

A CURE for **HEARTACHE**

MARY JANE GRANT

Life's simple pleasures,
one moment at a time



CORONET

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For my extraordinary family and wonderful friends

Prologue

Languedoc, France, 2015

The Peugeot took one final corner on the narrow road, and the village sign came into view. 'Labastide-Esparbairenque.'

'I'm going to learn how to pronounce that by the time I leave here,' I said to the friends who had kindly offered to chauffeur me through the French countryside to La Muse, a creative retreat set high in the hills of the Languedoc region of France. 'I've got a month to do it.'

The day before, I'd flown from Canada to Carcassonne airport, where my friends picked me up. After dinner, we sat in their living room to chat and enjoy the last few sips of local red wine. I checked my email. There was one from my lawyer: it was the certificate of my divorce. My marriage was legally over.

'It's a sign,' I said. 'I guess this is the beginning of the next chapter.'

My friends let me out in front of a rambling stone building on the edge of the narrow road, and I waved as they drove

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away. A tall, good-looking man with a friendly face emerged from the front door.

'Bienvenue! Welcome to La Muse.' He grabbed my suitcase and knapsack. 'I'm John, and this is Kerry.'

'Hi and welcome to La Muse,' said the pretty, dark-haired woman who came up behind him.

John and Kerry had come to France from New York fourteen years earlier to find a property that would be suitable for an artists' retreat. La Muse was the first thing they saw, and they fell in love with it. Over the years, they had turned La Muse into a comfortable place for writers, painters and musicians to work. In addition to the dozen or so bedrooms and a communal kitchen, there was a stone-walled library with a fireplace and an artists' studio with skylights. We entered through the library and went past the kitchen and up a winding stone stairway.

'Here we are,' said John. He took us inside a large bed-sitting room and put my bags down. 'Every room is named for one of the Greek muses. Yours is called Clio. The name Clio comes from the Greek word "kleos" for heroic acts. She's usually pictured with a book in one hand, so we like to give this room to writers.'

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I hoped Clio would smile on me. I needed her courage to excavate my past. I thanked John and Kerry, closed the door and surveyed my room. High ceilings, tall window alcoves and a fireplace with a mantel of red-swirled marble lent an elegant air. Cracked plaster, a crooked floor and mismatched antiques offered a shabby counterpoint. I sat down at the little marble-topped desk in the window nook and looked across the gently sloping valley. The landscape was covered with the tentative pale greens of an early spring. In the sky, broad swathes of pink mingled with orange on a blue-grey canvas as the sun prepared its final descent. 'Right now,' I said to myself. '... Right now, I get to sit at a desk in a room called Clio in the south of France. And right now, I get to experience the magnificence of nature in a way I've never seen before or will ever see again.' Transfixed by the beauty, I felt quiet joy in that single, small, extraordinary moment.

It had been two years since my twenty-five-year marriage had come to an abrupt end. At first, I was a wreck. Bad turned to worse as the truth revealed itself. I ran away to London, to immerse myself in any reality but my own. Slowly, I started to find my way

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back. I tried new ways of looking at the world and experiencing life. I did research and devised experiments. In the process, I came up with six strategies that helped me, not only to recover from loss and sadness but to feel more fully alive than ever before.

I felt that the things I'd learned could help others, so I came to La Muse to write my story. It's the story of how I learned to embrace life as it happens, moment by moment, in a rich and vivid way.

For me, it has made all the difference.

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Love and Loss

Before my marriage ended, I thought I knew a thing or two about loss. I'd been thrown into the deep end early. For the first seven years of my life, I was a happy kid living in the suburbs of Toronto with my parents, my older sister and my big brother. As the youngest, I got to spend lots of time with my mom. When she wasn't volunteering at the school or the church, she was sewing new clothes for us or painting at her easel. Her box of brushes and oils sat beside the back door, and on a sunny afternoon she'd grab them and me, and we'd head out in her Austin Mini to paint wild flowers. Many weekdays before I was in school full-time, minutes after my sister and brother had left for school my mom would say something like, 'Let's nip over to the church and see how the decorating committee is doing,' or 'Shall we see what fabric is on sale this week?' Then she'd click-click down the front

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hall in her red low-heeled pumps, open the drawer of the telephone table and take out a yellow pack of Peppermint Chiclets. She'd tap two Chiclets into her hand and two into mine, and out the door we'd go.

