

A Silhouette in Gray: Life in the Aftermath of Suicide

*Although the wind
blows terribly here,
the moonlight also leaks
between the roof planks
of this ruined house.*

Izumi Shikibu (trans. Jane Hirshfield)

If it's going to happen, it will be when I'm relaxed, unprepared, away from all my safe places. Always, it is like slipping on ice—once balance is lost, there is no way to halt the effect of gravity. Weeks might pass without incident, and then the angle of the sun is my undoing, or the sight of a certain brand of tea. The ground tilts, and suddenly I'm back there, watching my world come undone again. How many times to watch that awful day unfold, to still find it a shock?

I'm driving my son to school, peaceful after the rush to leave the house. He watches the people and houses we pass, smiling. I glance at him in the rear-view mirror, smiling too. Stopped at the traffic lights, there's a moment where my mind is half-floating, like a helium balloon losing air. An ambulance passes us, running a red light, and abruptly I feel nauseous, my stomach pulled along in the wake of the siren. I've fallen sideways into the memory of another ambulance, one which arrived too late. In a ghostly overlay, I also see fire trucks, police cars, first responders in blue uniforms, filling the cul-de-sac where my parents-in-law lived. Their house is smouldering, halfway gone to ash, and my husband's car is parked in the driveway. Nobody will let me near the house. Nobody will tell me where my husband is. A police chaplain stands beside me. He asks if I have someone to mind my toddler, Raphael, who is clutched to my chest like a shield. The chaplain offers Raphael a police officer teddy bear, and suggests we sit in his car, marked in bold red letters: Chaplain Unit. Over and over I ask him, in panic verging on outrage, *Why are you here? Why do you need to be here?* Despite my anger, the chaplain doesn't leave my side. He tells me he's a support person, in case I need to talk. And his voice is very calm, but I can see his hands are trembling as he hands my son the teddy bear.

All of this was years ago now, and it's also there, just across the road.

To pull myself back to where I am—my own car moving, the steering wheel under my hands, the immediacy of my need to see the road—I focus again on my son in the back seat of the car, and home in on the periphery of my vision as if feeling my way along a cliff’s edge. The voice of a grief counsellor reaches me through the layers of melding past and present: ‘What can you see, hear, touch, smell?’ Concrete elements of reality become a means to steady myself, to walk away from the canyon ahead, the vertigo of flashbacks. In the rear-view mirror, I see my son’s legs dangling over the edge of his booster seat. He wears shoes with lightning bolts that flash electric blue as he runs. He’s too tall to carry everywhere now, too buoyant with boyhood to contain for long. A sharp inhalation fills the upper reaches of my chest, and I can hear the ambulance is far away now. Both ambulances are far away.

On the morning of September 8, 2017, my husband Gabriel ended his life by multiple means after a long struggle with chronic headaches. He was thirty-two, and I was twenty-nine. In the days before his death, Gabriel commenced treatment with high-dose intravenous ketamine, which he had heard about through a support network for veterans. Infusions of ketamine were administered over several days by a nurse practitioner at a pain management clinic. Gabriel requested the maximum legal dosage of ketamine for each infusion and he refused the anti-nausea medication that usually accompanies treatment. I drove Gabriel to and from appointments with our son Raphael in the backseat, or Gabriel’s mother helped out with lifts if treatment finished late at night.

The infusions affected Gabriel enormously, causing him to exhibit symptoms of psychosis, but following these periods he seemed to return to his normal lucid self. He’d lapse into periods where he thought hours had passed and he was late for some appointment or meeting, when in fact it had been ten minutes since he last checked the clock. Or I’d catch him in a whispered conversation with himself: *That’s it. That’s what I’ll do. It will be better like that.* His mind was often far away. It would seem he was daydreaming, but his face was sad, sagging under some weight. Then I’d catch his gaze and he would smile, briefly himself again.

I’d researched ketamine on the internet, but this wasn’t enough to equip me for what I faced, caring for Gabriel at home. I assumed there was a doctor managing Gabriel’s treatment, but I later found out the doctor who ran the ketamine clinic was based several states away in California. When I entered or exited the clinic with Gabriel, nobody talked to me about what to look for in terms of adverse reactions. Three days before he died, I insisted Gabriel call the clinic to tell them he was feeling worse. I’d been taking him for walks in the sun and bringing

him everywhere I went with Raphael, to try to boost his mood and to make sure he wasn't alone. I listened as Gabriel made the phone call. The nurse practitioner answered, and they talked for about two minutes. The nurse practitioner assured Gabriel he would feel better in a few days, and the call ended.

