



Dear Elena

Hope and Sadness



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Editors Cut

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Before we begin

PREFACE

February 22, 2019

When Kim and I were preparing to get married we met separately with a priest and a rabbi.

The rabbi asked how we would handle the difficulties in our life.

Kim said she would talk to friends and maybe go for therapy.

I said, I would talk to friends, read books, and probably write.

We thought he was talking about ordinary difficulties.

You know, the problems that married couples go through.

Money. Time. Arguments. The waning and waxing of love and affection. Kids acting up or not doing well in school.

We had no idea.

Thirteen years ago today, our youngest daughter died suddenly.

I don't know how we survived that.

I know I couldn't have survived it without Kim.

Also, I wrote.

It helped me.

It turned out it helped others as well.

Two years later I thought I would publish some of the blog posts that I'd posted in that time and I wrote the introduction that you'll find next.

I wasn't ready to share it yet, though. Not in a book.

I know that's odd as I'd already shared it as a blog - but a book felt different.

Two years may feel like a long time after a death.

Most everyone else has moved on.

I can tell you today, thirteen years after Elena died, that two years isn't as long as you'd think.

Two and a half years ago tomorrow, Kim died.

I don't know how I've survived that.

I don't know how I possibly survived that without Kim.

A lot of it is the support I've gotten from friends, family, colleagues, and strangers.

Also, I wrote.

It helped me.

I'd stopped writing about Elena because it was unfair to Maggie to not be able to live her life without me writing about it.

When Kim died I wrote a little bit more,

I can truthfully say that with the exception of those two days, I've been lucky and life has been pretty great.

Anyway.

Seven years after Elena died, I published these first blog posts in an eBook but didn't really tell anyone.

This time I'm cleaning things up a bit and publishing it both digitally and as a paperback.

Why now?

I don't know that it matters, but on March 3, 2019, Elena would have turned twenty.

Twenty.

She never even turned seven.

I'm releasing the book on her twentieth birthday.

I can't give her a gift.

I thought I'd give her as a gift to you.

INTRODUCTION

February 22, 2008

The following is my draft of the introduction to the book that I wrote on this second anniversary of Elena's death.

Elena died two years ago today.

I hope you'll get to know her a bit through this book.

Elena was a beautiful bundle of optimism and energy. She was tiny but impossible to miss. She was born happy. For her it wasn't that fleeting happiness we get when we're enjoying a moment. Elena had the kind of happy that was contagious—the happy that you felt when you were around her.

Soon you were happy too.

“Look Maggie,” I imagine her saying as she opens this book, “Daddy wrote a book about me.”

“It's about me too,” Maggie says.

“Nuhhh uhuhh,” Elena says. Because what else could you say when you are the ghost of a six year old girl.

“Yuhhh huhhh,” Maggie says back. Because what else could you say back to a ghost saying ‘nuhuhh uhuhh.’

“Well it's got my name in the title not yours,” Elena says. “Why do you think that is?” Even beautiful happy kids can torment their sisters.

“Because you died,” Maggie says. She looks at Elena's ghost and adds, “duhh.”

“Well,” says Elena, “look at what he wrote. He says I’m beautiful. He didn’t write that you are beautiful.”

Maggie is beautiful. She is eleven and a half and making that transition from child to grown up.

Our relationship continues to change. She’s fast and smart and funny. She just lacks the experience and tempering that will come with age.

In the two years since her younger sister died, Maggie has taken on some of Elena’s characteristics. I don’t know why. It might be that while Elena was alive, Maggie could count on her to be the outgoing one while Maggie could be more shy and reserved. I don’t know. Maggie is still Maggie but she has also incorporated some of Elena into her personality as well.

And Kim. Sometimes when I call up to Kim from the living room I hear Elena’s voice echoing my bellow. Maybe there’s someone on the phone, or I’ve just thought of something, or the dog has gotten on my last nerves. I’ll tip my head back away from the puppy nipping at my ear and shout “Kim”.

I never know if she doesn’t hear me or just chooses to ignore me. When Elena was alive she would sit up in her bed and do her best imitation of me although it always came out with the vowel altered a little bit to “Kam.”

For good measure, just in case Kim didn’t know it was really Elena’s voice and not mine, she would always take it a step further and tuck her head down towards her chest to lower her voice and shout, “Kam, this is your husband calling you. This is Daniel, Kam.”

