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**EXCERPT: A Journey Well Taken: Life After Loss, by Elaine Williams**

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Author's Note:

My original intent in writing this story was as a catharsis for myself, a self-induced therapy if you will. I don't pretend to hold all the answers, however, this story is written entirely from the heart and I hope it resonates with other women.

Grief and loss take us on a sometimes gut-wrenching, emotional roller coaster ride. As much as people who care about us want to help, they are the helpless ones in their understanding. While writing this personal and often painful story, the conviction grew in me that other women needed to hear it.

If I have learned nothing else, I do know that the capacity of the human heart allows grief the time it needs to heal.

However, there is healing.

## The Beginning

My heart felt ripped out, a feeling I had never experienced before. I felt clarity in the moment and confusion over where I was going, all at the same time. I wanted to cry at the injustice of becoming a widow at 47 years of age. I had three boys and they each needed their father. My husband Joseph had always said the boys could get along without him. I'd tried to tell him he was wrong. Our boys, 11, 18, and 19, needed him more than ever. He had said he was certain they would be okay. They were his boys, they were strong. How can you be okay when you lose your father? Their ages didn't matter; the loss was real.

I hated that my kids saw their father waste away. I know it bothered Joseph tremendously, but it wasn't something we talked about or could control. It was a difficult way to remember a loved one. He didn't like anyone to see him like that, with sunken eyes and barely weighing anything at the end. He always joked, right up to the last 18 hours. It hurts me that the kids will remember how he looked when he died. But it raises me up to know they also saw how he died—without complaint, fighting and doing his best to the end. Going about life the best he could.

My friend Larry told me he'd seen Joseph out and about seven months before he died. They were at a trade show of some sort. My husband asked Larry

if he saw anything he liked at the show. Larry replied, "Yeah, but it's kind of expensive." He then recalled that my husband laughed and said, "You might as well buy it. You're a long time dead." That showed Joseph's philosophy of life. Live while you have life. My husband lived right up until he died. Some people give up. I'm not saying he was a saint or anything near it—he'd laughed at the sheer outrageousness of the suggestion. He lived every day. He had a good time. In all of our 23 years together, I don't ever remember him being grumpy or having a bad day. If he drank too much and didn't feel good the next morning, he still went into work.

Joseph died the way you think a man should die. Like in an old Western movie, with courage and dignity. Not once did he say "Why me?" If he ever thought it, he never said so. He was very matter-of-fact when telling anyone he was sick with cancer. If people were interested, he'd share the different things he was doing to beat it. He had elected not to do chemo and radiation, but instead went the route of alternative medicine.

Emotion rocked me up and down while my family lived with the knowledge that cancer was in our midst. Emotion and determination were the glue that kept me together for the entire 11 months he was ill. I always said to myself, "No matter what happens, we'll be okay." I still believe that, even now, almost five years after his diagnosis. There are still moments of loneliness that

transcend the grief, but it is true time has a way of smoothing and healing loss. Memories of our life together aren't forgotten, but remembered with a smile or reminiscent grin. I understand what it means when they say something is bittersweet. It applies to memories of a life shared and then broken apart. I feel we all heal in different ways and there is no prescribed way to go about it; it is each individual's private journey. To some degree, we have the help of friends, family, and loved ones, but ultimately it's our show.

It has been a difficult journey these many months and years. The second 6 months I found more difficult than the first six months. The first several months I was caught up with keeping myself busy with business, working, and making money. I had to deal with death certificates, lawyers and social security, then there were insurance claims and survivor benefits and hospitalization coverage. The invoices for the hospital tests the last months of Joseph's life were still coming in the mail six months after he'd been gone. We had a car payment I continued to pay, even though the bank told me I could stop since the car loan death benefit would pay off the balance. I had excellent credit, but if I had followed the bank's advice, I would have had a mark against my credit since it took six months to receive the final payoff. We had bought the car three weeks before we found out Joseph was sick, so after requesting all of Joseph's doctor

reports, the insurance company finally paid off the remaining balance. These practical, mundane matters kept me focused on day-to-day living.

I remember after Joseph died I suddenly felt I had a lot of time to do whatever I needed to do, as if the days had grown longer. I could now leave the house, whereas I'd had the constant thought the previous eleven months that I had to make sure Joseph's pain medicine was covered or there weren't any doctor appointments that may be missed. It's like I couldn't figure how to pick up the previous threads of my life, since life for almost a year had centered on Joseph's illness.

My strength in keeping myself on an even keel was out of concern for my kids' welfare. I had no time to be lonely or even think about being lonely and it was easier handling the daily living that way. I kept very busy. For me, the hurt seemed to magnify and became more noticeable about five months after Joseph's passing, right around our first wedding anniversary. It was a gnawing emptiness that at first hurt more when I saw other couples together.

