



Me Darlin' Ariel
October 1965 – February, 2011

Ariel's Story

On February 4th, 2011, the police came to my front door to let me know they'd found my wife's body in a hotel room a few miles away from our home. I'd last seen her four nights earlier, the night before she'd taken off for a few days. She'd told me she had to sort some things out, but would be back in time for her work shift on Friday the 4th. I had no idea that last night I saw her that it'd be the last time I would ever see her alive.

She had been depressed for awhile, having been laid off her job a couple of years before and not having been able to find another. She'd worked in the same career field for about 15 years and was very good at it, so not being able to continue had hit her really hard. In January 2010, she enrolled in a training program to become a medical assistant. She'd been told that jobs were plentiful and work would be easy to come by once she graduated. She did so, earning a 3.98 GPA. That was one of the happiest nights she'd had in a long time, especially as it was the first graduation she'd ever had where people showed up to cheer her on

and celebrate what she'd accomplished.

Sadly, work didn't come that easily. She kept going with her part-time job for the Post Office, struggling with her frustration over what felt like a dead-end job. She'd also become increasingly sensitive to chemicals over the last several years, especially synthetic scents, which would leave her with chest pains and merciless headaches. While the Post Office claimed to have a scent-free workplace, the policy was never enforced. It made it harder and harder for her to work.

She had also struggled with other issues. For the first two years or so we were in our house, things seemed fine. After that, though, she began having increasing anxiety attacks, especially at unexpected noises like the horn of the train that would go by a couple blocks away. The reactions got worse and worse, and to other sounds as well. Eventually, she ended up moving into the room in the basement the farthest from the train. Even with the windows blocked up, an air purifier, and ear plugs, the noise would get to her. I didn't find out until after her death that it'd gotten bad enough, along with her nightmares, that she had taken to abusing prescription drugs she'd order via the Internet along with alcohol to get sleep. In trying to hold on to what I thought we still had, I didn't notice how much weight she was losing or how bad of a toll it was taking on her.

I also didn't find out until after she was dead that she had previously taken off with the intent of ending her life. This was in August of 2008, just after she'd had to put her beloved 21-year-old cat PK to sleep. She'd just disappeared for a few days and, when she came back, said it'd been to work some things out. At least she kept her promise after that to let me know when she was going to take off for awhile. It wasn't until after her death that I found a journal she'd kept during that time, which indicated she'd gone away to end her life. I wish it gave some idea of why she didn't that time.

Ariel didn't leave a note of any kind. The only thing found in the hotel room was handwritten direction to contact me in case of a medical emergency. Due to the condition in which her body was found from having been in a heated room for a couple of days and the drugs she used to end her life, the medical examiner couldn't

provide an exact date or time of death. The closest I have to go by is her last post on her Facebook account, which was on February 1st. In that post, she referenced Imbolc, a pagan/Celtic holiday focused on rebirth and renewal. I can't help thinking that she picked that day with the hope that she would be able to transform herself and escape this life.

My Experience

As I write this, it's just over six months since the police came to tell me about her death. In the first month or so, I could barely function. At best, I could handle one thing at a time. Sometimes just getting out of bed or standing up out of a chair seemed like it might be too much. Friends and family were a constant support, helping me get back on my feet. I didn't realize just how badly I'd been depleted by it all, though, and a couple of weeks after I went back to work I got sick and ended up in the emergency room. I was shaking and twitching like a cross between epilepsy and Parkinson's. The doctors diagnosed me with a nasty biochemical imbalance due to exhaustion, stress, dehydration and a really bad cold. It laid me out for the better part of a week, most of which was spent on the couch of good friends who took care of me.

Since then, I've had to learn how to slow down. I've been able to go back to work, but there are days when I have to allow that I won't be as productive as I'd want to be. There is still a lot to get done around the house, and I have to allow that sometimes I can do some of that work...and sometimes I can't. Pushing things again will likely only land me back in the E.R. again, exhausted, shaking and unable to function.

I started seeing a counselor through the employee assistance program at work, attending a monthly suicide survivor's support group, and signed on to an on-line grief support group. Having people to talk to about what has been going on has been a godsend. That's been especially true of having those who are willing to listen without trying to "fix" things or who don't push for me to be back to "normal." It's also helped hearing other people talk about having gone through, and sometimes still going through, what I'm experiencing. It's

good to know it's not just me. It's also good to hear that people do get through it, even if they don't ever really get over it.

