

Dear, HOPE



Alexis Thomas

Growing up you could say I lived the ideal life, a perfect life. I had 2 parents both a mom and a dad, 3 younger siblings, and family and friends that loved and cared for me. That perfect life came to an end on August 25, 2007 when my daddy committed suicide. I grew up as a daddy's girl and losing him made me feel empty and alone.

I started to lose myself and that's when my depression and anxiety finally hit. After Losing him I began to get close with my grandfather. I would go over to his house every chance I got, we went to the park, church, and he always spoiled me with anything and everything. I would have trusted him with my life, until he sexually abused me the summer before my 4th grade year. At this point in my life I began to start to have nightmares, and flashbacks which the Dr's would soon diagnosed me with as PTSD.

While all of this was happening my mom had met an amazing guy, who would eventually become my step dad. He took care of us at first, treated us like his own kids, and always put God first. I started to finally get through my depression, anxiety, and PTSD, I was happy. Then everything changed.. it all started with him screaming and saying really mean things to not only my mom but me and my siblings. My mom would do anything to make him happy, even if that meant getting hit. She was scared and so were we. We never were allowed to say anything to anyone because we didn't want to get into trouble with him and he would lash out again. Later, he started to sexually abuse me and my younger sister. After 2-3 years of sexual, emotional, verbal, and physical abuse we finally got help! It was a long road of recovery and healing for everyone including my mom.

Soon after, i started high school. At first it was amazing, I had friends, my grades were good, I was popular, as some would say, and I never really had a problem in school until I started to get bullied at school and on Social Media. I always tried to put on a mask, a mask that made me seem happy and cheerful, but really on the inside I was sad, depressed, and alone. I had been contemplating suicide for a long time, but never really had the guts. Until one day when I had had enough. I seemed like i was always getting made fun of, pushed in the hallways, and always having people staring at me like I was a no one.

I went home sit in my bathroom grabbed a bottle of pills, got a glass of water, and took every pill I could until I finally blacked out. My mom had thankfully came home earlier than usual from work. She found me passed out on the floor and she knew exactly what had happened that's when she rushed me to the hospital. After that I had to spend a week in a hospital to try and get myself better. When I left I finally opened up about how I was feeling, truly feeling. I started to begin trauma therapy and get other help in the community.

The summer before my Junior year I thought I met the love of life. It all started off amazing, we never argued, we were honest with each other, we talked about everything, he understood me, and loved me. Months went by, all was well, then everything went sideways. He started calling me names, saying stuff that he knew would hurt my feelings, pushing me away from my friends, and then he threatened to harm me and my family. He controlled my life and I finally realized that, when my mom told me that she didn't want me to go through what she had to go through and that she wanted nothing but the best for me.

I am now an upcoming senior in high school, just a regular girl trying to finding herself, overcoming new things, involved in my church, doing photography at my school, working as a host and babysitter, and volunteering in the community. I live by a saying, "God never gives you something that you can't handle." No matter what you go through just know that you are never alone and I guarantee that there is someone who has been through something like what you have and understands how you are feeling. Always remember that you are strong, you are smart, and you are beautiful.

Thank you,
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HOPE,

I...

...Realize I Matter

“Fall in love. Get my dream job. Move to an amazing city. Meet some of my closest friends. Be there for other humans. Discover my true self.” Those are just a few of the things I would have never experience if my life ended after my suicide attempt.

Growing up, I always felt different and out of place. When my parents pretty much abandoned me, it cemented my self-doubt. For over a decade, I struggled with hopelessness, suicidal thoughts, self-injury, and multiple suicide attempts to end my life because I just could not see the light at the end of the tunnel.

But there is one my darlings. Honestly, the road may not always be easy and it certainly is not always swift...but it is worth it. You have got to keep going because there is only one you. You are unique, beautiful, and loved just as you are. I have learned over the years that some of the most beautiful and kind human beings have struggled or do struggle with similar life issues.