The date of our anniversary my sister-in-law, my mother, and my oldest son called me on the phone. Their concern meant a lot, but I knew I would have to figure out how to deal with these dates in a way that worked for me. My kids took a picture of Joseph and I from happier times and had it enlarged and framed. They presented it to me with a card in which they had all written a little

something. I was incredibly touched and I recall hugging each of them while I sobbed; their thoughtfulness something I'll never forget.

The first Christmas after Joseph's death was the most difficult in my memory. I went into a sort of depression, a mixture of sadness and self-pity, two weeks before the holiday and a few weeks after. I didn't even know it was depression pulling me down until one day that heavy, sad feeling really hit me. I was so terribly alone and lonely. In my room, I would allow myself the luxury of tears. I use the words "allow myself" because for some reason I felt guilty hiding and crying.

Our family always spent Christmas at my parent's house with my four brothers, my sister and all their families. It had been that way for years. I had always enjoyed being with family at this time, carrying on the tradition started when we were kids. However, the first year it was very difficult being around my happy, boisterous family, seeing the complete units. Mother, father, children. Boyfriend and girlfriend. Yes, it hurt. It wasn't jealousy, I was just made acutely aware of the fact that I no longer had that complete unit. Sometimes it is so true that you don't realize what you've lost until it's no longer there. I walked around with this dull ache in my chest that wouldn't go away. I put on the face, without even thinking about it, so everything would look fine; everyone would think I was fine. I could handle anything life shoves in my face. I'm strong, I told myself

repeatedly. I don't need anyone. That was my litany. I will not embarrass myself by crying or being needy. I couldn't stand to be a needy, whining person. I understand it in other people but I told myself I'd never be needy or desperate. How could I embarrass myself by showing the true emotion inside, maybe even shedding tears in public? That was not me. Perhaps little snatches of it slip out now and then, but never all the gut-wrenching emotion I kept hidden.

Especially in front of my kids, I remained strong. I didn't want them to be scared or worried that I was cracking up. Whether they knew it or not, they needed me more than I needed to break down. That was my thought, right or wrong. And maybe that is how my kids faced the world also. They kept it all together and sometimes I just wanted them to come to me so I could hold them close and reassure them that everything would be okay. I wanted to remember what our lives were like before everything turned upside down.

The boys rarely cried in front of me. They were really men in the making, taking it on the chin. I know we all had our moments of crying, but I only saw glimpses here and there. My boys kept their own counsel and perhaps they were taking their cue from me.

Many times, I was operating in a revved-up mode.

In hindsight, I know keeping my emotions in control was just a way of handling life. At some point, I began to want someone in my life to fill up the

empty hole inside me. I would be driving down the road, and I'd hear a song that struck a chord and it resonated in me. I'd start crying; deep, wracking sobs pulled up from the depths. Where did that come from? Just when I think I'm on an even keel, something as simple as a song sets me off. Was I heading for a breakdown?

I kept looking outside myself for help, all the time drawing closer to the truth that all answers can be found within. There are no quick-fix answers. I saw a hypnotist to discover the contentment within myself. She was one of the first ones to direct me on the road to finding the happiness within. She made a recording of our session so I could listen to the tape. I have a CD of brain music that I listen to when I meditate or do yoga. It stimulates the parts of the brain that deal with creativity and hope. I'm always willing to learn and listen. I've worked on myself for most of my adult life, but never more concentrated than in the last several years. It's like I'm both the experiment and the mad scientist directing the whole thing. Sometimes it is a scary prospect, thinking I was in charge of everything.

The Very Beginning



July 2003 began the end of our life together when my husband was diagnosed with cancer of the esophagus. Joseph and I had been together since 1982, married in 1983. Our oldest son Jordan was born in 1984, Lawrence in 1986, and Carl, my youngest, in 1992. Joseph loved his boys and when I found out I was pregnant at 35 with our youngest, it was a real surprise. However, neither my husband nor I would have traded our experiences with our kids for anything.

In 2004, our lives changed forever. The family unit was broken by Joseph's death from esophageal cancer, and none of us knew what the future held. Many times in the eleven months he was ill I felt we were all stumbling around in the dark.

I said to my husband during a meal in early June 2003, before we knew anything about his cancer, "Why are you burping so much?" I was a bit annoyed and couldn't believe how much he was doing it during the meal. He wasn't usually like that and all I could think about was his mother before she passed away, she used to do it all the time. She'd died only three weeks before in May. Life had been stressful because for about two months we drove almost every day an hour and a half to see her, until she died. There had been a lot of tension between my husband and his sister the last few years due to their mother's living arrangements, but they'd patched things up for their mother's sake.

