# *My Husband Died on 9/11, Will I Ever Feel Closure?*

## By Raina Wallens

When the two police officers arrived at my apartment door, they thought I'd be happy to hear the news: My husband's remains had been found. When I didn't give them the relieved reaction they expected—when I gasped and faltered instead—the male police officer gave me a nervous look and mumbled, "Maybe you can have some closure now?"

The cops had caught me within the first ten minutes that I'd been alone in two months since my husband, Blake, had been killed in the World Trade Center on September 11th, 2001. I'd gone out to lunch with a couple of friends who said goodbye to me on the corner of West End Avenue, and by the time I got inside my apartment off Riverside, the doorman was calling me to say two officers wanted to see me. Cold dread washed over me. It was a sensation I'd become accustomed to.

It was as if I was hearing the news of Blake's death all over again.

Closure, a word well-meaning people offer those who are in mourning, was the opposite of what the officers'

news was giving me. Hearing about Blake's remains was an opening: a fresh gash in my grief. Blake's body—his precious vivid flesh that I'd described several times the day of the attack in the hopes that he'd be found *alive*—had now, all these weeks later, been recovered. What did this mean about how Blake had died? Had he jumped? Had his close friend Greg been found, or any of his friends and colleagues from work? Horrific questions, thoughts I hadn't wondered in days, rushed back into my brain. Did Blake know what was happening when the planes hit the buildings? How scared was he? Why wasn't I there with him? Why hadn't I been there to answer the phone when he'd called once the first plane hit?

The female police officer handed me a card. Typed on it was the name and phone number of the medical examiner, who would have some answers. The officers scooted out quickly, their disappointment and discomfort palpable. I was not the 9/11 widow they wanted me to be. There were so many news stories of family members praying for bodies. I didn't fall in that category.

I was twenty-seven. Blake had been thirty-one when he was killed. We'd been together for five years, but married for just one. We didn't have wills. We'd never discussed death, or our "wishes." Blake was one of the most spiritual people I'd known, a deep appreciator of the natural world, but he'd been an atheist.

A close friend of mine, whose father had died a couple of years earlier, told me, "I don't *feel* my dad when I'm at the cemetery. That place has nothing to do with my memories of him or anything we did together. I feel close to him when I'm at a place like the beach. Or on a fishing boat. Somewhere he loved."

Blake cherished the outdoors. Cremating his body and digging his ashes into the earth felt like what he would have wanted. I took half of his remains to the spot where we got married, a favorite place of Blake's and mine, my parents' front yard in Connecticut. The other half I brought to California, to my in-laws. They chose to bury Blake's ashes at a close friend's home in Malibu, the site of our last family gathering four months earlier, waves lapping twenty feet beyond.

In both places, under the vibrant-colored leaves on a bright autumn day in Connecticut, and beneath the California sun, the smell of sand and sea wafting toward us, I could *feel* Blake.

He was there with me. This was comforting, but also eviscerating.

It still wasn't *closure,* but it was raw, unapologetic reality. When you're slammed down by tragedy, as a means of protection and self-preservation, your brain doesn't allow you to think about the pain all the time—or accept it. If I'd constantly been remembering that two planes had crashed into Blake's office building and killed him and I would never see him again, I simply wouldn't have been able to move anymore. A dose of denial is actually a healthy thing when it comes to mourning and grief. It's what Joan Didion referred to in *The Year of Magical Thinking*. Oh, how I wish that book had existed when Blake died.

Mourning is so lonely. Even if you are blessed with wonderful family and friends, as I was, you don't want to always be assaulting them with your grief. Not to

mention all the interactions you have with acquaintances and co-workers and neighbors and store clerks. It often feels impossible to act like a "normal" person. How do you answer the question *How are you?* when no one wants to know the real answer?

Days passed, which was supposed to help. Time heals, right? Except for a long while, it didn't. It just meant that other people had seemingly moved on, while I was stuck in the gaping chasm of grief. Still, I tried to cope. I never knew what to do when new friends asked me questions about myself and my life, when I felt like only a partial version of who I used to be. I didn't always want to shock someone with my story, or have Blake's death be the one thing they knew and remembered about me. But I felt so fragile, like I could break at any moment, at the sight of the West Village bar where we'd first met, or at the mention of Patsy's Pizza where we'd spent so many

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Sunday afternoons, or ambushed by any number of a shared life's details, both major and minor, that had suddenly vanished. The fact that I'd loved and lost so profoundly was an essential part of who I was. If someone didn't know that, they didn't know me. And more than anything, I wanted—no, needed—to keep Blake alive. He had to be remembered. Always.

Soon after Blake died, someone gave me a journal with a blue fabric cover. I wrote in it obsessively. Sometimes about my pain and mourning, but mostly about Blake. Memories. Phrases. Jokes between us. It was a memorial in words and I filled every page.

As time trudged on, the conflict of mourning a husband while encountering new people became more complex. I still loved Blake, and I never wanted that to change. I'd accepted his death, as much as it was possible, but that didn't mean I had to deny his life, *our* life, as if it had never happened.

I had dates cry when I told them about Blake; boyfriends mentioned that they'd hoped to fall in love with someone who'd never been married before; one guy I

was seeing told me he felt like he was dating a dead man.

My nephew Noah died a little over a year ago, at the age of twenty-five. A few months after his passing, his younger sister and I went for a walk, and she told me she didn't want to marry someone who hadn't known Noah. I stopped in place, her words lodging themselves right in my heart, unleashing memories and emotions that had never really left me. "The person you marry," I told her, "the person who loves you the right way, *will* know Noah."

I know this because when I met Michael eight years after Blake died, he didn't flinch when I told him about my first husband; he didn't blink when I shared a memory of my life with him. Michael came with me and my parents the first time we visited the 9/11 memorial, and he usually takes the day off on September 11th to spend with me.

Michael and I got married, but I didn't change my last name. Wallens is Blake's last name. My son's middle name is Blake. At my son's bris, Michael held our infant in his arms and explained, "Part of the reason Raina is

who she is, and she's the woman I love, is because she loved Blake. He's a part of her. And now he's a part of this little guy." Michael's voice cracked as he said the words. Yet I'd never seen such strength. He had the confidence to know I loved him fully and deeply, but also the wisdom to understand I'd loved before. And that was something I'd always want to remember.

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