



# RETURN TO ZERO

JOURNAL AND  
DISCUSSION GUIDE  
FOR BEREAVED PARENTS

A True Story of Love, Loss

# WELCOME

We are so sorry for the losses you have endured. We have designed this guide to help you to process the film, which is why you will find questions rather than answers and advice throughout this workbook.

As a bereaved parent himself, Sean Hanish made RETURN TO ZERO because he had a vision for dissolving the silence and shame that surrounds stillbirth. RETURN TO ZERO is evocative and real, not hiding the reality of the pain of stillbirth.

Our goal is to open up conversations so that bereaved families can find understanding and a deeper sense of belonging as they pursue their own paths to living wholeheartedly after loss.

## YOUR STORY IS UNIQUE

When we come together to share our stories of grief and loss, there is tension. On one hand, it is wonderful to find others who have similarities in their stories. This helps us recognize that our reactions are normal and healthy, and we do not feel so alone. The sense of understanding and belonging can be a valuable soothing balm.

On the other hand, no two bereaved parent stories are the same. Bereaved couples even report different experiences of their shared child's death. Bereaved parents' stories—and their subsequent grief journeys—can be so different, depending on:

- the age and stage of your baby's death
- how long it's been since your baby died
- how old you and your partner are as parents
- whether you have other living children
- whether you go on to have subsequent pregnancies
- whether you're single/coupled/married/heterosexual/same-sex
- the social support you have or don't have from friends and family
- the other challenges you face in your life which are woven into your bereaved parent story (disabilities, race, financial insecurity, health issues, domestic violence, substance abuse, mental illness...the list goes on!)

The death of a baby may also mean different things to different families, religions, and cultures, and your unique family, religion, and culture may validate or deny different aspects of your grief experience.

## HIERARCHY OF LOSS – THE MYTH

It can be tempting to try to measure, judge, and compare grief according to how long babies lived and other unique dimensions of your story. Bereaved parents often sense this judgment happening

when they are asked the question, “How far along were you when your baby died?”

Be aware of this tendency to compare and make hierarchies of our losses—especially if you are watching the movie or working through this guide with other bereaved parents. There is no research supporting the idea that the gestation or age of your baby at death determines how painful your grief is.

The “hierarchy of loss” is a myth, and it only alienates us from each other as bereaved parents. The greatest pain is always the pain **you** have to live with, so work at creating a conversational environment where each person’s story and experiences are validated, rather than comparing your losses and your grief reactions.

## SUGGESTION ON HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

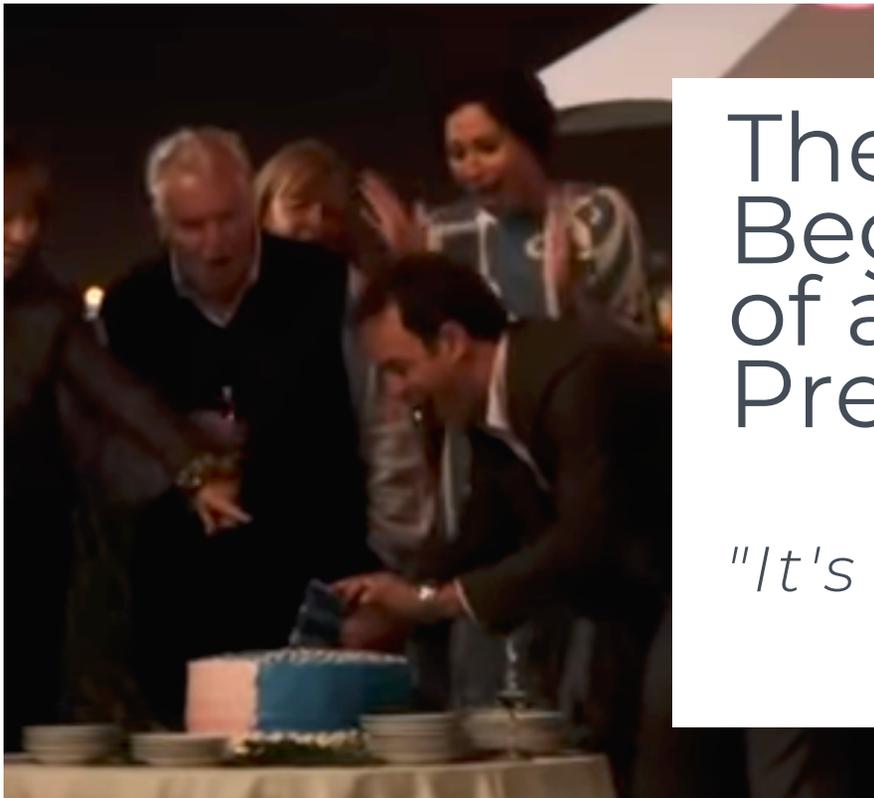
- Watch the movie (alone or in a group).
- Print the guide and write down your reflections in the spaces provided.
- Gather for discussions as you work through the guide together.
- Create a safe space for group discussions:
  - Listen with empathy.
  - Don’t compare losses.
  - Don’t judge another person’s own experience.