I still deal with anxiety and anxious thoughts. I have many days filled with insecurity and will forever be a work-in-progress. I used to be scared to tell people about my suicide attempts. However, I see there is strength in being vulnerable. Your past and current mental health issues do not define you. My darling, you are the author in the story of your life. You get to fill the upcoming pages with amazing things. Just please remember that help is real and... so is hope.

Turn your negative situation into a message and let your courage roar louder than criticism. You will be amazed at the things you can accomplish and the unbelievable human you are. You matter because you were put on this Earth for a reason.

...Pay It Forward

The first time I wanted to commit suicide was few years back after high school. I really did not have any direction or anything after high school. My older brother moved out three years prior, and I was feeling the pressure to get out too. I put a ton of pressure on myself, especially after my dad and I had a conversation about getting out of the house. I was depressed and would often harm myself. When I wanted to commit suicide, I tried to hang myself. It was a futile attempt, but a suicide attempt nonetheless.

Afterwards, I decided to get help; and it took me years to recover. I also even dreamed about it. I wrote a note saying to my parents, “You wanted me out of the house, so I got out of the house.” Fortunately, I have recovered and doing well today.

Basically, I would like to say do not put undue pressure on yourself. I did that, which that led to depression and suicidal thoughts. I got some help and that was the best thing I have ever done. Now I am working with the Memphis Crisis Center and the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention. As a suicide survivor, I want to help others who may be or have been in the position as me. I hope my story helps Tennesseans as well.

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After his death, I started to lose myself. That is when I started to experience depression and anxiety. After losing my Daddy, I began to get close with my grandfather. I would go over to his house every chance I got. We went to the park, church, and he always spoiled me with anything and everything. I trusted him with my life, until he started to sexually abuse me the summer before my fourth grade. At that point in my life, I started having nightmares and flashbacks. Eventually, the doctors diagnosed me with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). During this time, my mom met an amazing guy, who eventually became my stepdad. My stepdad took care of us at first. He treated us like his own kids and always put God first. In addition, I was finally coping with my depression, anxiety, and PTSD. I was happy and then everything changed.