That particular autumn day started like any other. My mom sent me off to school with a kiss. Our beagle Nicky walked me to the corner. Later that morning, my mother was struck with the pain of a searing headache. She barely made it to the phone to call an ambulance, and they rushed her to hospital. It was a brain aneurysm, and she was prepped for emergency surgery. We had just enough time to race to see her before she went into the operating room. I held her hand and asked if they would shave her head. She said yes, and would I help her sew some scarves to wear while her hair was growing back? I nodded and kissed her, not knowing she had only the smallest chance of survival. It wasn't meant to be a goodbye kiss, just a good-luck-and-see-you-soon kiss, until we were together again.

She didn't make it through the surgery.

* * *

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With our mother gone, our family lost the glue that had held our days together seamlessly and beautifully. I didn't know what it meant to live a day without her. The gaping hole, the terrible absence and deafening silence of life without her voice, her touch, her ever-present *thereness* was overwhelming. At seven, I knew I was sad, but I didn't know how to name that other feeling of breath-stealing heartache when the one you love simply isn't there. Not today, not the next day, nor the next, and then never. The sorrow settles over you and into you and then it becomes part of you – a vacancy you carry with you for ever.

'Wait!' I'd protest silently. 'I want my mom to see me win this race . . . I need her to help me sew my first dress . . . I want to race home to tell her I came first in my class.' But life didn't wait, and I had to do all those things and so much more without her.

On the day of my mom's funeral, the church overflowed with people. I was the only one wearing white in a sea of black. My mom had made the dress for my first communion. Some of the girls had stiff, scratchy

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crinolines that made their skirts stick out like flying saucers. Mom knew I hated itchy fabric. My dress was made of soft cotton. Hundreds of tiny gathers at the waist helped the skirt ease out ever so gently. If you looked closely you could see that the dress was covered in tiny embroidered eyelets. I loved that dress. After my mom died, I loved it even more, because when I wore it, I felt like she was with me.

My mother was buried in Holy Angels Cemetery on the far edges of Toronto. There was a flat bronze marker on the grave. I worried that we would never find her in those acres of buried people. I asked my dad why my mother didn't have a proper, tall gravestone, but he didn't answer. I thought she should have a monument with her hobbies engraved on it – a sewing machine, a paintbrush, maybe her Austin Mini. Then we could find her again.

As it turned out, we never visited my mother's grave. A few months after she died, my father made the disastrous decision to remarry. They'd met at one of the big hotel bars downtown, where my dad had

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started to go instead of coming home after work. The first time he brought her to meet us, she drank gin and tonics and smoked cigarettes while we ate dinner. 'I can't face dinner before eight,' she said, holding her glass out for my dad to refill. I think my father married her because he just wanted a normal family again, but what we got was anything but that. The first thing my stepmother did was convince my father to sell our home and move to Rosedale, Toronto's ritziest neighbourhood. All we could afford was a tired old rental that had seen too many tenants come and go. Furniture that had been perfect in our old house was stranded in big rooms, chairs strung out along stained walls, tables marooned on bare wooden floors.