Gabriel only made it a few days before he found a permanent solution to his pain. In those days of waiting and hoping for improvement, his pain increased and subsided in waves. When he died it was his first attempt at suicide, and he made sure there was no way to survive. The part of him that was driven and unhesitating in the face of danger—a part of him I loved—was also what took him from me, and from all who loved him.

If Gabriel made a decision, it was like a train switching tracks, only looking ahead to the destination. He was able to push his body in sometimes punishing ways in his search for a cure, and here the more extreme elements of his personality came to the fore. He eliminated gluten and dairy in the first year of the headaches, never giving in to the usual 'slip ups' that are a hallmark of such diets. In 2015, he fasted for thirty-seven days at a Jain ashram in Texas, after reading that fasting can induce a heightened state of healing and detoxification. He did things other people couldn't do, and he did them without hesitation. But prior to treatment with ketamine, Gabriel had not professed a desire to end his life. He had recently been promoted from his job as a personal trainer and fitness class instructor to Recreational Services Manager at the University of New Mexico. We had a trip to Mexico booked so he could see a specialist in stem cell therapy. Life was not straightforward, but it was mostly happy, mostly normal. His death was completely unexpected by me and all who knew him.

It is impossible for me to convey who my husband was through simple descriptions of him or accounts of his actions, yet this is the task I'm faced with in countless small and vast ways. Words fail me, where for the most part they have been my place of refuge. Above all, how do I convey who my husband was to our son, Raphael? How do I reconcile Gabriel's ending with who he was as a person, in my own mind and in my ongoing grief? Ultimately, there can be no resolution, and this is the 'non-end' with which I must live, uneasily.

Gabriel and I met in 2010 on the campus of the University of Western Australia, which Gabriel attended as an exchange student from the University of New Mexico. Gabriel had served as a US Marine before leaving the military to study Exercise Physiology. Although we were

studying different courses, the same administrative error had been made with our enrolment, so we happened to be together in the campus Administration Office.

‘I used to soothe the horses before we jumped,’ Gabriel said to me that first day, a sunny Tuesday in early August. I remember seeing Gabriel through the window before he entered the office, then he was sitting next to me. He wore a violet surf shirt and a brown beanie with a small peak, pulled low and slightly to the side. His eyes sparkled shades of umber in the sun. Dimples threatened to show the truth of his mischief. I knew I liked him right away, but I didn’t know the very particular ways I would come to love him.

‘The horses jumped?’ I played along, equal mischief rising.

‘How else could we get trained American horses into enemy territory?’

‘Oh, I hadn’t thought of that.’ Now I was starting to believe him. ‘So, you’re very good at calming animals? But how would you get them from the airplane to the ground?’

‘Wearing parachutes of course. We had to jump with them. It’s one of the things the Marines are known for.’

I started to laugh at this image, and then his resolve cracked into laughter too.

Always, Gabriel was like this, playful and full of good-natured humour, in spite of living with daily pain. His headaches had started after a car accident in Albuquerque in late 2009 and became much worse after a scuba-diving course in January 2010. He had travelled then with his father from the US to Thailand, en route to the Study Abroad program in Western Australia. They completed a three-week Vipassana (silent) meditation retreat on the island of Koh Phangan. Afterwards, Gabriel decided to participate in a five-day scuba diving certification taking place nearby. When he surfaced on the last day of the diving course, he was dizzy and nauseated. The pain in his head was so severe he saw spots across his vision. Based on their dive charts, the diving instructor was certain Gabriel couldn’t be suffering decompression sickness. From that day until his death, Gabriel experienced 24/7 headaches, later given the vague diagnosis of New Onset Persistent Daily Headaches, which pointed to neither a cause nor a solution. Some days the headaches were mild; other days, he found it difficult to stand or to conduct a conversation.