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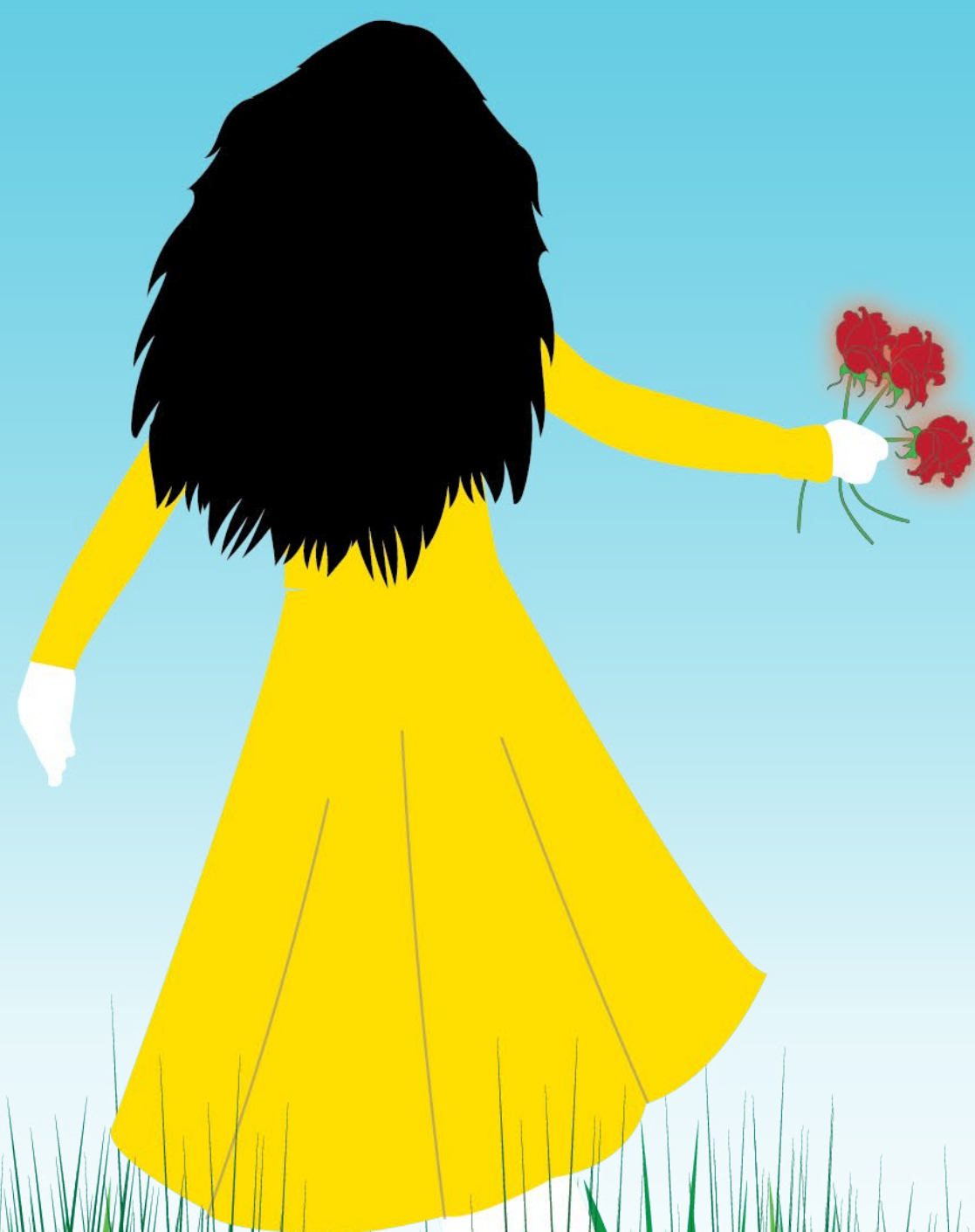
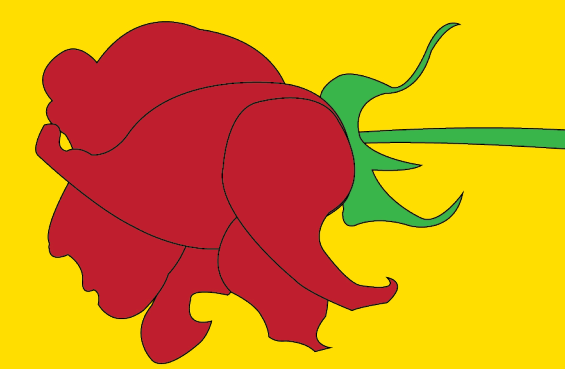
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The Death of a Prodigal Son



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June 9, 2018, I cannot describe in simple words. I find it difficult— if not impossible— to tell the story of Dennis and his suicide without telling part of my own story. As I begin, I find myself just one day from the fifteenth anniversary of my friend’s death. I also feel odd to consider Dennis my friend when he was so much more. How do you describe a relationship that lasted years and was so interconnected through family and layers of events? How do you describe love, loss, the moon, howling, dancing, light, kisses, tears, regret, pain, pardon, passion, relationships, passing, pulsing, vibrancy, and unspoken goodbyes? How do you describe a moment and a lifetime? How do you describe the point of no return?

I was thirteen when I met Dennis Ewing. He was my stepfather’s friend. Dennis liked motorcycles, drugs, dancing, and being the life of the party. He liked to work, fast cars, and most people he came in contact with. I did not become close to Dennis in those early years. He had a crush on my beautiful sister— as did most men when we were growing up. Dennis was like a member of our family. When we moved away, my parents stayed in contact with him, but not with frequently. They visited him once I believe in his new town after he moved away. After Dennis moved to a new town, he had two daughters. (Also, he had sons from a previous marriage before I met him. Over a twenty year span, we periodically heard from Dennis. While the life of my family had become rather “normal” or routine. Dennis spent time in and out of jail and living a wild life. My story had many twists and turns over those twenty years with little thought of Dennis, other than things I would hear from my parents. For instance, whenever he would go to jail, my folks would send money or a letter of encouragement and shared memories. I cannot tell you much about his life throughout those years. I cannot tell you why he went to jail, the names of his friends and women, where his family lived, if he had contacted anyone from his past other than my parents, or his pains or joys during those years. What I can tell you is the information Dennis shared with me, because this story continued following those years of absence. This story is about the death of a prodigal son’s return to the fold, a restoration of the pack, and a whirlwind of life in our midst.

