

# Flying in the Face of Grief

The Ever Being of Life



"Death is a stripping away of all that is not you.  
The secret of life is to 'die before you die' - and find that there is no death."

Eckhart Tolle

**ANNWYN**

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## Introduction

"Where are you my darling boy ... did you suffer?" I was desperate to know. My arms wound tightly around Laura's small frame, my chest heaving against hers. She screamed out in pain to her seventeen-year-old brother, "You left me!"

It soon became clear I couldn't settle for the well-intentioned expectations of others; that I'd never recover from Tim's death. Not after hearing curious murmurings within hours of his car crash, "Remember, remember - it's time to remember now." Some sweet, otherworldly love embraced me for weeks, coaxing me with whispered prompts to remember. But remember what - and why now of all times?

An unexpected pilgrimage began. Over the ensuing months and years, a rite of passage revealed itself - one we have mistakenly called 'crippling grief'. Mostly, the noble gifts of grief have laid crumpled on the floor, creased with sorrow, unrecognised.

At times these gifts brought me to my knees but, finally, I understood 'the hero's journey' where wants and needs must eventually collide in unlit corridors called the dark night of the soul. I ached to commune with my son, and I desired to know about the afterlife. More than that, I urgently needed to find my own purpose for being on Earth at all, because up until that point I had lived my life through others. But to achieve this I would have to identify and release my erroneous beliefs about death and grief, along with a quantum shift of consciousness. Only then would the healing of my heart occur, opening the portal where physical and nonphysical worlds could meet.

*There is soul's purpose in grieving,  
for we have not lost our loved ones,  
we have lost ourselves.  
Our beloved departed souls will lovingly guide  
us back - if we allow them.  
Remember?*

When Tim transitioned back into spirit in 2000, I yearned for the information held within these pages. I needed to hear from others who had experienced grief and, while professionals held their important, rightful place, I intuitively rejected models of therapy that might well have obscured my precious spiritual awakening. It wasn't until I began writing that I realised I'd organically embodied the structure of story accredited to Joseph Campbell as the 'hero's journey'. I realised too that all of humanity are unsung heroes, bravely meshing their wants and needs while undergoing the changes that transform them into better versions.

I have republished this extensively revised and updated version because, although the world and humanity are much changed, death remains one of humanity's deepest fears. Grief is still perceived as an undesired burden, instead of a richly transformative opportunity.

Eckhart Tolle once wrote, 'we don't need to sit on a park bench for two years,' as he did after experiencing suicidal thoughts, and neither do we need to avoid grief by 'running away to sea' and cruising the Pacific Islands for six years as I did. Tolle's books were pivotal for me; he flew in the face of what humanity believed to be 'normal' human nature. In the same spirit of Eckhart's messages, I wish to soften the journey of transformation, because the last leg of the hero's journey involves sharing wisdom gained.

Soar with me beneath the wings of my son in spirit and liberate yourself from acquired beliefs regarding life and death. Discover an inner sanctum of wisdom where death no longer dwells, only the ever-being-of-life. Together we will fly in the face of grief!

## Chapter 1



### Sound of a Breaking Heart

*'In this curious, calm state of grace,  
something mysterious stirred within me.'*

Tim churned with agitation for days, a six-foot tall jangle of teenage nerves. No amount of coaxing could persuade him to confide. At last, choking back emotions, he opens up.

Tears wet his sun-kissed freckles as he splutters, "I can't stop thinking about Floyd and Jess. I can't get them out of my mind, Mumsy. It's like they're living in my head. At night, they call me. I can't sleep."

Three months earlier, both teenagers had taken their lives within weeks of each other. While the rest of the world lost sleep over technology crashing from the millennium bug, a spate of teenage suicides rocked our small harbourside town of Lyttelton, New Zealand.

Allowing me to fuss, I plump cushions and soft rugs around him on the sofa. Taking a damp flannel to cool his forehead, I stroke the worry from his surf-bleached curls. A rock fan at heart, he surrenders to soothing classical music and soon dozes off. He looks so peaceful sleeping away the winter evening.

I gaze down at my golden boy, admiring his youthful beauty. His long legs dangle over the end of the sofa, auburn hairs showing beneath scrunched up trousers. Fast morphing into manhood, Tim loves fashionable clothes and I smile at how he's managed to make navy work-overalls look trendy.