All the time, as I write about Gabriel, I want to say, in the present tense, *I wish that you could meet him*, as if he is alive but somewhere very far away. What I can say about Gabriel is that every decision he made was brave. He never took the easy way out. Specific elements of his

personality and background contributed to the nature of his death. This doesn't mean he is to blame for what happened.

Yet the reality of a conversation about suicide is that people make a judgement before any explanation can be given. If I mention my husband, if I talk about him using the past tense—as I must—people want to know more. They want an account of events, and far too often they want graphic details. My language frames reactions. A compassionate listener will understand that someone who commits suicide must have tried hard to keep going, possibly for months or years leading up to the event. However, if I'm questioned about Gabriel's death by someone lacking empathy or depth, then inevitably I must explain why I'm not angry with Gabriel, why I don't blame him for his absence in our lives. To talk about suicide can be a litmus test for compassion and insight.

Often, I don't have the energy to mention suicide as the cause of Gabriel's death because, for his sake, that requires further clarification. I'll say, 'He died in an accident,' and change the subject, or end the conversation. Always, I'm left feeling drained. There is no way to account for the liminal space of grief to someone who has not lived through loss. It's gray, endless gray. Gabriel's death does not define who he was to me. I don't want it to define who he was to anyone. But it does.

I wish that you could have met him.

As a child, Gabriel loved art and the outdoors. He was inquisitive in the extreme and had a knack for finding the most dangerous way to do a task. Friends loved him, but teachers found him difficult to manage. By the age of five, Gabriel was diagnosed with ADHD. His parents researched widely and found occupational therapists to help their son, only resorting to medication when it became clear it was necessary in the school environment. Gabriel told me he felt trapped inside his mind during the years he took ADHD medication. He scored highly in IQ tests, but often acted out, which resulted in frequent disciplinary action. His high school friends still talk about some of his adrenaline-fuelled stunts, which ranged from jumping off roofs to starting a high school trade in anime movies, using rare DVDs he had shoplifted.

Once he left school, Gabriel found purpose at an orienteering program for wayward teens. During his time there, a friend encouraged him to try out for the Marine Corps. With his love for physical exertion and his propensity to seek risk, Gabriel easily passed the entrance tests. He hoped to join the elite Special Operations Command wing of the Marines, but negative experiences with his commanding sergeant turned him from this path. Things happened to

Gabriel in the Marines that he would never discuss. His roommate later ended his life on live Facebook feed, making headlines across the US. After leaving the Marines, Gabriel decided to turn his love of exercise into a career. He found meditation and became interested in Taoism.

I could write whole books in tribute to the life Gabriel lived. He ran high ropes courses at the juvenile detention center in Albuquerque, working to boost the self-esteem of kids who were much like him in his youth. He facilitated team-building events with school groups and business people. After his death, his personal training clients, unaware of what had happened, continued to message his phone with a string of exercise-related questions. When I replied to his clients from my own phone—trying to figure out the least upsetting way to break the news, and to avoid a message notification that would say ‘From Gabriel’—they were devastated. I was told by several clients that Gabriel was more informed and empathetic than many physiotherapists and occupational therapists. He gave people his time because he genuinely took an interest in them. This doesn’t mean he was easy to be around. If he was set on an idea, it was almost impossible to go against him. He could be selfish in his determination to reach goals. As time passed, these attitudes mellowed, especially after Raphael was born. When Gabriel died, he was a very different person to the young man I met at UWA.

When we met, Gabriel was twenty-five and determined to re-claim the years of freedom he’d missed while in the Marines. Within weeks, we were on a road trip north to Kalbarri. Gabriel said he wanted ‘to see if we could get sick of each other’, but neither of us expected to become inseparable. By the end of that semester, we’d both deferred our studies and were making plans to live abroad together. In 2012, Gabriel and I married on a beach in Candi Dasa, Bali. It was meant to be a small wedding, just the two of us and a celebrant, but a party of about twenty Balinese officials joined us on the sand. We ordered food and drinks, and ended up having an impromptu beach celebration with our new friends.

Once my visa application was approved, I moved to the US to live with Gabriel. We made it our focus to find out what was causing his headaches, all of our savings devoted to this goal. We were fortunate to be able to live for several years with Gabriel’s parents, who also funded visits to doctors and naturopaths. Initially, Gabriel tried various forms of pain medication prescribed by his GP, neurologist and other specialists. He underwent dozens of diagnostic scans and blood tests. As years passed without any answers, Gabriel felt that

allopathic doctors had given up on his case. He became increasingly hopeful that traditional forms of healing would reveal the cause of the headaches.