We know that you have all the wisdom that you need to find your path to living wholeheartedly after loss. There is no template for “doing grief the right way,” and you do not need somebody else’s interpretation of the meaning of your experiences.

**SPOILER  
ALERT!**

**The following pages reveal crucial information about the plot, characters, and ending of the film  
RETURN TO ZERO.**

**Please watch the film before continuing.**



# The Beginning of a Precious Life

*"It's a boy!"*

## IN MAGGIE, AARON, AND ARTHUR'S STORY

We join Maggie and Aaron's story when they host a gender reveal party with family and friends. It is here that they—and their community—discover that they will be having a baby boy.

## REFLECT ON YOUR FAMILY'S STORY

Every bereaved parent's story starts with the arrival of a small and precious little life. Use the following page to journal a bit about how your baby came into your and your family's hearts and lives.

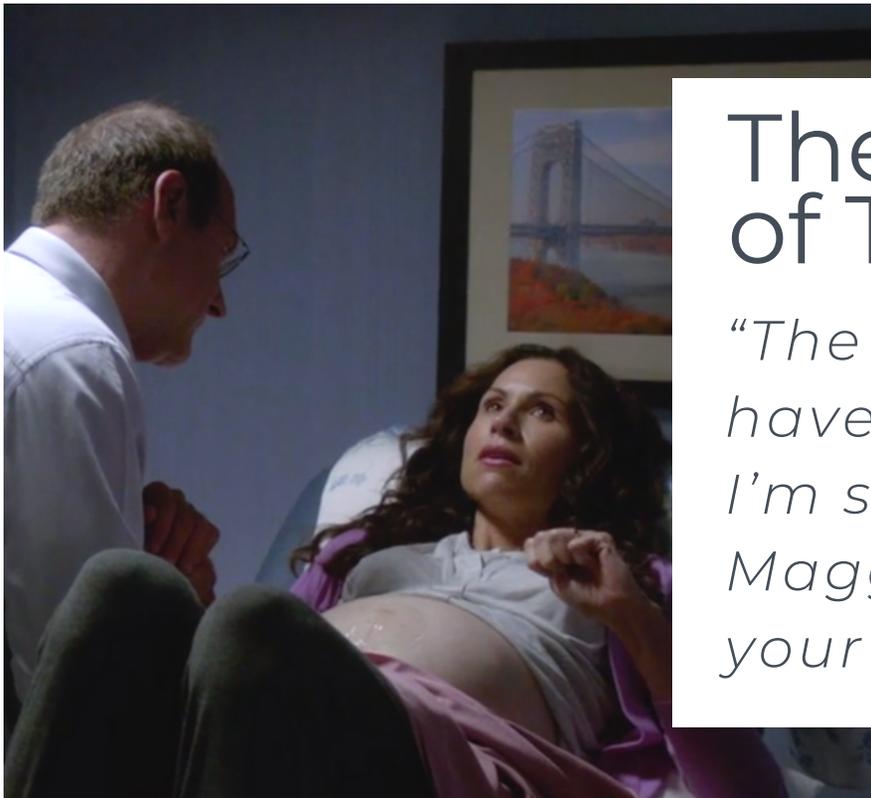
## SHARE

Afterwards, share your arrival stories with your group if you're working through this book with others.

*"Life is not measured by the number of breaths we take,  
but by the number of moments that take our breath away."*

ANONYMOUS





# The Moment of Trauma

*“The baby doesn’t have a heartbeat. I’m so sorry...*

*Maggie,  
your baby’s dead.”*

## IN MAGGIE, AARON, AND ARTHUR’S STORY

The life that Maggie and Aaron thought they were going to enjoy unravels in a sudden moment.

Every bereaved parent remembers that life-changing moment when you received news of your baby’s death. Many bereaved parents talk about this as a life-defining moment and the beginning of an unexpected new chapter in their family story. This moment may have been anticipated or it may have arrived completely unexpected. The news may have been delivered traumatically or gently. You may have been alone or with others. Either way, the discovery that your baby has died is always still a shock and a pivotal point in your family’s life.

## REFLECT ON YOUR FAMILY'S STORY

Here are a few questions to guide you:

- How did you learn about your baby’s death?
- Was anyone else with you when you learned the news?
- Did you have someone that you could turn to for support, advice, or counseling at this time? If so, how did that help you? If not, how did you get through the initial shock and trauma?

## SHARE

Afterwards, if you are comfortable doing so, talk about the moment you learned about your baby’s death.

