

about sexual encounters. All these obsessions have now faded, but I'll never forget my experience of powerlessness when I tried to stop them.

Then the experience of deep shattering grief. Though it is no longer searing, it still persists and is easily ignited by looking at Marilyn's portrait. I weep when I think of her. I write these lines on March 10, Marilyn's birthday, one hundred and ten days after her death.

And finally I've had a strong whiff of depression. I don't think I'll ever forget the experience of immobility, of deadness, of feeling inert and hopeless.

I now view my patient, Irene, through a different lens. Just as though it were yesterday, I recall so much of my encounter with her, particularly her comments about how my snug, cozy, fortunate life prevented me from fully grasping the devastation of her many losses. Now I take her words more seriously.

Irene, I believe you were right. "Smug and cozy" you called me—and you were correct. And if I were to see you now, now that I've lived through Marilyn's death, I am certain our work together would be different—and better. I can't specify what I would do or say, but I know I would experience you differently and that I would have found a more genuine and helpful way to be with you.

## CHAPTER 35

# DEAR MARILYN

My Dear Marilyn,

I know I'm breaking all the rules by writing you, but I've now come to the last pages of our book, and I cannot resist contacting you one last time. You were so wise to invite me to write this book with you . . . no, no, that's not right: you didn't *invite*, you *insisted that I put aside the book I had started and, instead, write this book together with you*. And I'll be forever grateful for your insistence—this writing project has kept me alive since you died one hundred twenty-five days ago.

Of course, you recall we wrote alternating chapters until two weeks before Thanksgiving when you grew too ill to continue and told me that I would have to finish the book on my own. I've been writing alone for four months—in fact, doing nothing but writing—and I'm now coming to the end. I've been circling around this last chapter for weeks, and now I know that I cannot finish it without reaching out to you one final time.

How much of what I've written and am about to write do you already know? With total assurance, my mature, scientific, rational mind says—"zero, nothing, nada"—whereas my child mind, my tender, weeping, lurching, emotional mind wants to hear you say, "I know everything, my darling Irv. I've been by your side, accompanying you every moment of your journey."

Marilyn, the first thing I must do is to address and shuck some troublesome guilt. *Forgive me, please, for not looking at your portrait more often.* I keep it in the sunroom but . . . to my shame . . . I keep it turned toward the wall!! I tried for a while to keep it face outward so I could look into your beautiful eyes every time I entered the room, but without exception, each time I looked at your picture, grief pierced my heart and I wept. Now, after four months, it's just beginning to ease. Now, for a few minutes almost every day, I turn your photo around and gaze into your eyes. The pain has lessened and now, once again, love-warmth flushes through me. Then I look at another photo of you I've just found. You are hugging me. My eyes are closed, and I am blissfully transported.

And I have yet another confession: I have not yet visited your grave! I haven't mustered the courage: the very thought of it evokes too much pain. But the children have all visited your grave each time they come to Palo Alto.

Since you last saw our book, I've written one hundred additional pages and am now working on these closing paragraphs. I found it impossible to change or eliminate a single word you had written, so I've asked Kate, our editor, to edit your chapters. At the end I describe your final weeks, days, even the moments when I was next to you, holding your

hand, as you drew your last breath. Then I wrote about your funeral and all that's happened to me since.

I've gone through a deep abyss of grief—but how could it have been otherwise given that I've loved you since we were adolescents? Even now, as I think how blessed I was to have spent my life with you, I can't understand how it all happened. How was it that the smartest, most beautiful and popular girl at Roosevelt High School chose to spend her life with me? Me, the class nerd, the star of the chess team, the most socially awkward kid in the school! You loved France and French, and yet, as you often noted, I mispronounced every French word that ever came my way. You loved music and were such a beautiful, graceful dancer, whereas I am so tone deaf that my elementary school teachers asked me not to sing in class chorus exercises, and, as you well know, I was a disgrace on the dance floor. Yet you always told me that you loved me and saw great potential in me. How can I ever, ever, thank you enough? Tears pour down my cheeks as I type these lines.

The last four months without you have been the hardest months of my life. Despite innumerable calls and visits from our children and friends, I've been numb and depressed and felt very much alone. I was slowly recovering until three weeks ago when I sold your car. The following morning, I was crushed and overcome with despair when I saw the empty space in our garage. I've contacted an excellent therapist and have been seeing her weekly. She has helped considerably, and I'll continue working with her for a while.

Then, about a month ago, a coronavirus epidemic broke out, placing the entire world in jeopardy. It is unlike anything anyone of us has ever experienced, and at this very moment

the US and almost all European countries, including France, are on a twenty-four-hour lockdown. It's extraordinary—all New Yorkers, Parisians, San Franciscans, Germans, Italians, Spaniards—most of the Western world—must stay isolated in their homes. All businesses, except for grocers and pharmacies, have been ordered to shut down. Can you imagine the huge Stanford Shopping Center closed? And the Champs-Élysées in Paris and Broadway in New York empty and shut down? It's happening at this very moment and it is spreading. Here is this morning's headline in the *New York Times*: "India, Day 1: World's Largest Lockdown Begins—About 1.3 billion Indians have been told to stay at home."

I know how you would have experienced this: you would have been weighed down with anxiety about me and our children and your friends throughout the world, and by all the daily reminders that our world is collapsing. I am thankful you didn't have to go through this: you followed Nietzsche's advice—you died at the right time!