My aunt who's a doctor gave me a very useful metaphor. I think about Ariel's suicide about like having had a stroke. It was sudden, unexpected, hit from out of nowhere. Suddenly, some things I used to be able to do I can't, some I can only sort of do, and some I still can. There's no way to really know what will come back on-line or when. It will just take time and patience.

Going through her things has been very hard. Each one brings up memories and thoughts of her, which made getting rid of a lot of her belongings hard. It helped at least finding ways to dispose of them that I think she would have liked. One example was donating most of her books to the local public library, a place she'd always loved. Even if they don't keep the books, they will sell them and the money will go to support the library.

We had a small memorial service for her, just family and friends that she had been close with. As she had never been all that religious, there were no prayers or scriptural readings. Instead, people were invited to share whatever they wanted about her. It was both touching and heartbreaking to hear the things they remembered and how sad so many were that they didn't know what was going on with her, didn't get the chance to help.

I had her body cremated, which was what she'd said she would want to have happen. Before it was burned, I got to see her body. It felt important to me, to really KNOW for sure that she was gone and that there wouldn't be any last-minute, mistaken-identity happy ending. I didn't realize it at the time, but it was also a chance to say goodbye to her. When the time is right, I'll be taking her ashes to one of her favorite places to scatter them. It's a place she'd always loved for its peacefulness and seclusion. I'd hope that would help her spirit find peace.

I've spent a lot of time talking with the God of my understanding. Sometimes it's in the mornings when I'm having a hard time getting up out of bed, asking for help to get through another day. Often, those are times I've asked for God to carry this heavy heart until I can carry it myself. Sometimes

it's in the evenings, either expressing gratitude for the support I've been given or ranting about what I still have to deal with. I believe God understands those times, and loves me anyways....and that helps, too. Recently, I've been able to pray for God to look out for, comfort and guide her spirit. I wasn't sure if that would ever come and, though it brings up the sadness and pain, I'm glad I can do that as well.

It's often the little things that are the hardest. The big things are easier to see coming, to brace myself for, like my first birthday without her or the first Fourth of July alone. Little things, though, hit from out of nowhere. The smell of her shampoo, seeing the snacks in the store she lived on for the last months, getting a cheap advertisement in the mail with her name on it....and so on. One little thing, and suddenly the walls and emotional floodgates open, and the sadness and loss and grief and rage pour out again. The flood always ends, it can be ridden, but it's always exhausting. The hope is always that each time it can be ridden and survived, it's one step closer to working through this darkest of times.

I know I have a lot more healing to go. Having made it this far, and seeing how much support and love I still have around me, most of the time I believe I can make it through.

Some Suggestions for Healing

- ◆ Talk to people. Just having people hear you out can help make things less confusing. It especially helps to find people to talk to who have either been through something similar or at least won't try to judge or fix you. That can be family, friends, a priest/pastor/bishop/etc., or a therapist or therapy group.
- ◆ As best as possible, eat and sleep regularly. It's not always easy to do at a time like this, but it does help to keep going and deal with what comes up. Moving through this is exhaustingly hard work; rest and food are necessary.
- ◆ Cultivate whatever spirituality you are comfortable with. Having some sense of

connection beyond yourself helps make it easier to bear. It also helps having somewhere to direct the questions that will never be answered.

- ◆ As best as possible, understand there is no right way to go through this. Grieving has no roadmap, and suicide only adds an order of magnitude of complexity and pain to it. It's about surviving and getting through it; that's all.
- ◆ As you feel ready, read up on others who have survived the suicide of a loved one. There are many good books out there. Getting to read what others have experienced can help make your own experiences feel less insane. Many of these books also have good suggestions for how to deal with grief and get through this process.
- ◆ Physical exercise helps as well, in whatever form you can do regularly. It helps to relieve tension and stress, and to facilitate sleep. It's not about training for a marathon; it's about moving regularly to help avoid other problems from cropping up.
- ◆ Don't be afraid to ask for help. These are NOT normal circumstances, and there are often more people around wanting and willing to help than we think. There is nothing wrong with asking for and accepting help at a time like this. Odds are you would do the same for family or a friend; they see you the same way.
- ◆ Allow yourself time and space to feel what you feel. It doesn't mean wallowing in it, but it also means not avoiding or repressing it. Feelings need to be felt and expressed in order for healing to happen. That can be journaling, walking, talking with people, or allowing yourself a place to cry or to be angry or afraid. They will come up and, if we allow them, they will flow through and pass.

--A Survivor