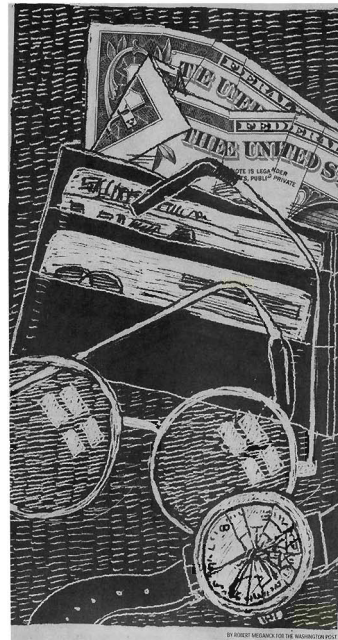


In a Way, He Took Our Lives, Too

After 45 Years, the Hurt, and Questions, Still Linger

By Margie Goldsmith
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When I think of my father, I see fragments of him: sad brown eyes, a downcast mouth, huge hands clasp and unclasp indecisively. I see his 6-foot-2 frame towering over me, his enormous feet digging into the sand at Bailey Beach as he barbecues hamburgers. I see him playing the piano, singing songs by **Cole Porter** and Rodgers and Hart. But mostly I conjure a shattered pair of eyeglasses, a wristwatch with a broken crystal, a worn brown leather wallet containing two crumpled dollar bills. Those were the only possessions the police returned to my mother after my father jumped from the 14th story of a **Philadelphia** office building.



I try to picture the scene -- he drives to the advertising agency. It's Saturday, so no one's around. He's lied to my mother about having to work that day. Does he lock his office door? Does he take a drink from his dented silver flask? Has he written the note already or does he write it then? He goes to the window and opens it. It's winter. Does he climb right out on the ledge or does he hesitate? What is he thinking at that instant as he steps into the air?

It happened 45 years ago when I was only 18, so the whole thing is just fragments in my memory. But it haunts me. It starts when I read about a suicide or see it in a movie or play. As the word springs to life in my mind, I feel not sadness but shame, maybe because suicide is still such a taboo. When my father died, the radio announced that he had fallen out of a window by accident. Fallen out of a 14th-floor window on a blustery cold day by accident? I don't know who gave the radio station that information -- probably our lawyer, a good family friend, trying to protect us.

If someone asks how your father died and you say heart attack or cancer, they tell you how sorry they are and the subject is over. But if you answer "suicide," they ask, "Suicide?" This is not a substitute for "I'm sorry," but rather a shortcut to what they really want to know: Did he take pills? Slit his wrists? Shoot himself? Whenever anyone asks, I say my father died in a freak accident.

They say only about a third of suicides leave notes. My father's was typed on yellow copy paper. It said he loved us, that he knew my mother, my younger sister and I would be fine, and that he wished he could take Kathy, my older sister, with him. The day before my father killed himself, he'd taken Kathy to her first mental institution. As he said goodbye and the thick steel door locked him out, he felt as though he were the one who should have been inside.

He'd been depressed before. At **Brown University**, he'd tried to kill himself with a rubber gas hose. He'd also been in the hospital for shock treatment. The week before he killed himself, he'd been depressed and wanted to go to the hospital, but my mother talked him out of it because she knew he hated shock treatment. For months afterward, she lay sobbing on the sofa, drinking

herself into oblivion with vodka, and saying over and over again, "If only I hadn't canceled the bed."

The night of his death, I went into his den and rummaged through his desk drawer. He was an advertising copywriter who hated his job, thought he was a hack, and wanted to write detective stories. As I looked under his typewritten pages, I saw a small black spiral notebook with his familiar scrawl: "Wednesday: Bad. Friday: Worse. Tuesday: Terrible."

One million people worldwide take their lives each year. My family was dysfunctional before he did it, but after, we were wounded in new ways. My mother blamed herself until she died 20 years later. Kathy spent the rest of her life in a mental institution, terrified of heights.

And me? I dealt with it by doing drugs, drinking myself into oblivion, and going through eight years of therapy. I gave up the drugs and drinking, regained my self-esteem and graduated from therapy. I married and divorced twice but never had kids because I was so afraid they might be subject to the same depression.

Even though it happened so many years ago, at some moments it all rushes back, and I have to fight not to cry. I can see his body falling from the air. And I wonder, in those last few seconds of his life as he was hurtling down toward the sidewalk, did he think, if only for just a brief second, of me?