My two baby half-sisters were born just a year apart. Still, my stepmother was out much of the time, preferring to linger in the cocktail bars downtown. She said she had to meet people for her PR business, but I never saw her do any work. I'd come home from school to find an impatient babysitter waiting for me to take over and put my little sisters to bed. The house

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was a mess, clean clothes were a thing of the past and food was scarce. We ate frozen dinners, when she remembered to buy them. My dad started working from the upstairs den, after my stepmother convinced him to leave the family business and strike out on his own. In the old days, he'd get up early, put on his navy suit, shine his shoes and head out to see his customers. Now, he'd sit at the card table in his dressing gown, calling people who didn't know him, trying to sell them something from the paltry product lines he represented. Before long, the whiskey glass appeared in his hand, sometimes before noon. Our family was in chaos. When my dad and stepmother fought, which was often, they said and did things I'd never imagined possible in our family. He called her a whore and she called him a failure.

One September morning, my dad got up early to see us off to school. He'd showered and dressed and smelled of Ivory soap with a hint of Old Spice. Almost like the old days. During the night, he and my stepmother had had the worst fight ever. Around two in the morning, I'd watched from my bedroom window

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as my stepmother lurched down the uneven front walkway toward a waiting cab, her nightgown hanging below the hem of her trench coat.

I slung my school bag over my shoulder and went over to my dad.

‘Have a great day, sweetie,’ he said, giving me a long hug.

‘You too, Dad,’ I said, wishing he really could have a good day while knowing how unlikely that was.

Two days later, I stood on the threshold of Rosar’s Funeral Home. I couldn’t see over the crowd of sombre suits and black dresses. Cigarette smoke hung in the room, and the sticky smell of cologne made me feel ill. From behind me, an arm came down around my shoulder. One of my aunts nudged me forward and said, ‘Let’s go up front.’

The funeral home stood next to Mac’s Milk, where my dad and I would stop for the staples of our household – milk and cigarettes. Five kids go through a lot of milk, and my dad and stepmother went through a lot of cigarettes. Dad and I had been at Mac’s a few

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days before. He idled the car out front while I ran in. Did he have time to smoke all the cigarettes we'd bought? Did he have several in a row, sitting alone in the kitchen with his black coffee? What else did he do, before he took the gun from its hiding place and went down into the dark, damp basement?

And so, we were at the funeral home again, for yet another wake. It had been only five years since I had come to say goodbye to my beautiful mother. Now I had to let go of the father who loved me and needed me.

I scanned the crowd for my sister and brother, but I couldn't find them. My stepmother was sitting at the back of the room. People occupied a little knot of chairs around her. She had black circles under her eyes, either from too little sleep or too much mascara mixed with tears, or both.

The day after that terrible fight, she came home while we were all at school. At some point, she must have gone down to the basement, and there he was. No one told me the details, but I assumed Dad was dead when she got to him.

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I wanted to say a quick prayer and get out of there. 'I'll go in, but only if the coffin is closed,' I told my aunt.

'It's fine,' she said. Her hand pressed on my back and propelled me through the crowd.

We stopped, and it was too late. I was standing at the edge of the wide-open coffin. The cold collage of eyes, nose and lips didn't add up to the face of my father. I wanted to pull back the eyelids, just to prove there was no one behind them. But I didn't need to. That lifeless body in my father's blue suit, dead face thick with make-up, was all the proof I needed.

I pushed through the crowd, ran out the front door and threw up in the middle of the wet sidewalk. Wiping my mouth with the back of my hand, I started to run back to our house. Twelve blocks later, I got home to find our living room full of people. I wasn't surprised; I knew this routine too well.

Someone called my name. I kept going up to my room and refused to come out for the rest of the night. I couldn't eat casseroles or kiss my relatives or thank the neighbours.

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The next day, I didn't go to my father's funeral; I went to school instead. It was a lot safer there. The image of that frozen face was stuck in my mind. I was sure that terrifying corpse would materialise where my father belonged – in his favourite chair or leaning against the frame of my bedroom door to say good-night. I was afraid to be alone in case he came back as suddenly as he had left. After my mom died, I lived in a state of quiet anguish over her persistent absence. After my father died, I lived in fear. What had happened was more terrible than anything I could have imagined. I should have been able to see it and stop it. But I couldn't, and I didn't. How did I miss the signals that morning, when he seemed full of fresh resolve and hugged me longer than usual? How did I let this happen? The questions turned over and over in my mind.