The Return of Dennis

Dennis showed up at my family’s home in his old Ford pick-up truck with his camper and sidekick in tow. His sidekick was sullen. He followed Dennis as if he were his god, his keeper, or even perhaps his lover. It was a difficult relationship to witness, but you could tell there were many years and layers to it, which was not ours to understand. As I recall, his sidekick stayed for a few months. I met him a few times before he left. Dennis stayed. However, not too long after his sidekick left, Dennis got word that he had shot and killed himself. I do not know what Dennis suffered from that loss. He kept those feelings to himself. I thought Dennis would leave after that, but again he stayed. Dennis found his way to a family and place he could belong. He was part of a pack again. The pack was small, but strong. It provided shelter from the things about Dennis and his story that he was unable to share.

The Relationship

It happened without warning when Dennis and I began a relationship. Our relationship began under the moonlight, dancing, and stolen kisses. It was sudden, so I was not sure our relationship would continue or was a moment’s fancy. Dennis and I happened so abruptly, that I was not aware of my heart’s desire and that I would share the next three years in this dancing and spinning relationship with consequences that would change who I am forever. We began our love story with intensities I had not considered possible within myself, which have not occurred since.

“We sometimes carry wounds that can close us from possibilities, until something happens that awakens the exiled parts within; and we find ourselves allowing the freefall,” that is how it was for me on that fateful night with Dennis. I allowed his touch to awaken me and his body to fold with my own. I allowed the possibilities to reawaken the headiness and intoxication of oneness with another. Do I regret this allowance? No. I do not regret the beauty and chaos of my time with Dennis. Still these fifteen years later I feel the whisper of his voice on my neck and hear the long howling of his pains unspoken. My only regret is I did not know how to reshape his suffering into a space of completeness and belonging. There were many incidences in those three years of drama and then the many spaces of quiet and peace. Dennis had issues with addiction, and unfortunately those issues spilled over into our life together.

June 10, 2018: The Anniversary

Today marks fifteen years since Dennis’ suicide. As I write, my limbs feel heavy and my throat constricted. My eyes are full with tears and my heart still laden with grief.

I mentioned regret in writing yesterday, and I wish to explain why that rests in me. I wish to express— like so many before or after me who live to tell the story of a loss to suicide of a loved one— how difficult it is to shed regret and guilt. There is always the continuation of thought. What could I have done differently that day? What could I have said or done something to change the outcome, if at least for another day? How do I live with the consequences of not noticing or knowing what was going to happen on that ill-fated day? How do I find a path to self-forgiveness, even if I know in my heart and mind I am not responsible for his choice? What if I had just said something— anything— that would have kept Dennis from making that choice?

The day lives like a bad movie in my memory. The memory plays out in slow motion and a sickening color with a heavy air. The haunts of the things unsaid or said have a way of remaining like a lead blanket that will not allow movement. I have gone to treatment for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), but that does not remove the reality of that day. It does help with my immediate response to certain objects or images, but it does not take away the weight of pain that still exists.

Yet still, a slight smile comes to me when I remember Dennis in his many hours of play and light. How he would yell my name from across a crowded room to let me know he was there or thinking of me. I remember the day before his passed and how he rolled up on a bicycle with what was undoubtedly a stolen rose bush; and how he was determined to get it planted right away. He often brought me gifts. One gift he brought, not long before his passing, was a large mosaic heart. I still keep in my yard. Dennis said he bought it, but I will never really know.

