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My Dear Friends

I'll never forget being told in therapy, newly bereaved and bewildered, that a massive 80% or so of relationships ultimately break down following the death of their child. (TCF research, When A Child Dies, 1999). Charming, I remember thinking indignantly, as if I needed to hear that as my world imploded. However, once I rallied from my exasperation of unrealistic expectations, (not least that the counsellor surely had some magic formula to hasten my healing), I reluctantly acknowledged this notion. Forewarned means forearmed and I didn't want to lose the most important person left in my life over diverse grieving styles.

So in this light I ponder my technique to survive the first anniversary of our only child's death – utterly inebriated with work colleagues who had swooped me up to help me blot out my misery. Of course how we self sooth our suffering and try to avoid the dismal drudgery of grieving is a significant topic in itself... A bit of me is horrified at the incapacitated state I got into. Another part empathically recognises I was just trying to withstand the body blow of the day as best I could. However, a huge part of me wonders why I was not with my husband that day, sharing a mutual grief that only we could comprehend. Isn't it a further cruel twist that losing your child doesn't necessarily bring you closer together despite the commonality of shared anguish? Instead, it can leave us missing each other, dealing with our demons quite alone.

And no wonder, as you both strive to adjust to integrate such a phenomenal loss and concurrently grapple with your emptiness, anger, incomprehension, and guilt. The persecution of guilt! Our job as parents is to protect our children and the torment of not accomplishing this on the most fundamental, base level, is brutal. How understandable that bitterness and fury be directed at the one most close, as expectations of each other require dramatic adjustment. Once instinctive connectors such as comfortable conversation, shared activities or sexual intimacy may have become fraught. An impasse indeed.

But while a relationship is inevitably placed under enormous stress, it does not mean it's destined to fall apart. With kindness and generosity, and a sense of respect for each other's way of dealing with your tragedy, an opportunity for a deeper connection is possible. Because at the heart of your relationship is your shared parent-child bond, the one person on the planet who can truly grasp your agony - because they feel it too. You've lost your child, but this doesn't mean you have to lose each other too.

With love,

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