Sighing as the kettle warmed, I thought back to the past nightmarish nine months. At times, Tim's recovery from a drug-induced psychotic episode had relapsed into serious unwellness. For many months I lived with the prospect he might take his own life but, thank God, step by step he had stabilised. Supported by his understanding boss, Tim now held down a job as a hammer hand at the new Lyttelton marina, but a sensitive young

man such as he would of course feel the impact of not just one, but two suicides. I hoped like hell his healing would continue.

An hour or so later he wakes and sits bolt upright.

"How are you feeling, love?"

"Better, Mum. I dreamed of an amazing wave. I'm going to draw it."

Drawers open and close, and clothes fly through the air before a packet of coloured pencils turns up. I'm reassured by his complete focus sketching a surfer riding a perfect tube and, it's difficult to believe an hour earlier this young man struggled to finish a sentence. Not only has he now captured the wave with his natural artistic ability, but the dream also seems to have harnessed the peace he yearns for.

"Looks like your favourite break. Sumner Beach?"

"Not sure what beach this is. It seemed so real in my dream. I could even taste the salt. Thanks, Mum, I think I'll be able to sleep tonight."

I love the way he called me Mum, a Tim thing. Resting my face against his chest for a moment I feel the strength in his body. After giving me a lopsided grin and a bear hug, he ambles off to his new double bed, purchased with his first pay packet.

Waking next morning with a cough rattling in his chest, Tim decides to take the day off work to see his doctor. I long to stay home with him, but he insists I go. I remain unconvinced, but with my car undergoing major mechanical repair, a forthcoming bill overrides my maternal misgivings. Hearing the chuff and hum of a colleague's Volkswagen Beetle arriving to give me a lift, I promise to ring during my lunch break and head out the door.

With the ease of a seasoned actress, I swing into my role as the cheerful, resilient, single parent who teaches school 'dropouts' to decode the inky symbols on their pages. Parenting my own teenagers, plus specialised training for dyslexic students has prepared me well for this position. It makes me mindful of the enormous pressures young people are under, and that my students' apparent failure adds to their vulnerability. They are unaware the system has failed them - not the other way around.

Teaching duties command my full attention until lunch break allows me to phone Tim. Sounding confident and upbeat he says, "Doc prescribed antibiotics for a chest infection. I've cleaned up my room."

"Wow! You must be really feeling unwell." I shake my head in disbelief.

"Very funny, Mumsy. I'm going over to Sumner to visit Dad. See you tonight."

On a more serious note, I say, "Take it easy, darling. A chest infection means your body needs rest."

"Don't worry Mumsy, I'm fine. Love you."

"Love you too," I echo. My steps and thoughts are lighter heading back to the staffroom. He's just a little run down. Things feel worse when under the weather. His voice sounded cheerful. Thank heavens.

Tim isn't home at the end of the day. I expected to find him curled up watching a movie or listening to music. The phone rings the moment I fling my battered teaching folders onto a chair. It's Elaine, a friend who purchased our former family home a few weeks ago.

"Annette, thank God. I've been trying to get hold of you all afternoon," she says in a rushed, breathless voice. "Two detectives were looking for you earlier. I gave them your new address. They want you to ring Lyttelton police station straight away."

A multitude of scenarios rush through my mind as I dial the station's number. Staff straight away dispatch the two detectives who have waited hours for my call.

Telling myself to remain calm, I reason there is nothing much I can't handle. After two completed marriages and raising teenagers alone it takes a fair bit to phase me. Both children are high-spirited individuals, especially Laura who's known among friends with affection as the 'wild child'. Tim practices discretion, whereas Laura tends to be impulsive. Impulsive to such a degree I've sent her to live with friends in the remote alpine village of Mount Cook.

Her substitute 'mother' is the sole teacher at the local tiny school, and I remember she's running their annual school camp in Hanmer Springs. Jumping at the chance to join the ten children she adores, Laura had volunteered to assist. I'd be surprised if she



created havoc there. Perhaps she is injured? Assuming Tim is dining with his father, I'm baffled.

I hear the gravel scunch under the wheels of the police car in the car park. Hurried steps ascend the wooden stairway and urgent knuckles rap on my door. Forcing a warm greeting, I invite the two tall strangers to sit but they remain standing. A palpable tension, like over-tightened guitar strings, exudes from these men in my living room. After the formality of checking I am indeed Annette Hanham, they introduce themselves, encouraging me to sit down. I stand. Taller feels stronger, braver. I brace myself, clenching my buttocks.

One of the detectives again advises me to be seated, indicating a chair and warning they bring bad news.