“What?” Kim would shout back in that voice that every husband knows. “What do you want?”

Whatever it was I wanted doesn’t seem so important.

I feel like saying “never mind” but I don’t.

I tell her whatever it was that prompted me to call her in the first place. But really I just wanted to hear her voice.

Even in annoying her, I’ve connected to her.

It’s why I call her from the grocery store or on my way to a coffee shop and ask “Want anything”.

Today as she heads out the door for Elena’s mass she asks me if I want her to pick up anything at the store.

“Yes,” I say, “a big bag of chips.”

“Like what?” she asks.

“I don’t know. Something chippy. Something fried and salted. And maybe some dip.”

“You don’t want it,” she says and she’s right. But, of course, that’s not the point.

“I don’t. But I’ll eat it anyway.”

“What about the small bags my mom brought?”

“I’ll eat those too,” I say.

She signs and says “ok, I’ll get you some chips on the way back from church.”

Kim heads out to the 8:30 mass for Elena.

It’s snowing.

I always smile when it snows this time of year. Elena was born in a big snow storm in the beginning of March.

I pull out my laptop and start to write this introduction. The phone rings. It's Kim.

"Are you ok?" I ask.

"Yeah," she says.

"What's up?" I ask.

"We missed it," she says.

"Missed what?" I ask.

"Missed the mass. I must have had the wrong time written down. The mass was at eight."

"Not eight thirty?"

"Nope. They're done already. They're coming out of the church."

"You ok?" I ask.

"Yeah," she says.

"It's kind of perfect," I say.

"I know," she says.

"Elena would have been late."

"I know," she says.

It's a hard day for all of us. It's hard enough given that it's the anniversary of Elena's death, but on top of that Maggie is home sick.

She went to the doctor's with a sore throat two days ago. Exactly the same as Elena did two years ago also on February 20.

The doctor sent her home saying nothing was wrong. Same as they did with Elena two years ago.

We didn't really know the doctor that sent Elena home. This doctor we've known forever. She was Maggie's doctor when she was little and she saw Elena just days after she was born.

I know that Maggie is fine and yet she's home sick today the same way Elena was two years ago.

So many thoughts.

"Daddy?"

"Yes, Elena?"

"Why are you writing a book?"

"I'm not really. I wrote the book already except for this Introduction and something I'll write at the end. I wrote the rest of it for my blog. Really I'm just publishing what I've already written as a book."

"Oh." Elena processes that last bit of information. The conversation is not yet over.

"Daddy?"

"Yes, Elena?"

"Why did you write your bog."

"My blog? I don't know. I went upstairs the day after you died and started to write. I wrote about you and Maggie and people we knew and things we'd done and even imaginary conversations like this one. I wrote about losing you, about my feelings, and about all of the little details wrapped up in saying goodbye."

"Daddy, do you ever worry about these imaginary conversations?"

“No, baby. I know they’re not real. Just every now and then I need to hear your voice—even if I’m the one choosing the words I hear you say.”

“Just as long as you’re not losing it.”

I’m touched by her concern. Even though it is me choosing her words, somehow it really is her voice in my ear with her worried hand on my shoulder comforting me. Once she sees I’m ok, she gets back to her original question.

“Daddy?”

“Yes, Elena?”

“So why are you writing a book? I mean, why are you publishing a book?”

“Because lots of people liked what they read in the blog.”

“So why not just leave the blog?”

“I am. But there are lots of people who don’t read blogs.”

“Do you think people will read this book?”

“I don’t know, baby.”

And I don’t.

I’m writing this book for two reasons. First, there are plenty of people who don’t live online and who would prefer a book they can hold in their hands. But second, I have never gone back to read any of the entries in my blog. I stopped writing because I couldn’t remember which stories I had told already. My plan is to take some of the entries and put them together into a book while keeping a list of stories I want to tell but haven’t yet. I’ll add these stories to the blog and perhaps to another book.

There is, however, the issue of other people's words. There are the people who added their comments to the blog. I think that that is what makes the blog special but it is not part of this book. So I am leaving them online but not reprinting them here. There are also books and songs and people who I've quoted. I will ask their permission, and hope that it is granted so that I can include those stories.

"Daddy?"

"Yes, Elena?"

"Do you still think about me?"

"All the time, baby. All the time."

"See Maggie. He thinks of me all the time."