



The Empty Chair

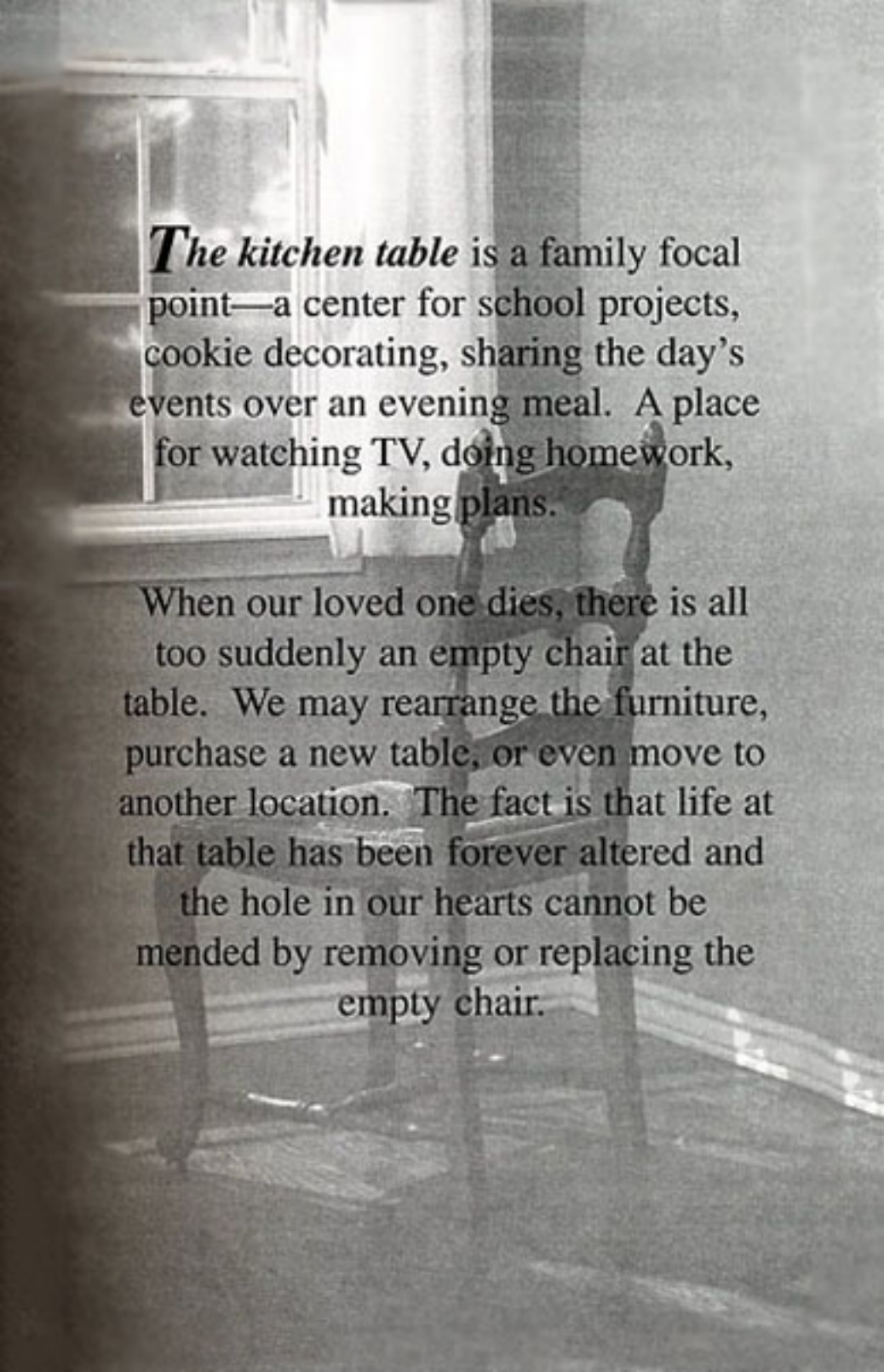
the journey of grief after suicide

written by Beryl S. Glover
edited by Glenda Stansbury

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The kitchen table is a family focal point—a center for school projects, cookie decorating, sharing the day's events over an evening meal. A place for watching TV, doing homework, making plans.