In May 2015, we travelled to the Peruvian Amazon to work with a shaman at a retreat center. Gabriel researched every aspect of this trip, from the plants he would consume at the retreat, to the restaurants with the best reviews in nearby towns. He admired the work of Joseph Campbell, and it seemed to me he saw himself in the arc of the hero, on the cusp of transformation. He believed he would be cured in the Amazon, and in my own superstitious way, I believed this too, suppressing any scepticism for fear I would ruin the outcome.

We arrived by plane in Tarapoto, a town at the edge of the high jungle plateau between the Andes and the Amazon basin. From there, the journey was slower, over roads and rivers, through towns too small to be marked on maps. We hitched a ride out of Tarapoto, standing in the flat-bed of a truck, shoulder-to-shoulder with men returning to work on cocoa and coffee bean farms. The truck stopped in the village of Llamas, where we were told a driver would come to take us into the jungle. From a corner of the sun-bleached town square, our driver emerged and introduced himself as Rambo, smiling at us like we were old friends. He walked away across the square and returned driving a Datsun the colour of faded black jeans, dancehall music blasting through the open windows. As Rambo manoeuvred the car along muddy cliffs at speed, Gabriel sat beside him and chatted in Spanish. I watched from the backseat, wishing for a seatbelt, certain we would soon slide down into the vista of vines and waterfalls. Far below us, a land of tangled green on green stretched away, life immersed in fecund decay.

What I'm trying to convey, in relaying these memories and facts, is this: Gabriel was real, and he was imperfect, and I loved him very much—more than any of these words can express. He was unlike anyone else. I was hesitant about getting close to men and didn't have a string of relationships in my late teens or early twenties. I only had Gabriel. He was my person. I never hesitated over anything when it came to him. I don't want to talk about him in an essay on grief. He was real, and then, very suddenly, he was gone.

Death involves a pulling away, a tidal force of destabilisation, absence and leaving, that doesn't have a mirror, water rushing back—on this side at least. Sometimes the pulling away happens slowly and can be anticipated. Sometimes the pulling away is so fast you look over and realise half your life is gone, your breath sucked away with it. In that desert, even happy memories curl inwards, bone-dry and hooked, waiting to be stepped on in the dark.

Gabriel died in his parents' home while they were away at a meditation retreat. He was supposed to be heading to work. It would have been his first full day after taking a week off to undergo ketamine therapy. He slept maybe an hour or two the night before he died. When I carried Raphael out of our bedroom on the morning of September 8, 2017, Gabriel was already dressed for work. I was surprised to see this, and suggested he try to rest a little longer. However, he insisted he needed to check on his parents' house on the way to work. In particular, he wanted to make sure the water for their evaporative air-conditioner was turned off. Gabriel was conscious of the environment, so I believed his reasoning and explanation. He seemed mildly agitated, but I put this down to the lack of sleep. The day before, his symptoms had improved by the afternoon. He'd been well enough to visit his office and chat to work colleagues about the coming week.

Gabriel left our apartment around 9am, carrying a glass container of Bircher muesli that I'd made him for breakfast, as well as two large water bottles, which I watched him fill with alkaline water. At first, he rushed out without a word. I called him back so he could say goodbye properly to Raphael, who had started crying when the door closed. Gabriel returned and kissed Raphael's head twice. Once the door closed again, Raphael screamed and threw himself against a wall. He'd never reacted this way before. I picked Raphael up and we walked out onto the balcony overlooking our parked car. I held him so he could wave goodbye to Gabriel on the street below. Gabriel was talking to himself quietly as he walked towards our car. He looked up once, his face clear, and smiled. 'I'll see you tonight, beautiful,' he called.

Around 9:30am, a neighbour saw Gabriel looking out from the bay window at the front of his parents' house, distress across his face. Gabriel left the house, drove away and then returned, the neighbour said. These are the facts as observed. They tell me Gabriel tried to live.