"How bad?" I ask, my heart thumping.

"Your son has been in a car accident.

Blood drains from my face, my mouth all at once dry. "How bad?"

"The worst," they say. Then silence, as they allow me time to prepare for words no mother wants to hear.

"Do you mean ... (silence) ... he's ... dead?"

"Yes. We can't tell you how sorry we are to bring you this news."

My tall tower of bravery collapses and topples me into the nearest chair. Hot drops of salt sting my eyes and surge down my cheeks. Blinded and doubled over with shock, I sob out loud, hands over my face in primal privacy. My heart rips, like the tearing during a birthing. Pain sears my chest, but there is no midwife to hold me. It's violent; I think my ribs will crack. Remembering the detectives are still there and, feeling genuine pity for their difficult task I manage to look up and sob, "What an awful job you have."

A mix of relief and gratitude passes over their faces and, they take their cue to tell me what happened. "Your son was travelling along Sumner Road, between Lyttelton and Sumner on a patch where heavy rain had brought minerals up to the surface. On top of this, a tanker from Lyttelton Port leaked a trail of oil on that road earlier today. We are trying to find the driver responsible."

The second detective takes over and speaks with a modicum of warmth in his voice. "However, we think Tim may have been driving a little too fast. When he braked at a tight corner, his car spun around on the greasy road. The car slid into the cliff face hitting an overhanging rock. We believe he died straight away on impact, around 1.30pm."

Weeping in the chair, I'm in desperate need of strong comforting arms, but the men shift their weight, looking uncomfortable and helpless. All they can offer is professional kindness. One softens his tone, asking if he can phone someone for me.

Friends come straight away, their faces showing deep shock. Older than me and wiser about life, they hold me tight in their ample arms. My thoughts are already a two-hour drive away, with Laura. Thank God it isn't five hours to Mount Cook. Tangled knots pull even tighter in my stomach as I fret. How can I tell her? How can I deliver total devastation?

This familiar dread. The same feeling a year ago, after admitting Tim to the mental hospital then dragging myself away. To have walked away from him in such a vulnerable state had torn me to pieces. I thought I'd faced the most heartbreaking moment in my life but now, even that paled in comparison.

An emotional heaviness crushes my chest, knocking the wind out of me. Before I can draw breath the detectives pass their temporary burden to me like a baton. In this split second I am forced to accept responsibility for this permanent change to our lives. Worst of all, the baton of bad news must be taken to Laura.

I ring Johnny, Tim's boss. Because Johnny understood the nature of Tim's condition, he'd kept a lookout for Tim, and we'd become friends. Stunned by my news, he offers to drive me to Laura. He arrives ashen-faced and together we collect my close friend, April.

The night drive is a blur, almost surreal. I don't feel like talking. I'm crying at times, but my focus is on holding myself together for Laura.

April is inconsolable. "I feel like I've lost a son too," she wails.

"Remember our little boys holding hands and walking to school together?" I say, squeezing her hand.

"Yes, Timmy and Jimmy." She nods, "And years later they started work at the marina on the same day."

“Tim said it was awesome to see a familiar face. But just a handshake that time,” I say with an unsuccessful attempt to lighten the mood.

“God, I’m supposed be supporting you. I’m sorry, I can’t stop crying.”

“Johnny,” I say, leaning forward to be heard over the road noise, “better stop at a shop for a box of tissues.”

Putting my arm around my friend, “I think when one parent loses a child, every parent loses a child. There’s an unspoken bond among the parents whose children grow up together.”

Then, losing myself in nightmarish thoughts, I question how it was possible to have been teaching remedial maths earlier today, unaware that firefighters were cutting my son from a wreckage.

Was I that disconnected from my son?

Where was my mother’s instinct?

How could I not have felt that?

Remorse finds a dark crevice in my belly and crawls in to feast. Oh, how I wish I had stayed home today. Now, the headlights light up the road signs, announcing we are getting closer to the school camp, closer to Laura. My hunched body aches with dread. I rub my sweaty palms slowly up and down my knees, aware of a high-pitched static noise in my ears.

Tim and Laura are devoted siblings. Twenty-two months apart, they idolise and support each other through the unhappy times as well as the crazy, joyful times of life. Laura looks up to her brother with adoration, manages his hair and wardrobe, shares his secrets, and screens all his girlfriends.