When our loved one dies, there is all too suddenly an empty chair at the table. We may rearrange the furniture, purchase a new table, or even move to another location. The fact is that life at that table has been forever altered and the hole in our hearts cannot be mended by removing or replacing the empty chair.

A SUICIDE IN THE FAMILY...

Time stands still. For a little while or a long while. Whereas the world whispers its regrets and then continues on, our body shuts down. At first, we measure time in breaths. We can't move, we can't eat, we can't think, we can't hear, we can't sleep. We feel desperate and disconnected. Disconnected from our loved one in the middle of a sentence. Disconnected from ourselves and our lives. We are in shock, and it may last for two days, two weeks, two months...sometimes even longer.

This book describes the grief process as it is experienced by a variety of people. In it we address the emotions and expressions of grief common to most people after the death of a loved one, list them in alphabetical order, and offer stories and insights of fellow travelers. We call it the "glossary of oh-my-gods."

The people who share their stories are making progress and healing a little more each day. Their experiences are a testimonial that beyond the suffocating pain and terrible sadness, there is life and there is hope.

This book is about what happens after the initial days of the funeral. It is about what to do when we get up the next morning and everyone has gone home. Home to resume life, leaving us with the staggering task of forging a way to go from where we are—drowning—to returning to some semblance of life as we knew it.

The note on her door said, "Please don't disturb. I stayed up late doing homework and don't have a class until 1:00."

We honored our daughter, Cathy's, request as she knew we would, notwithstanding the temptation to check in to see whether she was all right. She wasn't. She was dying a slow death by her own hand.

I listened for her every time I went upstairs that morning. I even noticed that my medication and vitamins were missing from the kitchen cabinet. "Curious," I thought, "I wonder who moved them."

Later in the morning, I noticed that her door was ajar and I heard moaning sounds calling me. I went in and found her rolling on the floor, ghostly white, unable to lie still. Her bed was soaked with blood, a kitchen knife was on the night stand and there were medicine bottles scattered everywhere. She begged me to open some windows because she couldn't breathe. I knew as soon as I saw her that she was dying.

Automatic pilot took over. With a composure that belied my terror, I ran downstairs and asked my sister-in-law to call my husband, Bob, the rescue squad and Cathy's surgeon. The rescue squad instructed me to hold her slashed wrists so she wouldn't lose more blood. I ran back to her room and desperately followed those instructions. I knew there was not much blood left in her body, but I was too frightened to do anything else. I was so intent on doing

Acceptance—Accepting the reality of our loved one's suicide is the centerpiece of our recovery. It is a zigzag course that begins somewhere in the early weeks of our journey. There are moments when we can see beyond the tangle of our shrieking emotions and begin to acknowledge our loss. There are other times when it's just too horrible to countenance, and we deny it hopelessly.

This zigzag course is just that. It eventually takes us in the right direction—forward rather than backward. However, our progress is routinely interrupted by setbacks. After months, sometimes even longer, of what may seem a never-ending struggle along this difficult continuum, we eventually learn to acquiesce to the suicide as part of our new reality.

Elizabeth

Elizabeth is a physician. She is married to a physician and the mother of four young adults. Her mother completed suicide over thirteen years ago at age 70.

Elizabeth remembers the moment:

She hanged herself. I mean, time stands still. I remember I was in the kitchen. Our kids were involved in skating lessons, and I had just come from a lesson when the police called. They had gone to my mother's house and found her. I'm not sure whether they said she had killed herself, but I understood that was what they thought had happened. And I was absolutely dumbstruck.