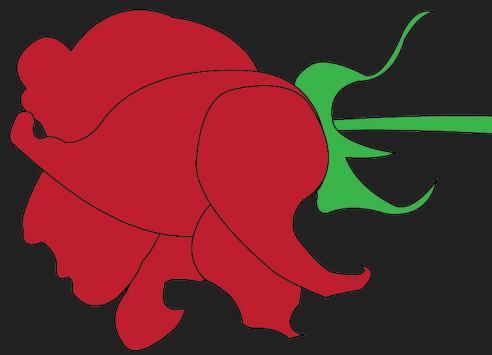
The house I bought a few years after he died is just two blocks from where he took his own life. We were both at home that day and a friend had stopped by for a visit. Even though Dennis would not sit to watch a movie with us, he kept coming in and out. At one point asked me where the dog leash was located. I found it odd at the time, but did not think much of it. We always kept the leash in one place... I wish I would have questioned my feelings more. I remember that day having concerns for his safety. I remember feeling relieved when he rolled up in the yard on his bike after having gone somewhere for a short ride. When I saw him pull into the yard, I knew I did not have to worry about his well-being anymore. He was home and safe.

Dennis had gotten rid of most of his few belongings in the last few months of his life. He had everything condensed to a small backpack and a locked box of old memorabilia and photos – mostly old car and motorcycle pictures, and his birth certificate. Those items are tucked safely in a drawer at my house. Sometimes I look at them, but mostly they are just there. They were special to Dennis, which makes them special to me. I remember a few months after his passing, I had somehow found his daughter and talked to her on the phone. That was perhaps one of the most difficult conversations of my life. How could I explain what had happened when I really did not know myself? I told her how much he loved her and her sister, and how often he spoke of them. I do not know the circumstances of his relationship with their mother. I do know the burden of living with the final moments of Dennis’ life and any final words between us being mine to carry. Oddly, our last words were me saying, “I just don’t want any trauma or drama.” He replied, “There will be no trauma or drama.” Shortly after, I looked out my window and saw Dennis hanging from a tree in the front yard. I could not save him... that moment will forever be the most traumatic and dramatic of my life.

Today will pass slowly. I will think of Dennis and our sweet hours of lovemaking and the many spins across the dance floor. I will think about his love of animals and plants, and even think about what a bad boy he liked to be. I always liked the bad boys. I will think about his love of cars, motorcycles; and most of all, the people he cared about most and considered family. I will think about his children that I never met, how he loved to paint and explain to me the knowledge of his craft, how he loved to sit in the sun, drink his cold beer, and quickly befriend strangers.

I will not think about what could have been because it is too painful to live in the what ifs. But, I will remember the love and take the time in this very long day to honor what was and shall remain forever in my memory and heart. In the aftermath of all that happened, Dennis still lives. If only in the sacred spaces of my being and in his story, however limited in the telling. Though I no longer dance, when I close my eyes and remember our movement together it is as if I am still there. I will always treasure these memories.

Open the rose to hear
Gloria’s story.



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Afterwards, I decided to get help; and it took me years to recover. I also even dreamed about it. I wrote a note saying to my parents, “You wanted me out of the house, so I got out of the house.” Fortunately, I have recovered and doing well today.

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After his death, I started to lose myself. That is when I started to experience depression and anxiety. After losing my Daddy, I began to get close with my grandfather. I would go over to his house every chance I got. We went to the park, church, and he always spoiled me with anything and everything. I trusted him with my life, until he started to sexually abuse me the summer before my fourth grade. At that point in my life, I started having nightmares and flashbacks. Eventually, the doctors diagnosed me with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). During this time, my mom met an amazing guy, who eventually became my stepdad. My stepdad took care of us at first. He treated us like his own kids and always put God first. In addition, I was finally coping with my depression, anxiety, and PTSD. I was happy and then everything changed.

