

## ***In Death There is Also Beauty***

Lauren Fritz

It's hard to believe I'm nearing the two-year mark of the worst night of my life. I'm still navigating my grief and sometimes I choose to not acknowledge it – to ignore it. This second year has been, in a way, peaceful, because I'm over the year of firsts. When dates came and went, such as our wedding anniversary, his birthday, holidays, I had experienced those before. I knew what to expect. The second year was my year of stable creation.

The past year and a half has been hard, but also incredibly joyful and enlightening. It can be hard to balance the vast amount of emotions – sorrow, rage, contentment, and bliss. It's an oxymoron at times. To suffer such a tremendous loss, but to push forward and to be happy with my "new life." And I am extremely happy with my new chapter. When Sean died, the old Lauren also died, and a better version emerged. I refused to live in the darkness. I vowed to learn, to grow, and to transform. I feel so much stronger and I carry a confidence I never had before. I trust myself and I know I can handle anything life throws my way. Without profound tragedy, there is no significant development.

My new life began that night. After the police detective left my house, I packed a suitcase and went to my parent's house. I never went back to the home Sean and I had put so much sweat and tears into. Our dog and I would call this room our home for the next few weeks until I was able to sell my home and eventually purchase a home that was solely mine. Uprooting my life in an instant is what I needed though. I could never resume my normal life and my normal routine after what happened. The thought of even sleeping in our bed alone was something that sickened me.

And that's the biggest adjustment when you lose a spouse. Your daily routine is ruined. The person you see everyday is no longer there. You simply can't "go home." Not only was I dealing with this loss, I had to rebuild my life. I no longer had a home, a car, a second income. I felt like I was 14 years old again living with my parents. No car to leave, no room or bed of my own, no autonomy. I lost my routine, the present, but I also lost a future. Hours before he died, we were discussing baby names with my family. Would I be alone forever? Who would want to be with me after this? Will I ever have a family?

It's crazy to think that I went back to work after only two weeks. I remember being angry with society. I was originally granted three days bereavement, but my company gave me five. This still wasn't enough. The entire first week, I was communicating with the medical examiner, the funeral home, insurance companies, figuring out my finances, my living situation, my vehicle situation. I also had to attend his viewing at the mortuary, then his service. Of course, I had help from my amazing family, but five days was not nearly enough time to rebuild. Not only was I amid reconstruction, but I was also emotionally charged yet empty inside. I didn't eat for weeks and I didn't have the strength to bathe myself. Yet, I was back at work 10 days later. I couldn't afford to go another week without pay and I needed to get out of the house. To resume some sort of life again.

Now here I am. In my new, beautiful and "totally me" house with my friend/roommate, Sean and I's dog, along with a new dog. I have a new car, a new job, and a new man in my life. I get a little nervous writing that because I have witnessed the good in people during this time, but also the bad. Society turns a blind eye to widows; I think it scares them. But it also tries to place rules on the bereaved.

People think they know what a widow should and shouldn't do. What they should and shouldn't feel. They try to force their understanding of the world on them. Treading through grief and loss is extremely individualistic. No one will ever experience it the same way. And that's what makes it hard. People assume the way they are coping is how you should too.

I was drowning in an ocean of sadness, loneliness, and numbness for the first couple months. I didn't know if or how to survive. I didn't have any hope for the future and even questioned if I wanted a future. I wanted to be where Sean was. I knew I couldn't do that, though, because I saw what he did to his family, our friends, my family. My anger for his actions really took effect when I sat in a pew of the funeral home, watching each one of my family members go up to his casket to look at him one last time. I saw the pain and hurt in all their eyes. The tears streaming down my grandmother's face, my cousin breathing rapidly, frozen, staring at him, my dad writing "I loved you like a son" on his favorite hockey team flag. I felt guilty for exposing them to this.

After experiencing so many things at the age of 28 that most people never experience in a lifetime, I decided I had every right to move forward, to be happy, and to do whatever I wanted and needed to do, to be "okay." If I wanted to go out and have fun or stay in and cry, it was my choice. So, when a long-time friend of mine and I started to connect on a deeper level, I didn't see anything wrong with it. Instead of constant sadness, I was finally feeling something different. He made me want to live, he gave me hope. This was a friend of mine for the past decade. He knew me before Sean, he saw Sean and I together, he saw us get married, and he saw the aftermath of when Sean died. He helped my family pack and move our four-bedroom house only 2 days later. He held me at the viewing, he spoke at the service, and he stopped by my rental house almost every day to check on me.

He knew the Lauren before Sean and he was getting to know the Lauren after Sean. He was there to comfort me if I needed it and he gave me space when I needed to heal. It happened so organically, it seemed like it was meant to be. As I navigated this new relationship, he and I experienced the wrath of society. Mutual friends turned against him and I was viewed as callous and uncaring of my deceased husband. I would explode every time I was referred to as "Sean's wife." I wanted to be free of that title. I even petitioned the courts to legally change my last name back to my maiden name. I was trying to create a "new me," but those that knew the old Lauren (and Sean) weren't receptive.

*"I think you're using Sean's decision to leave you and this world as a reason for being able to say you can do whatever you want."*

*"Every time I think of looking at the two of you being a couple, it makes me want nothing to do with it."*

*"I don't think you guys can still care for him when you are doing this. I think that craps on him."*

With everything I had experienced, I tried to not let the judgement and comments bother me. I was deep in that ocean of grief and now I was emerging from the surface – a new woman with so much strength. The people judging were also grieving. I had to take what they said with a grain of salt. This was hard for him though. He didn't ask for that. He fell in love with one of his friends and felt like he had to pick between the two. Loyalty to someone no longer here and loving a friend who is here. He didn't deserve that negativity and I hope those that judged in the past or will judge in the future, will rethink why they put rules on those that have experienced loss. Why do we not deserve happiness? Because it's uncomfortable for you? I'm sorry my happiness makes you uncomfortable. I don't deserve that either.

But, with time, those comments became few and far between. Our relationship became the new normal. And I learned about a new kind of love – our souls aligned. He’s an extremely caring and unique person. He’s good for me and I’m grateful to have him in my life. Choosing to love again is like grief. It’s individualistic. No one experiences it the same and there is no “right” timeline. Other people may say things about your life, but ultimately, it’s *your* life, not theirs. You must do what is right for you and no one else can dictate that for you.

What is the future of my second love story? I’m not sure. I’ve learned that you can’t plan out your life. There are always going to be outside factors and unexpected losses and triumphs. No one really knows what will happen in the next year, it’s not prescribed. What I do know, is that I have a man beside me that I love more than I ever thought possible. I’m happy with my relationship, with my career, and most importantly with myself. Sean will always hold a place in my heart. Other people may come and go, but I will always have myself to rely on.

Something I’ll always remember; my sister-in-law’s parents came to visit me after Sean died. And her father said, “In death, there is also beauty.” At the time, I was upset and confused. There was nothing *beautiful* about Sean taking his own life and the pain it has caused so many people. Now as time has passed, I have come to realize that he was right. Sean’s death will always be a part of my story, but it’s not my story. There is life and loss and love, and they can all be mixed up. You can love multiple people in your lifetime, at the same time, at different times, or you may only love one. The human heart is incredibly resilient and big. Look for the beauty in everything, even death.

Rest in Peace

Sean Stephen MacPhee

7/18/1991 – 1/13/2019