
Jennifer Tennant

1000. Jen

I have an excellent memory. Somewhat encyclopedic. Friends have joked that I remember things that have happened in their lives but they have since forgotten. Remembering is important and comforting to me. It keeps things alive, it affirms, it is a way for me to see myself and truly see others. An act of care for others, a way for current me to care for younger me. But I have no recollection of the day my mom told me that my dad did not, in fact, die in a hiking accident. That he had jumped off the Golden Gate Bridge.

The walkway of the Golden Gate Bridge is about 250 feet above the water. The railings are easily scaled and there are no suicide barriers, even though more than 1700 people have died there since the bridge opened in 1937. A barrier wasn't even approved until 2008, but the Bridge board formally delayed the project until 2017. The first bids came in at more than double the original \$76 million estimate, threatening to delay construction even further. Construction finally began in April 2017, with a price tag of \$200 million. The rationale for no barriers was an aesthetic one. Many people oppose nets and safety barriers because they don't want to obstruct the view. Even if it saves lives, people often don't want a visual representation of human suffering and despair. There might be subconscious cost-benefit analysis at play, as well. A false yet common judgement about suicide victims is that they are lost causes. That expensive barriers are futile, delaying the inevitable. However, in 2016 alone, bystanders helped prevent 200 suicides from taking place at the Golden Gate Bridge – more than one every other day.

After jumping, it takes 4 seconds to hit the water. At the moment of impact, a body is falling at 86 miles per hour. The Center for Suicide Prevention in Calgary states that out of the more than 1700 who have jumped off the Golden Gate Bridge over the years, only 25 have survived. The rest die from internal injuries and broken bones, drown in the frigid tumultuous waters that straddle the San Francisco Bay and the Pacific Ocean, or succumb to hypothermia. As we say in my family, it's not the fall that kills you, it's the sudden stop.

My dad was 6'3", slender and beautiful, almost all legs. His legs would have scaled the railings very easily. What did his last moments on that June day look like? Did he walk with purpose and go right over the edge in one continuous, unstoppable movement? Did he pace back and forth, convincing himself that this is what he needed to do for himself, for us? Or did he pause and hang on to the railings for a bit before he willed himself to let go? Often when someone takes his or her own life by way of some sharp object, there are hesitation wounds. One of my greatest worries is that someone saw this happen. That someone tried or didn't try to intervene and had to witness terrifying pain. Does this image haunt them still? Do my dad's hesitation wounds mark their bodies?



A couple of days before he died, my dad checked himself into a psychiatric facility in Marin County. Since his teen years, he had dealt with severe bipolar episodes. I don't know what was going on in that particular moment – why this moment seemed more unlivable than others. He had a dentist appointment set for the following week. Why would he have made a dentist appointment – both a mundane task and an act of self-care – if he didn't plan on being alive to go to it? His death couldn't have been completely planned – there must have been an impulsive part of it. A horrible impulse that could never be taken back. Since he checked himself in, he was allowed to check himself out. When he left the facility, he left his will on his bed. On it, he wrote, "Cath can keep the kids."

My parents had divorced a couple of years before my dad died. There are always myriad reasons why marriages end. The strain of dealing with my dad's mental and emotional health must have been one. The fact that my mom is a lesbian must have been another. It was 1982 when they parted. The early 1980s were not supportive or welcoming of difference. It was Reagan's America and stigma, blame, and misinformation abounded. No one talked about suicide in 1984, and outside of intimate safe circles, there was still a cost to talking about lesbianism. I grew up in the San Francisco Bay Area -- the City of Sodom, Belize's idea of heaven in *Angels in America* -- and I only knew one other person who had gay parents, and she lived in a different city. My dad's suicide note was certainly brief, but I believe that he was trying to be kind. He and my mom were dear friends before he died; they had overcome the pain of divorce and settled into a loving co-parenting relationship. I have always thought that the "keep the kids" comment was incredibly sad, but also odd -- who else would we live with? It seemed obvious, further proof of his troubled mind.

But in 1984, could some court try to take away children from their own mother, using their father's suicide and their mother's homosexuality as "evidence" that they should be raised by other adults? In Florida, Anita Bryant was Saving Our Children, the first organized opposition to the gay rights movement. The repeal of that anti-discrimination law led to Florida's ban on gay adoption, which stayed on the books for 30 years and spurred propositions in other states. Home in California, the late 1970s and early 1980s were filled with popular but ultimately failing propositions aimed at everything from stopping public school employees from making even neutral statements about homosexuality to reporting people with HIV/AIDS to public health authorities. So, even though they committed massive and very clear negligence, my mom didn't sue the treatment facility.

In her essay, "Losing Streak," Kathryn Schulz reminds us that "questions of causality can also lead to trouble, because, in essence, they ask us to assign blame." And in the case of suicides, those left behind are often submerged in the waters of self-blame. Why did he leave us? Did he need more connection? Was he pleading for that: from us, at the psychiatric facility, at the bridge itself?

The narrator of Duncan MacMillian's play, "Every Brilliant Thing," was a child when his mother's suicide cycle started. After her first attempt, he started writing her "a list of everything brilliant about the world. Everything worth living for."

"998. Aromatic duck pancakes with hoisin sauce

It's common for the children of suicides to blame themselves. It's natural.

999. Sunlight

However much you know that you're not to blame, you can't help feeling like you failed them. It's not fair to feel this way. But it's natural."

Like the narrator, I was also a young child when suicide re-formed my life. And also like him, I have my own list of brilliant things. Things he loved; things I wish he could have experienced. The smell of tomatoes on the vine. The energy in the audience right before a band takes the stage. Maltballs. The sound of the foghorn reverberating across the bay. So that I can have more time with you.

I try to remember that you can't save anyone. But you can love them. You can hope that they will choose to stay.

In Schulz's essay, she contemplates different types of loss. The loss of a person is different from the loss of an object – a terminal state, not a transitional one. She writes, "Death is loss without the possibility of being found." But can a person be found as well as actively loved even after their death? Deep understanding and deep love are continual, layered processes. One of my favorite songs, "Waltz #2 (XO)" by Elliott Smith, has a refrain that reminds me of this, and of him. "I'm never gonna know you now, but I'm gonna love you anyhow." At the end of the song, this refrain repeats over and over, becoming more emotionally resonant for both the singer and the listener at each iteration. It is a mantra that is simultaneously plaintive and comforting. The narrator looks his immeasurable loss right in the eye, acknowledges its presence, feels its shape and size. But this repeated refrain is also an act of self-care; it reminds him and us that no matter what else is lost, love always remains...anyhow.