*“The dark does not destroy the light. It defines it. It’s our fear of the dark that casts the joy into the shadows.”*

DR. BRENÉ BROWN





# Navigating Grief

Aaron: *“Okay, so we’ve established that I think it’s healthy to talk...”*

Maggie: *“What do you want to talk about? How my uterus is a lethal weapon?”*

## IN MAGGIE, AARON, AND ARTHUR’S STORY

No two people grieve in the same way. Maggie and Aaron have very different grief journeys in the film, and this becomes a point of tension in their relationship—tension that adds further challenges to their individual grief experiences.

It is a myth that men grieve a certain “masculine” way and women grieve a certain “feminine” way. However, men may feel they have less social permission to use the stereotypically “feminine” grieving styles (such as crying or talking about their emotions, or journaling, making art and writing poetry), and women may also feel they have less social permission to use the stereotypically “masculine” grieving styles (such as doing activities, setting up service projects, being angry, or reflecting alone).

## REFLECT ON YOUR FAMILY'S STORY

Here are a few questions to guide you:

- What are the ways of grieving that you feel are often expected of you, because you are a man or woman?
- What are the ways of grieving that you feel you don’t have permission to use?
- Have you ever broken these “rules” of grieving?
- Which ways of grieving seem to be bringing you and your partner closer to each other or further apart?

*“Learn your theories well, but put them aside when you confront the mysteries of the living soul.”*

DR. CARL JUNG

## SHARE

Afterwards, share ways that you feel you are expected to grieve and other ways you don't have permission to grieve.

## NOTES



# Grief in Your Neighborhood

*“Maggie, last time I saw you—you were out to here. So, how’s the baby?”*

## IN MAGGIE, AARON, AND ARTHUR’S STORY

When Maggie integrates herself back into her community, she is immediately confronted with people who had not heard about the death of her child. While at Trish’s shower, Maggie has three different and painful experiences—a family friend who asks “how’s the baby?”, two women who are afraid to talk to Maggie and “run away” from her, and finally a woman steeped in her own belief system foists her beliefs upon Maggie to try to ease her pain.

The way that friends and family talk about death and grief, and the ways that they respond (or don’t respond) to the death of your baby, can have a big impact on how you feel. It can have a strong impact on how you see yourself and decide to open up or suppress your feelings about your own loss and grief experience.

Sometimes other people’s responses are very helpful. They may offer practical help, validate your loss, acknowledge the pain, listen without judgment, and remind you that they love you and see your resilience.

But other responses may be less helpful and even quite hurtful. People may avoid you, question you in an attempt to try to find out “why” your baby died, tell you their religious, spiritual or cultural ideas about the meaning of tragedies, compare your loss to loss experiences they’ve had, tell you it’s time to “get over it” or “pull yourself together and move on,” and quite commonly there is only a deafening silence—no acknowledgement whatsoever that you have even had a loss.

*“For there is but one veritable problem—the problem of human relations. We forget that there is no hope or joy except in human relations.”*

ANTOINE DE SAINT EXUPÉRY

## REFLECT ON YOUR FAMILY'S STORY

Here are a few questions to guide you:

- Like Maggie, did you experience any situations or have someone say anything inappropriate when integrating yourself back into your community?
- How did you respond to these situations?
- What resources did you draw on within yourself during these situations?
- Looking back, was there anything anyone could have said that might have made you feel better?

## SHARE

Afterwards, share one or more of the surprising responses you received after your loss and how you responded to that.

## NOTES



# Remembering

*“The thing no one tells you about is the relationship that begins after they die.”*

## IN MAGGIE, AARON, AND ARTHUR'S STORY

A large part of Maggie's healing journey is remembering and connecting with the relationship she had with Arthur while he was here with her. She also realizes that this relationship does not end with Arthur's death but continues forever.

Some of the language that we use when we talk about death and grief seems to suggest that our relationships with our loved ones end when they die. Phrases like “let go and move on,” “get closure,” and “disinvest your love” suggest that, after they die, we are supposed to stop thinking about or communicating with them. You might even have some people say to you that you should not continue to talk about or with your loved one who died.

These are not truths. It's normal, natural, and healthy to continue to think and talk about your deceased baby, and even to sometimes talk \*to\* your deceased baby. Many cultures continue to actively nurture their relationships with their deceased loved ones on a daily basis and hold community or family rituals to remember together. Many people say that they feel comforted in their grief when they continue to remember their deceased baby, and even more so, when others remember their baby with them.

## REFLECT ON YOUR FAMILY'S STORY

Here are a few questions to guide you:

- What is one of your favorite memories from your baby's life, even if he or she only lived in the womb?

*“The risk of love is loss, and the price of loss is grief. But the pain of grief is only a shadow when compared with the pain of never risking love.”*

HILARY STANTON ZUNIN

- How would you like your baby to be remembered in your family and community?
- Who would you like to join you in your remembering?
- Since your baby's death, when are the times when you remember him/her most or feel more connected to him/her?