One thing I knew for sure: anything can happen, including the worst thing.

In the weeks following my father's death, our phone was buzzing with calls. The family had to work out

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what to do with us. Then, we were told: the two little ones would stay with our stepmother, while my sister, brother and I would be split up among different aunts and uncles.

Why didn't I feel relieved? The years of chaos and confusion were over. I wouldn't have to live in a big, creepy house any more. There would be regular meals. My aunts and uncles weren't drunks.

But now I was losing the rest of my family. I went to my baby sisters' room. The older one was awake. She held out her arms, and I picked her up. We sat together in the rocking chair, and I covered us both with a blanket. 'Sing Beatles,' she said, snuggling against my chest.

'Michelle . . .' I sang, and the tears streamed down my face. I cried for my mom, who would have given anything to be there to comfort me. I cried for my dad, who got swept away by life. I cried for our family, because we were about to fall apart for good.

And I cried for myself, because I didn't want to say goodbye to everyone I loved. And because I had to learn, too soon, that nothing is for ever. Those you

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love and need most can send you to school with a kiss on a sunny autumn morning and be gone for ever by the afternoon. We don't get to say when love goes. It just goes.

Decades later, on a warm October day, Stuart and I said *I do* with all the confidence of newly-weds. *We'll be together for life. Our love is strong.*

And ours was, for twenty-five years. We worked, took trips, moved from the city to a small town, had a wonderful son, a cat and a dog, lots of friends. We almost never fought and if we did, we'd quickly and carefully resolve our differences. There were small challenges but nothing we couldn't work out. Our marriage was happy. Was it too happy? Maybe it was boring.

One bitterly cold Sunday morning, Stuart and I were sitting in front of the fireplace in our beautiful home. Our town, set on the shores of Lake Ontario, had recently been named the prettiest in Canada. I was doing the weekend crossword puzzle. Classical music was playing. The dog was at Stuart's feet; the cat was curled up beside me. Too good to be true, you

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might say. Turns out it was. Because that's when Stuart leaned forward and said he wanted out. Didn't want to be married any more. I couldn't understand. Please explain, I said. What's wrong? Since when? His words sounded vague, rehearsed, unreal. There didn't seem to be a convincing explanation.

We separated, and I told myself this was a test of our marriage, that we'd find our way back together again. I was glad our son Ryan was out on his own, living in London now. I found a small one-bedroom apartment in Toronto, imagining it would become our city pied-à-terre once Stuart and I reunited, as I was sure we would. But that was my secret. Meanwhile, Stuart helped me move. He installed dimmer switches, put in under-cabinet lights, hung the paintings. We made multiple trips to IKEA, and he assembled the shelving units. He was acting the role of dutiful husband, making sure I had everything I needed.

Then, it was done. I walked him to his car. We hugged and said goodbye. I remembered kissing my mom and hugging my dad, not knowing it was for the last time. Which was worse – knowing or not

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knowing? Stuart cried. I couldn't tell if they were tears of sadness or relief.

I came back to the apartment, closed the door, sank to the floor and wept.

Later, I poured a big glass of wine and went out to the balcony. I could see over the treetops and across the lake. Tiny sailboats leaned into the blue water. Fresh tears came, and the breeze felt cool against my wet cheeks.

One month went by, and then another. It was early autumn when the story revealed itself. There was someone else. He wanted to be with her, not me. It was that simple.

I felt stupid for trying so hard to convince myself that we'd reunite. I felt the shame of being rejected after so many years together. And for the first time in decades, I felt the unmistakable, gnawing pain of knowing that someone I loved was gone for good.

Suddenly I was desperate to get away. I needed to immerse myself in distractions. I decided to go to London, England. I could see my son, and we could