The possibility that I tripped sidelong, headlong, into a crack in the face of time, into a nightmare realm where Gabriel has died, persists in my mind. It makes more sense than reality at times, so I let the fantasy linger. He might still exist if I can crawl out of this crack, pulling Raphael up by his arm behind me. Gabriel might come home from work, the water bottles empty, the muesli eaten, not needing to be scraped into the bin a week later when I summon the strength.

Based on the findings of the autopsy, Gabriel's death was an unplanned complex suicide, which is characterised by two or more methods being used, simultaneously or one after the other

(Eroğlu et al. np). The manner of his death was the source of disagreement within his family and at the coroner's office, where the Forensic Pathologist invited me to speak with him prior to finalising the death certificate. Gabriel's mother, Irene, sat beside me to offer support, her back straight, her eyes ringed with dark circles. To take the extra step of speaking to the next of kin was not protocol, the Pathologist informed me. Irene is a psychiatrist by profession. She will never call her son's death a suicide, and I will never use that word around her. More than that, I agree with her. There is no language for this type of loss.

For me, the last to speak to Gabriel on the morning he died, the term 'suicide' is barbed, too sharp to carry far, too entwined in my grief to pull away. Gabriel's absence is framed by the question of how lucid he was in his final moments. I don't think he was able to access higher order thinking in order to know what he was embarking on. However, it is true he died at his own hands. That part is indisputably true. So where does his death leave me? How do I reconcile the immensity of his presence with the violent nature of his death? The way he lived and the way he died are so divergent that I could be talking about two very different people, and one of them (who was also, apparently, my husband) took my husband away from me.

So much of how I think about Gabriel's death depends on how I define suicide. If I apply leniency in my definition—'They know not what they do'—I should extend that same mercy to every victim of suicide. But then it seems I'm inventing new categories of a word I never thought would touch me so closely, as intimate as a knife against my throat. Is it not enough to live without him? Why does there need to be any explanation beyond, *he is gone*? Some days I can set the need for an explanation aside, other days I'm the one holding the knife, demanding answers that lead me into further darkness.

After Gabriel's death, I couldn't stay in Albuquerque and see him everywhere he was not, so I returned to my family in Western Australia with Raphael. The primary force which carried me through the initial shock was Raphael. Caring for him necessitated acts of love across days, weeks, months. In this way, the time passed, dimly, out of my view. I was so tired, I didn't notice new routines forming around us, accumulating into a feeling of safety and hope. Only in looking back can I see what we survived together, and what we left behind.

In the equation of loss, Gabriel lost more than anyone. I live the truth of this as I watch our son grow up. The person Raphael looks to when he's mastered some new and miraculous skill, like catching a ball or writing his name: that's me. The person he looks to when he's frustrated and wants someone to blame for his Lego creation falling to pieces, or his hand

slipping off the monkey bars: that's also me. I never asked to have it all; but, in having it, I see so clearly what my husband, my love, misses every day in the myriad mundane and grand moments that make up a bond, a life.

I sometimes wonder what Gabriel would think of the choices I've made in his absence. I veer between honouring what I know he would want, to saying emphatically, *No, I can only manage this much. If I fall apart, I bring Raphael down with me.* I'm a different person from the one Gabriel loved—harder and more fragile in ways that thread together like a fibrous cord. I've had to embrace a life of autonomy, and I wouldn't relinquish that easily now.

'Did Daddy do it to himself, Mommy? How did he start the fire?' Raphael asks. He is five now. He knows what death is, but he doesn't know how to hold a question back, to leave the difficult parts hanging in the silence of mid-air.

I'm at the stove about to light the flame to cook porridge for breakfast. I turn to look him in the eyes, and I say, 'Daddy wasn't thinking clearly. A doctor prescribed medicine to help him, but it made his pain worse, and he couldn't think far ahead about what he was doing. He started a fire when he was in the kitchen.'

'But, how, Mommy? What did he do to start the fire?' He wants facts, not nebulous accounts of motivation. This is a sort of grace, but Raphael doesn't know that yet.

'He probably started it at the stove. He was found next to the stove. There was always paper on the kitchen counter, which we used for writing shopping lists and notes. I don't know exactly how Daddy started the fire because the thing with fire is this: it burns everything away. It is extremely dangerous and gets out of control quickly. We know always to be careful around a flame.' I emphasise my last words, as much to help myself as to warn Raphael. Some days I can't look at the stove, much less stand near it, even in a new home, far away from where it all went wrong. The kitchen was the center of so many simple, happy pleasures for us—family meals, celebrations, quiet moments standing together as we cooked or put away dishes.

