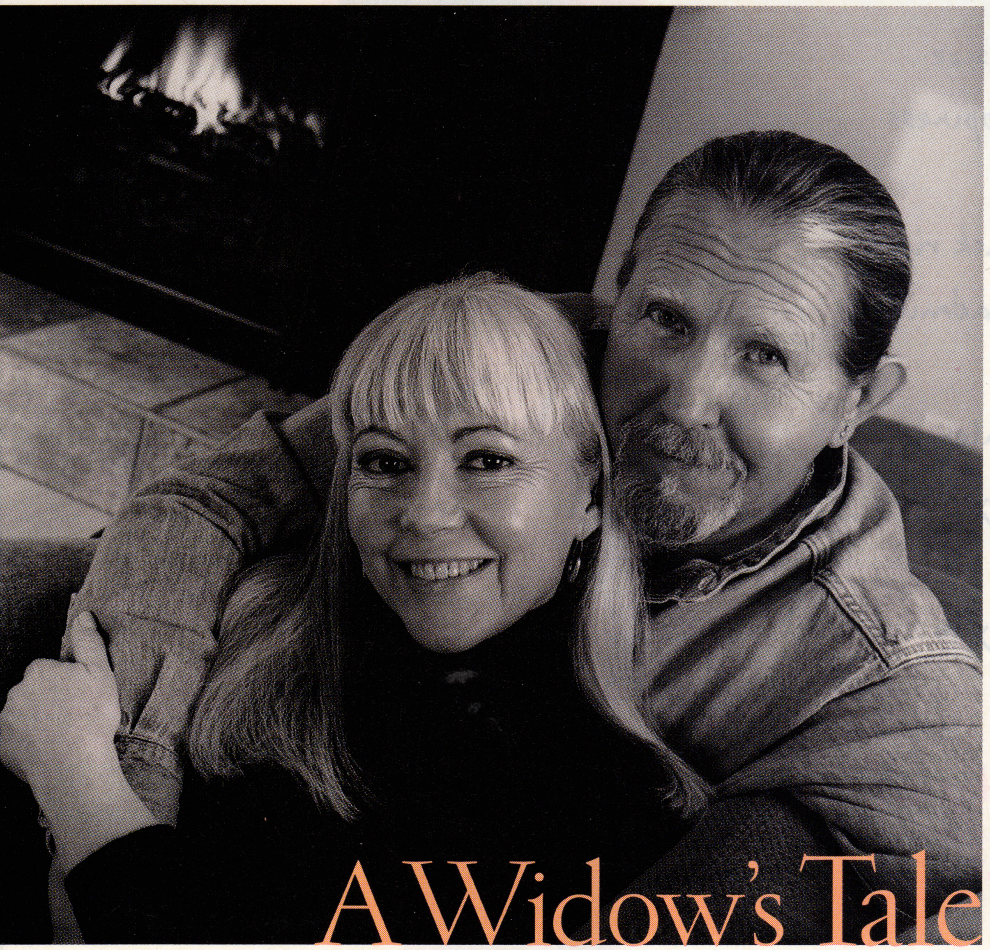

Happy together: the author with her husband, Ray Pokerwinski

DONNA TEREK

# A Widow's Tale

Brian died when I was 40; Ray came into my life at 43. Now, at 51, something strangely wonderful has happened: I have both of them.

We're standing face-to-face, close enough to touch, to whisper, to feel each other's heartbeats. Only we can't. Something separates us, a pane of cold glass running the length of the barren room in which we stand. This, I'm thinking, must be how it feels to visit a loved one in prison—reassuring in a way, but mostly wrenching. Distracted, I glance away for a moment, and when I turn back, he's gone. It's just me, the pane of glass, and my own dreary reflection.

Pane of glass. Pain of separation. This same scene played over and over in my dreams for the first year after Brian died. We had celebrated our fifth anniversary just a month before his heart attack. At 40, I was left longing for the life we'd expected to have together, and the dreams only renewed my grief.

Now when I dream of Brian, it's different. He's sprawled on a grassy slope, looking down at my house—the house where I live with my new husband, Ray. Ray and I are in the sunny front yard, pruning an arbor of roses (Brian's favorite). We notice Brian watching us and stroll up to say hello. For a while, we all sit on the hillside, laughing at my dead husband's outrageous and stunningly profane tales and impressing him with our own adventure stories. I'm feeling pure joy—at seeing Brian, at being with Ray, at my good fortune for having the love of two men I admire and adore. The sun slides lower, the air turns cool, and we invite Brian to come inside. But he says he can't stay, and we all understand why.

I awake with a sense of contentment instead of the desolate aching that used to linger for days. And it strikes me how the old and the new dreams symbolize Brian's place in my life and heart—how it's shifted and evolved in the ten years since he

## To Help You Move On

James William Worden wrote the classic *Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy: A Handbook for the Mental Health Practitioner* (Springer, 1991, $29) with therapists in mind. But it's a valuable resource for anyone coping with the loss of a loved one.

died and the seven years since I met Ray.

It's been a true evolution, gradual for the most part, punctuated by significant turning points. The most startling was the transition from wife to widow, a shift my mind was incapable of making for the first few years. As I saw it, Brian's life had ended but our marriage had not, and believing that I still had a soul mate somewhere, inaccessible though he might be, comforted me as nothing else could. Beside my bed sat a picture of Brian, one eyebrow raised like an Irish John Belushi; shots of him working intently at his desk decorated the space above my computer. In photos and in spirit, Brian occupied every room of my house, and, just as I had when he was alive, I talked to him throughout the day.