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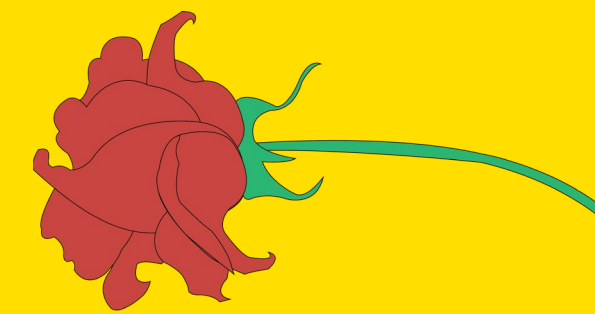
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differently that day? What could I have said or done something to change the outcome, if at least for another day? How do I live with the consequences of not noticing or knowing what was going to happen on that ill-fated day? How do I find a path to self-forgiveness, even if I know in my heart and mind I am not responsible for his choice? What if I had just said something— anything— that would have kept Dennis from making that choice?

The day lives like a bad movie in my memory. The memory plays out in slow motion and a sickening color with a heavy air. The haunts of the things unsaid or said have a way of remaining like a lead blanket that will not allow movement. I have gone to treatment for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), but that does not remove the reality of that day. It does help with my immediate response to certain objects or images, but it does not take away the weight of pain that still exists.

Yet still, a slight smile comes to me when I remember Dennis in his many hours of play and light. How he would yell my name from across a crowded room to let me know he was there or thinking of me. I remember the day before his passing and how he rolled up on a bicycle with what was undoubtedly a stolen rose bush; and how he was determined to get it planted right away. He often brought me gifts. One gift he brought, not long before his passing, was a large mosaic heart. I still keep in my yard. Dennis said he bought it, but I will never really know.

The house I bought a few years after he died is just two blocks from where he took his own life. We were both at home that day and a friend had stopped by for a visit. Even though Dennis would not sit to watch a movie with us, he kept coming in and out. At one point asked me where the dog leash was located. I found it odd at the time, but did not think much of it. We always kept the leash in one place...I wish I would have questioned my feelings more. I remember that day having concerns for his safety. I remember feeling relieved when he rolled up in the yard on his bike after having gone somewhere for a short ride. When I saw him pull into the yard, I knew I did not have to worry about his well-being anymore. He was home and safe.

Dennis had gotten rid of most of his few belongings in the last few months of his life. He had everything condensed to a small backpack and a locked box of old memorabilia and photos – mostly old car and motorcycle pictures, and his birth certificate. Those items are tucked safely in a drawer at my house. Sometimes I look at them, but mostly they are just there. They were special to Dennis, which makes them special to me. I remember a few months after his passing, I had somehow found his daughter and talked to her on the phone. That was perhaps one of the most difficult conversations of my life. How could I explain what had happened when I really did not know myself? I told her how much he loved her and her sister, and how often he spoke of them. I do not know the circumstances of his relationship with their mother. I do know the burden of living with the final moments of Dennis’ life and any final words between us being mine to carry. Oddly, our last words were me saying, “I just don’t want any trauma or drama.” He replied, “There will be no trauma or drama.” Shortly after, I looked out my window and saw Dennis hanging from a tree in the front yard. I could not save him...that moment will forever be the most traumatic and dramatic of my life.

Today will pass slowly. I will think of Dennis and our sweet hours of lovemaking and the many spins across the dance floor. I will think about his love of animals and plants, and even think about what a bad boy he liked to be. I always liked the bad boys. I will think about his love of cars, motorcycles; and most of all, the people he cared about most and considered family. I will think about his children that I never met, how he loved to paint and explain to me the knowledge of his craft, how he loved to sit in the sun, drink his cold beer, and quickly befriend strangers.

I will not think about what could have been because it is too painful to live in the what ifs. But, I will remember the love and take the time in this very long day to honor what was and shall remain forever in my memory and heart. In the aftermath of all that happened, Dennis still lives. If only in the sacred spaces of my being and in his story, however limited in the telling. Though I no longer dance, when I close my eyes and remember our movement together it is as if I am still there. I will always treasure these memories.

Open the rose to hear
Gloria’s story.

