

# *A Reimagined Life*

— AN ESSAY BY —

TOM McALLISTER

**F**irst you start drinking, then you start talking about death. It's a natural progression.

At least it is for my wife and me.

We'd been dating for two years when my father died of esophageal cancer. A year later, her mother died of ovarian cancer, the by-product of a hereditary predisposition that she passed on to my wife. We were in college then. Time suddenly seemed very limited. The future seemed like a place other people got to visit, but not us. I moved to Iowa City for grad school, and she stayed at home with her dying grandfather.

After two difficult years of maintaining a long-distance relationship, I was in both a personal and a professional crisis: I'd wasted my time in grad school, drinking every day and never writing, and I was coming home carrying no completed work and about thirty extra pounds. I had applied for a temp job and had no marketable skills. The only thing I knew for sure was that I wanted to marry her. I proposed after my graduation, and then we drove home together, our first real road trip. I called my brother from the parking lot of a Bob's Big Boy to tell him I was getting married. We got lost in western Pennsylvania and drove until midnight looking for a place to sleep. I don't remember much else from the drive, except the feeling like I'd passed through something, like I was finally entering the good part of my life.

Four years later, we were in Seattle, celebrating our third anniversary. The year before that, we had gone to Ireland, and before that, we were in San Francisco, and there had been a number of shorter trips in the interim. Since then, we've traveled to Italy and a dozen other places. I'm an anxious traveler—about the logistics of flight, about the crowds, about visiting the right places at the right times, about being lost—and I wouldn't have gone on any of these trips without her. I would have talked about going but never

committed. And, as much as I've enjoyed our travel, I realized recently that it's never so much about going to a specific place as it has been about being *with her* while we are in that place.

There has been an unspoken urgency to our travel: to see as many places as possible while it is still possible, while we are still physically able, and while we're still both alive.

By the time of our Seattle trip, we were both in our late twenties; if we were fated to die at the same age as our parents, then we had already crossed the midpoint of our lives.

I know it sounds melodramatic, but the deaths of our parents were foundational for us; they made us acutely aware that at some point one of us will be alone again, and quite possibly that will happen long before we're ready, if being ready is even a possibility.

When we were in Seattle, the weather was so perfect it was suspicious (had everyone been lying about the rain just to keep visitors away?), and we were sitting outside at a French restaurant that served homemade sausage that tasted better than almost anything I've eaten in my life, and we were both feeling very lucky to have a life that allows us moments like this. We were deep in that giddy mid-vacation high where we had convinced ourselves that not only could we move to Seattle, but we *should*. We ordered the fourth-cheapest bottle of wine to avoid looking like the kind of cheapskates who just pick out the lowest-priced bottle regardless of quality. We started talking about where we would travel for future anniversaries, and then she said something about how I'd better not die on her.

I promised not to be dead—or rather, I promised to try really hard to not be dead—and then I asked her for the same. Soon, we were discussing how I would handle it if she died suddenly. Would I still talk to her family? Would I sell the house and move a thousand miles away? Would I ever date anyone again? Would I even leave the house? Would I completely collapse (this was my prediction)? Would I eventually find some way to rebuild a decent life? Friends are sometimes horrified to hear that we used this occasion, of all occasions, to talk about my hypothetical life as a widower. But it's not like I was plotting her murder. It's not like I was looking for an escape hatch. We were a little drunk and we were in love and we were capable of talking like adults about sad things.

At some point, I joked about how I could carry her ashes with me and travel to the places we'd never seen.

"That really sounds like a book," she said.

It did sound like a book, I agreed. I hoped it wasn't already a book.

We ordered another bottle of wine.

Over the next hour, *The Young Widower's Handbook* came to life. We brainstormed the general shape of the novel together: the backgrounds of the young couple, the cause of the wife's death, the road trip, and the potential stops the widower could make. I scribbled notes on the backs of receipts, and she tapped out text messages to me so we could have the ideas stored somewhere.

When we returned to the hotel, I sat and scrawled two pages of notes in our room; in the morning, I couldn't read some of them, but many of the notes from that session have survived, in some form, to the final draft of this novel. That morning, I wrote the opening paragraph, which hasn't changed since that day.

This novel comes from a place of great love and great fear. Before meeting my wife, I was a very sad, very angry young man, and her love and compassion showed me how to be a decent person in the world. We've been together for almost fifteen years, and so the person I've become is so intimately tied to her and our relationship that I can't envision who I would be without her. In writing *The Young Widower's Handbook*, I envisioned the protagonist, Hunter Cady, in a similar relationship and wanted to explore his despair as he not only tries to properly honor his dead wife but has to learn to reimagine himself in a new life. Starting in Philadelphia, he carves a jagged path across the country, hitching on the final leg with a group of travelers and ultimately arriving in San Francisco. Nothing on the road trip goes according to plan, but each interaction with a stranger in a strange city is a chance for him to redefine himself, to try to be the man his wife always believed he could be.

In writing these scenes, I wanted to face my own fears. I wanted Hunter to honor his wife's memory while trying to overcome his fear of the future. I wanted him to discover a version of himself that he could be proud of—the version that his wife had always seen. And I wanted readers to feel exactly what I felt that night in Seattle, on our anniversary, when my wife and I were celebrating the best days of our lives.