That day my husband just said he couldn't help the burping. Then he mentioned he'd thrown up a couple times that week for no reason and had lost some weight. It didn't seem too worrisome until a week later, when he got on the scale and said he had lost 12 pounds.

I talked Joseph into going to a doctor. My husband hardly ever went to the doctor; in fact he usually avoided them at all costs. He was rarely sick and didn't take any medication except something for gout. He'd had two outbreaks of gout several years before, so he took the medicine as a preventative. My husband had gone to see a doctor in February, three months before, for some pressure in his chest. No other symptoms. They did a stress test, everything came back fine and we were told not to worry. At the time Joseph felt something wasn't right, but he couldn't pinpoint it other than a pressure in the chest area.

Joseph had been retired from work since October the year before, and now his schedule was flexible so we made the doctor appointment right away. After the exam, the doctor said it would be a good idea to go for an endoscopic procedure so they could rule out anything serious. He sent my husband that day for the test. By this time, I became alarmed at the increased frequency of the burping and throwing up. After the endoscopy, a procedure where they inserted a tube down his throat and looked at the esophagus and stomach, we stopped at a fast-food place. He ordered a cheeseburger, but he couldn't keep even one bite

down. This was the first time the stark reality of the situation hit me. As we drove off, it became glaringly obvious how terrible this could be. How can someone survive if you can't eat?

The doctor called early the next morning. He wanted my husband to come in because the test had shown something, some type of lesion. We were told he needed to go see a specialist so an appointment was scheduled with a gastroenterologist who would do further testing to discover exactly what was going on.

Worry and fear began to gnaw at me, and time seemed to move slowly and with unreal precision. I felt as if all this was happening to someone else. We were afraid to mention the worst-case scenario we could think of, what we were afraid it could be. Cancer. My thoughts raced wildly, but there was no stemming the fear.

Sometimes he could eat normally and at other times, he couldn't even drink soup. My husband especially enjoyed steak and potatoes but suddenly he couldn't eat anything like that. After two days of only sporadically keeping food down, he was very hungry and there seemed no rhyme or reason to why food stayed down or why it came back up.

We told the two older boys right away that Dad was going for tests so we could find out what was going on with the throwing up. We told our youngest,

who was 10 at the time, merely that Dad had to see the doctor. We didn't want to scare the kids, and how to handle this was a tough call.

The gastroenterologist ordered a second endoscopy and there would be a biopsy. My husband wasn't looking forward to it, but he knew there was no choice. He did not react well to any kind of anesthesia and he usually was given extra doses to keep him under sedation. This meant it also took him longer to come out of it. The doctor was relatively young and Joseph joked with him as they prepared him to be sedated for the procedure. I waited in the room they'd assigned him for recovery and the procedure seemed to take forever. Finally, they wheeled my husband back into the room and after about an hour, he was no longer groggy. He got dressed and we waited for the doctor to come see us.

The doctor and a nurse took us into a small room and closed the door. I wondered why the nurse was there. The doctor confirmed there were two "lesions" on my husband's esophagus and a larger one at the junction of his esophagus and stomach. They took samples but he said we had to wait for the test results to see if it was cancerous. I could tell by the doctor's face that maybe he knew more. Joseph sensed it also. Very calmly and matter-of-factly he said, "So tell me Doc, is it cancer?"

The doctor did not want to commit to that until the test results were in, but Joseph pressed him for a definite answer.

I said, "You must know. You must see this all the time." The doctor looked at me, considerable compassion in his eyes. He admitted they looked like they were cancerous, but until the test results came in he could not say positively.

I remember Joseph sitting there, not saying anything. Even though I'd asked for the truth I felt shocked. Disbelieving. This entire scenario felt incredibly unreal and out of sync. This could not be true. Emotion took me on a great, overwhelming ride. I started crying, noisily. I couldn't stop it. The nurse put an arm around me. Now I knew why she was there. I was so overtaken I shook. The doctor put an arm around me next, saying it would be all right. Joseph just said to me, "It'll be okay. It'll be okay, Hon."

Despite everything, I've always been full of hope. Vividly, I still see that moment. Totally engulfed in grief, sadness and fear I cried so hard my entire face was wet and my body shook and heaved with loud, wracking sobs. I stared at my husband who stood silently across from me, taking it all in. It took me a long time to calm myself, and at some point Joseph put an arm around me. That was the beginning of the never-ending numb confusion. What does it really mean when they say it will be all right?