Perhaps because Brian's death was premature (he was 43) and dramatic (just hours after finishing one of the biggest projects of his newspaper career), and because he was a spirited and much beloved character, tributes continued long after the last funeral flowers faded. Pictures and plaques were hung in public places, awards were given in his name, and friends still celebrated his birthday. I showed up for every ceremony, large or small, trying to make sure that Brian Patrick Aloysius Michael Dennis Flanigan was remembered not as an icon, but as the iconoclast he really was. I was the protector of his memory, and that was cool, in a way. I felt like Yoko Ono, only nicer and better-dressed.

When I met Ray, I was still in wife mode, or so I thought. But something had already started to change inside, so subtly that I hadn't noticed until one night when I was talking long-distance to a married male friend. It was one of those easy, rambling conversations where, because of a common history, similar values, or the same quirky sense of humor, you don't have to explain yourself. As we talked, I felt a new yearning—not for the guy on the other end of the line, but for someone who, like him, shared my outlook on life. After I hung up, I realized that part of the ache I still felt so many months after Brian's death was specifically for Brian—the 5 foot 9 tough-talking ex-Marine who had a soft spot for roses and kids—but part of it was a more generic longing for a kindred spirit

DEBBIE DRECHSLER

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here on earth. The words "partner" and "lover" didn't enter my mind; I wasn't ready to let them. But I was ready for a soul-worthy comrade.

Ray was that person. I sensed it the first time we talked on the phone and knew it for sure when, over a lunch that stretched into a whole afternoon, we confided our dreams (cross-country motorcycle trips), values (independence, individuality, sincerity), and tastes (tattoos, multiple earrings, and the same alternative music station). But I thought it only fair to warn Ray that I still felt married to Brian and wasn't sure when, if ever, I'd be ready for real dating.

If my devotion to a dead husband seemed kooky or creepy, Ray didn't let on, and his benign reaction snagged him a spot in my heart where the hole was starting to heal. "If we end up just being friends," he said at the end of that first lingering lunch, "then at least we'll each have made a new friend—and that's always a good thing."

When I couldn't stop thinking about Ray that evening, I knew this good thing was going to amount to more than friendship. A week later, we were holding hands at the movies, and I had begun the process of "emotionally relocating" Brian, to borrow a term from psychologist James William Worden, author of a classic text on grief therapy.

Worden identified four "tasks of mourning" that must be accomplished before a bereaved person can move on: accepting the reality of the loss, experiencing the pain of grief, adjusting to life without the loved one, and "emotional relocation"—easing the deceased person out of a central role and transferring mental energy to other relationships. I hadn't heard of emotional relocation when I first allowed myself to laugh with Ray over the day's triumphs and trials instead of talking to a snapshot at my bedside, or when—finally—I packed away Brian's pictures and began scattering ones of Ray around the house. But when I stumbled across the term much later, it seemed a perfect description of how I felt.

Relocating. Not removing, not replacing. Ray wasn't another Brian. Taller, slimmer, and calmer (more Charles Bronson than John Belushi), he had a whole different set of talents, interests, and lovable traits. Thank goodness he was secure enough to accept that Brian would always be a part of my life—and his, too. A widow's new mate has to understand that: "He's not there to cancel out the old relationship; he's there to integrate it into his life as well," a grief counselor recently told me when I called to ask how the process usually goes for other couples.

DONNA TEREK

**Honoring my living husband had come to matter more than publicly paying tribute to my dead husband's memory.**

It helped, I think, that Ray still felt a bond with his first wife, Rox, the mother of his four grown children. Though they divorced when the kids were small and Rox died almost 20 years ago, she'll always be the high school sweetheart who touched off his teenage passion. When Ray describes how he felt watching Rox descend a staircase in her prom dress or the time he brought her a Pomeranian puppy zipped inside his suede jacket, what can I feel for him but more affection? And Ray, I know, reacts the same way to my tender memories of Brian. Ray's loving Rox and my loving Brian laid the groundwork for us to love each other.

But if we hadn't put some effort into finding new places for our lost loved ones, that foundation could easily have fallen apart. Brian's relocation in my life is complete now. That became clearer than ever on a couple of recent occasions. One was the tenth anniversary of his death. A longtime friend of Brian's was organizing an observance worthy of any obstreperous Irishman: storytelling, food, and festivities in a downtown pub. It would be a great time and a fitting tribute—and it was the last place I wanted to be. My first thoughts when I heard about the plan were not of Brian but of Ray. Tolerant as he is, I'd never ask him to sit through a whole evening of Brian-worship. Nor would I leave him home while I went off to play Yoko. Respecting and honoring my living husband had come to matter much more to me than publicly paying tribute to my dead husband's memory.

Privately, moments still surface when Brian sneaks back to stake a claim on my heart, but even those are different now. On my birthday, Ray and I were driving through snowy woods and fields. We'd spent a long weekend snowshoeing in forests of pine, cedar, and hemlock, and at the end of our last day, the sun slanted through branches and threw sparkles on the snow. Ray was talking about a cottage he and Rox had once thought of buying. I was listening until the opening strains of a tune on the radio caught my attention: Linda Ronstadt and James Ingram singing *Somewhere Out There,* a song that always reminds me of Brian in the most weepy way. Tears began to pool in the corners of my eyes, and my thoughts drifted. Suddenly Ray, oblivious of what was playing on the radio and in my mind, said, "I'm so glad we met, and you fell in love with me, and now you're my wife. It was just meant to be."

"I'm a very lucky woman," I said, fully focused on Ray again but aware of a peripheral presence. As in those recent dreams, I sensed that Brian was watching, reminding me that someone loves me not only somewhere out there, but also very close to home. And that's where my heart belongs. H