Three weeks ago, at the very beginning of the epidemic, our daughter decided to move in with me for the interim. As you know, Eve is on the verge of retiring from Kaiser. When your children retire then you know you are truly old. Her gynecology department has made it possible for her to do all her doctoring online these last weeks. Eve has been a godsend. She is taking good care of me, and my anxiety and depression have faded. I think she saved my life. She is making sure that we're truly isolated and making physical contact with no one. When we take a walk in our park and pass folks on the path, we wear our face masks, as does everyone now, and we assiduously keep six feet away from anyone we pass. Yesterday, for the first time in a month, I got into the car. We

drove to Stanford and took a walk starting at the Humanities Center and walking to the Oval. It was entirely deserted aside from a few other walkers all wearing face masks and all keeping their distance. Everything is empty—the bookstore, Tressider Student Union, the Faculty Club, the libraries. Not a student in sight—the university is entirely shut down.

For the past three weeks, no one other than Eve or I has entered our home, absolutely no one, not even Gloria, our housekeeper. I will continue to pay Gloria until it is safe for her to return. Same with the gardeners whom the government has ordered to remain in their homes and not to come to work. People my age are exceedingly vulnerable and perhaps I may die of this virus but now, for the first time since you left, I think I can say to you, "Don't worry about me: I'm beginning to rejoin life once again." You're there, with me, all the time.

So many times, Marilyn, I search my memory in vain—I think of someone we met, some trip we took, some play we saw, some restaurant we dined at—but all these happenings have vanished from memory. Not only have I lost you, the most precious person to me in the world, but so much of my past has vanished with you. My prediction that, when you left me, you would be taking with you a good part of my past has proved to be true. For example, the other day I recalled that we took a trip a few years ago to some isolated location, and I remember that I brought *The Meditations of Marcus Aurelius* with me, and to insure I would read the entire book, I brought no other books with me. I remember how I read and reread and relished every word. The other day I tried, in vain, to recall *where* we had gone on that trip. Was it an island? Mexico? Where? Of course it's not important,

but still it's troubling to think of such wonderful memories vanishing forever. Remember all those passages I read to you? Remember how I said that when you died you would take much of my past with you? Indeed, that has come to pass.

Another example: The other night I reread "The Hungarian Cat Curse," the final story in my book *Momma and the Meaning of Life*. You may recall that the main character of that story is a menacing talking Hungarian cat who is terrified as he approaches the end of his ninth, and final, life. It's the most fanciful and bizarre story I've ever written, and I have no idea where, in my life, in my memory, that story came from. What inspired it? Did it have anything to do with my Hungarian friend, Bob Berger? I imagine asking you about what inspired me to write this strange tale—after all, who else has ever written about a therapist working with a Hungarian talking cat? I am certain you'd remember precisely the source of this tale. So many times, Marilyn, I search my memory in vain: not only have I lost you, the most precious person in the world, but so much else of my world has vanished with you.

I feel certain that I'm approaching the end of my life and yet, strangely enough, I experience little anxiety about death—I'm having a freak bout of peace of mind. Now, whenever I think about death, the thought of "joining Marilyn" soothes me. Perhaps I shouldn't question a thought that offers so much balm, but I cannot escape my skepticism. After all, what on earth does *joining Marilyn* really mean?

Do you remember a conversation in which I expressed my wish to be buried side by side in the same coffin with you? You told me that in your years writing your book on American cemeteries, you never once heard of a coffin for two. That didn't matter to me: I told you I was greatly soothed

by the thought of you and me in the same coffin, my body placed next to your bones, my skull next to your skull. Yes, yes, of course rational thought informs me that you and I won't be there—what remains is nonsentient, soulless, deteriorating flesh and bone. And yet the *idea, not the reality*, provides comfort. I, an ardent materialist, jettison my reason and bask unashamedly in the entirely fantastical thought that if you and I were in the same coffin, then we'd be together for all time.

*Of course* this is unreal. *Of course* I can never join you. You and I will no longer exist. It's a fairy tale! Since I was 13 I've never taken seriously any religious or spiritual views of an afterlife. And yet the fact that I, a devout skeptic and scientist, am, nonetheless, soothed by the thought of joining my dead wife, is evidence of the extraordinarily powerful desire we have for persistence and the dread we humans have of oblivion. I am left with renewed respect for the power and the soothing of magical thinking.

As I was writing these very last lines an extraordinary coincidence occurred: I received an email from a reader who had read my book *Becoming Myself*. His closing lines:

But why, Dr Yalom, so much fear about death? The body dies, but consciousness is like a river, running through time . . . when death comes, then it's time to say goodbye to this world, to the human body, to the family . . . but it's not the end.

*"It's not the end"*—How much, how tightly, we humans, ever since the beginning of recorded history, have embraced and clung to this thought. Each one of us dreads death, and

each of us must find a way to cope with that dread. Marilyn, I so clearly remember your oft-repeated comment, "The death of an 87-year-old woman who has no regrets about her life is no tragedy." That concept—*the more fully you live your life, the less tragic is your death*—rings so very true for me.

Some of our favorite writers champion that viewpoint. Remember how Kazantzakis's life-loving Zorba urged: "*Leave death nothing but a burned-out castle.*" And remember that passage by Sartre, in his autobiography, that you read to me: "I was going quietly to the end . . . certain that the last burst of my heart would be inscribed on the last page of my work and that death would be taking only a dead man."

I know that I will exist in ethereal form in the minds of those who have known me or read my work but, in a generation or two, anyone who has ever known the flesh-and-blood me will have vanished.

I shall end our book with the unforgettable opening words of Nabokov's autobiography, *Speak, Memory*: "The cradle rocks above an abyss, and common sense tells us that our existence is but a brief crack of light between two eternities of darkness." That image both staggers and calms. I lean back in my chair, close my eyes, and take comfort.