Raphael returns to hiding his toy Transformer robots in the cushions of our couch. At the stove, I breathe slowly and focus on the bubbles forming in the warm milk, stirring slowly with a wooden spoon that has travelled with us from New Mexico to Western Australia. The spoon is made of beech, delicately curved. It has been softened by years of use. When Gabriel, Raphael and I moved into our own apartment, after living with Gabriel's parents for several years, Irene let us pick out some essential utensils from her own kitchen cabinets. The wooden

spoon survived the fire and made it to Western Australia because I loved its shape; because my mother-in-law was always generous.

The smell of a housefire is worse than the sight of an ambulance or fire truck. A bushfire carries the scent of eucalypt and jarrah, making it less likely to trigger flashbacks, but a housefire, while less common, is harder to move past. The smell is acrid and heavy, a mix of wood and plastic, household chemicals set off like fireworks. It clings to clothes, hair, airways for days. You might turn and catch a trace of it on the breeze, and suddenly the original loss is happening again: the fire has come for you, after all. Once your panic passes, you realise it's just the scent—the memory of fire—trapped somewhere in a T-shirt, or an old teddy bear.

The smell of a housefire doesn't leave you easily. But the sight of one, of what it can do to a home? Cupboards explode, along with their contents, metal fixtures and cans twist in the extreme heat, merging into new shapes that bear a resemblance to items you once knew: a sippy cup fuses with a soup can, chairs buckle towards the floor as if on their knees, windows explode towards the backyard, leaving shards of glass to surface years later in the grass. Everything is black. Everything you loved is black. Except for a shape on the floor by the stove. It's gray there, a silhouette in gray, where somebody lay down for the last time.

You never forget walking through that nightmare. Many nights you walk there again, as if the nightmare is inside you. And it's your child who wakes you, soft hands against your face, asking in a whisper, *Mommy, why are you crying?*

His lips, his eyes, his laugh, his smile. All these words, and I've come to the part that I've avoided the whole time.

From the moment I saw Gabriel through that window in the UWA Admin Office, I thought he was handsome. When he came closer, sat beside me, smiled at me, laughed as we talked—it was clear to me then: his face was the loveliest I'd ever seen. I remember thinking, *Perhaps I've known him somewhere before?* Two weeks later, Gabriel looked at me as if I was his—a treasure—and said, *I was falling in love with you that first day.*

The fire took so much from me, before there was even the possibility of saying goodbye. In our life together, there were days I couldn't look away from Gabriel. A thrill ran through me just to be near him. But, Gabriel was burned. Nobody held him, nobody helped him as he endured unfathomable pain, as all the lovely parts were scorched away forever.

I had to fight to be allowed near Gabriel's body after he died. The fire department refused to allow me into the fire-ruined house until he was carried out inside a body bag. The police sidestepped my questions about how badly he'd been burned with further questions: 'Would you really want to remember him this way?' The funeral home strongly advised against a viewing of his body. I told them I didn't care about protocol: *Just let me be near him. Leave him in the body bag. I only want to be near him.* I remember saying these words. Away from the funeral home, and the ceaseless activity that surrounded those first days of loss—with so many terrible decisions to make—I was losing my grip on reality, searching for Gabriel in the back of every passing man. All these people trying to help me, and I only wanted to run away, to be alone with him. My mother-in-law advocated for me, and the funeral home wouldn't go against her. I was taken to a long, windowless room, where Gabriel's body lay, sealed under layers of plastic. At last, I could say goodbye to him. But when I stood beside his body, I had to face the truth: he was already gone.

It hurts too much to think I won't see his face again. Instead, I imagine that I'm waiting, that he will one day return, across years and oceans, just as he always was—perfect, fragile, infinite. This belief allows me to keep going, moving forward without leaving Gabriel behind. Fire can't destroy the force of his personality, which I would know even in the half-light, even with my eyes closed. And when I want to see Gabriel's smile again, I look at Raphael, and the waiting doesn't seem so difficult.

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