It’s been a year since she had made the world-famous, yet isolated village of Mount Cook (Aoraki) her home with close family friends, Brian and Bu. We all agreed Laura needed a break from Lyttelton after abrupt, marked changes in her behaviour caused serious concern for her safety. Her changed environment had proved an astounding success, and the Hermitage Hotel were quick to recognise Laura’s natural hospitality skills. They thought her older than her years but, still hired her on condition she continued living with Bu and Brian rather than in staff quarters. Laura and Tim had never lived apart for

any length of time before and, although they missed each other, both had recognised the need.

We are now just ten minutes from Hanmer Springs; I ask Johnny to stop the car. I stumble out with unsteady legs and pace around in circles. Panic sets in, I feel sick. There's a band tight around my chest leaving me breathless.

Desperate to steady myself, my mind makes a frantic search for words to lessen the impact. There are no right words - what words could even come close to softening this devastating blow? To spare Laura an anxious long wait, I hold back my arrival as long as possible, but as we approach the gates to the camping ground, I must now phone Bu. Alarmed by my call, she warns Laura I'm here, and to prepare for bad news.

It's close to 9pm. Through the hut window I see the small group of children and parent helpers sitting in the camp kitchen clutching steaming mugs of drinks. Laura appears at the open doorway, her long, blonde hair held back by a blue paisley bandana. She looks worried and pale. Bu takes her arm and guides her out into the crisp dark night, leaving the concerned, cocoa-smeared faces of the children in the warm glow of the kitchen.

This close, I see her large dark brown eyes are wide with adrenaline and filled with worry. We have never looked at each other in this way before: pleading in her eyes, anguish in mine.

I try in vain to muster strength and courage, but find I can't speak, can't breathe. Paralysed with fear of what these words will do to her, my mouth understands my dilemma - it opens and closes, but nothing comes.

April steps forward, bravely offering to be my voice in this dreadful moment, but I shake my head. It's my responsibility to speak the unspeakable. There is no saliva in my mouth and as I falter again, Bu takes charge in true matriarchal style and commands, "Out with it!"

It seems as if someone else's voice utters the words that I'm so reluctant to ground in reality, but I hear myself say, "It's Tim, there's been an accident."

Laura freezes. Horror steals over her beautiful face as she realises the nature of my words. "No, she says, he's not ...?"

"Yes," is all I can whisper. I hang my head and watch large drops of water fall on the small, smooth stones.

Laura's scream shatters the peaceful alpine air. Like panes of ice. I hear the cracking of her heart as it splinters into tiny, sharp shards of pain. She screams out to her brother, a wild mountain-cat shrieking into the abyss, "Tim! You left me!"

Six strong arms attempt to hold her as she thrashes about in disbelief. She turns wild, flinging her arms to slough off words she can't bear to have near her. Her personal universe implodes in just one second. Eight arms wrestle, an alpine octopus of angst.

Frozen fingers tear at my womb as I watch my sobbing daughter writhe in agony, resolute in her refusal to know what she now knows. Registering a second death that day, I witness a part of her wither and die. Submerged in a swamp of shocking inadequacy I slump to my knees, realising nothing can ease her pain.

She begins to shake. April wraps her in blankets and bundles her into the back seat of Johnny's car. She whimpers with emotional exhaustion that sweeps her close to physical collapse. With her head resting on my lap, she lays down her distress and succumbs to the void of sleep.

I fall silent during the drive back to the house. Oddly, even though my world has shifted on its axis, at this moment I don't feel disturbed. The day's events no longer run through my head. But I notice a peculiar tingling sensation in my crown. I'm dimly aware of 'something else' surrounding me, embracing me. I, too, am wrapped in a blanket, but mine is invisible. A soothing cocoon crafted by an unseen force, whose deft fingers weave calm and quietude. My mind can't understand or analyse this strange state. It simply observes.

In this curious, calm state of grace, something mysterious stirs within me, something I've never noticed before. I don't know what this new state is, but I feel reassurance and deep gratitude for this unexpected exodus of acute grief.

Johnny helps us stumble up the stairs, then leaves us by ourselves. The apartment seems much larger than it used to be. Tim will never fill it again.

We sleep in his double bed that night, comforted by his linen library of familiar smells, aftershave and hair mousse. But the earlier acceptance and allowance that held me, has withdrawn its embrace. My heart and mind fill with fresh anxiety. Laura and I hug each other and wonder where Tim is, worrying he suffered at his death. Numb with exhaustion, we cry ourselves to sleep. Laura sobs for her brother. I wail for both my children, and my womb bleeds sticky tears between my legs.