## SHARE

Afterwards, share your favorite memory from your baby's life and the ways in which you continue to feel connected to and remember your baby.

## NOTES



# Your Next Chapter

*"I know there's no roadmap for this, but after what we went through, I can't do it alone."*

## IN MAGGIE, AARON, AND ARTHUR'S STORY

Maggie invites Aaron to participate in their surprise second pregnancy, after realizing that the grief journeys they are on—while challenging and in their case divisive—do not define them. Both Maggie and Aaron decide to embrace this opportunity and use it to support each other in the next step of their journey.

Grief is often talked about as though it is an illness that needs to be cured; however, you are not broken or sick. On the contrary, grief symptoms are actually a sign that you are mentally healthy, and your capacity to love is intact.

In addition, the advice we are often given about how to grieve usually supports the myth that there is only one right way to grieve. This can leave bereaved families—who often already feel like they've failed as parents—feeling like they are not even doing grief right. There is no one "right way" to grieve. You are naturally resilient, creative, and resourceful.

## REFLECT ON YOUR FAMILY'S STORY

Here are a few questions to guide you:

- Reflecting on the ways that you have been grieving and identify which ways bring you closer rather than further away from yourself?

*"There is always a moment in any kind of struggle when one feels in full bloom. Vivid. Alive. One might be blown to bits in such a moment, and still be at peace. To be such a person or to witness anyone at this moment of transcendent presence is to know that what is human is linked, by daring compassion, to what is divine."*

ALICE WALKER

- Which ways have brought you closer to your spouse or partner, and which ways have been divisive?
- If you are at this stage, in what ways have you been able to integrate the death of your baby into a new vision for your future?

## SHARE

Afterwards, share ways that you feel you are expected to grieve and other ways you don't have permission to grieve.

## NOTES



# Living Wholeheartedly After Loss

*“What about joy... when does that come?”*

## IN MAGGIE, AARON, AND ARTHUR'S STORY

RETURN TO ZERO is a snapshot of one couple's story. Not everyone will have the same type of “happy ending” that Maggie and Aaron did in the movie by having another baby. Many people believe that this is the only option for a happy next chapter.

Some couples discover that they cannot have a biological child; others decide that they do not want to get pregnant again, adopt, or try surrogacy. In some instances, the couples separate after the death of their baby and go their different ways.

There are as many possible journeys as there are bereaved families.

## REFLECT ON YOUR FAMILY'S STORY

Here are a few questions to guide you:

- Where do you see possibilities for happiness, love, and meaning to continue to come into your life, even as you grieve and remember your precious baby?
- What will you do to nurture and further this in your life?
- Who will support you in this direction, and how could you invite them to do so?
- Through your reflections in this workbook, have you come to a new understanding of your journey?

*“It'll be okay in the end. If it's not okay, it's not the end.”*  
ANONYMOUS

## SHARE

Afterwards, share one way in which you see possibilities for happiness even as you grieve and remember your precious baby.

## NOTES

# ABOUT THE AUTHORS

## CATH DUNCAN

Cath is a Social Worker and bereaved parent. She helps bereaved people to find their way of living wholeheartedly after loss at Remembering For Good: <http://www.rememberingforgood.com/the-book/>

With Kara Jones, she trains Creative Grief Coaches via <https://creativegriefstudio.com/>

## SEAN HANISH

Sean is a WGA Award-nominated writer, producer, and director and a multi-award-winning commercial director. His debut film was the Emmy and Critics' Choice-nominated and Satellite Award-Winning film RETURN TO ZERO. RETURN TO ZERO earned an Emmy nomination for its star, Minnie Driver, as well as a Critics' Choice Award nomination for her phenomenal performance and a WGA Award nomination for Sean.

*"Courage is not the absence of fear, but rather the judgment that something else is more important than fear."*  
AMBROSE REDMOON

”

*IT'S  
A  
BOY!*

“

”

*THE BABY  
DOESN'T  
HAVE A  
HEARTBEAT.  
I'M SO  
SORRY...  
MAGGIE,  
YOUR BABY'S  
DEAD.*

“

”

*WHAT DO  
YOU WANT  
TO TALK  
ABOUT?  
HOW MY  
UTERUS IS A  
LETHAL  
WEAPON?*

“

”

OKAY, SO WE'VE  
ESTABLISHED  
THAT I THINK IT'S  
HEALTHY TO  
TALK...

WHAT DO YOU  
WANT TO TALK  
ABOUT? HOW MY  
UTERUS IS A  
LETHAL WEAPON?

“

”

*MAGGIE,  
LAST TIME I  
SAW YOU—  
YOU WERE  
OUT TO  
HERE. SO,  
HOW'S THE  
BABY?*

“

”

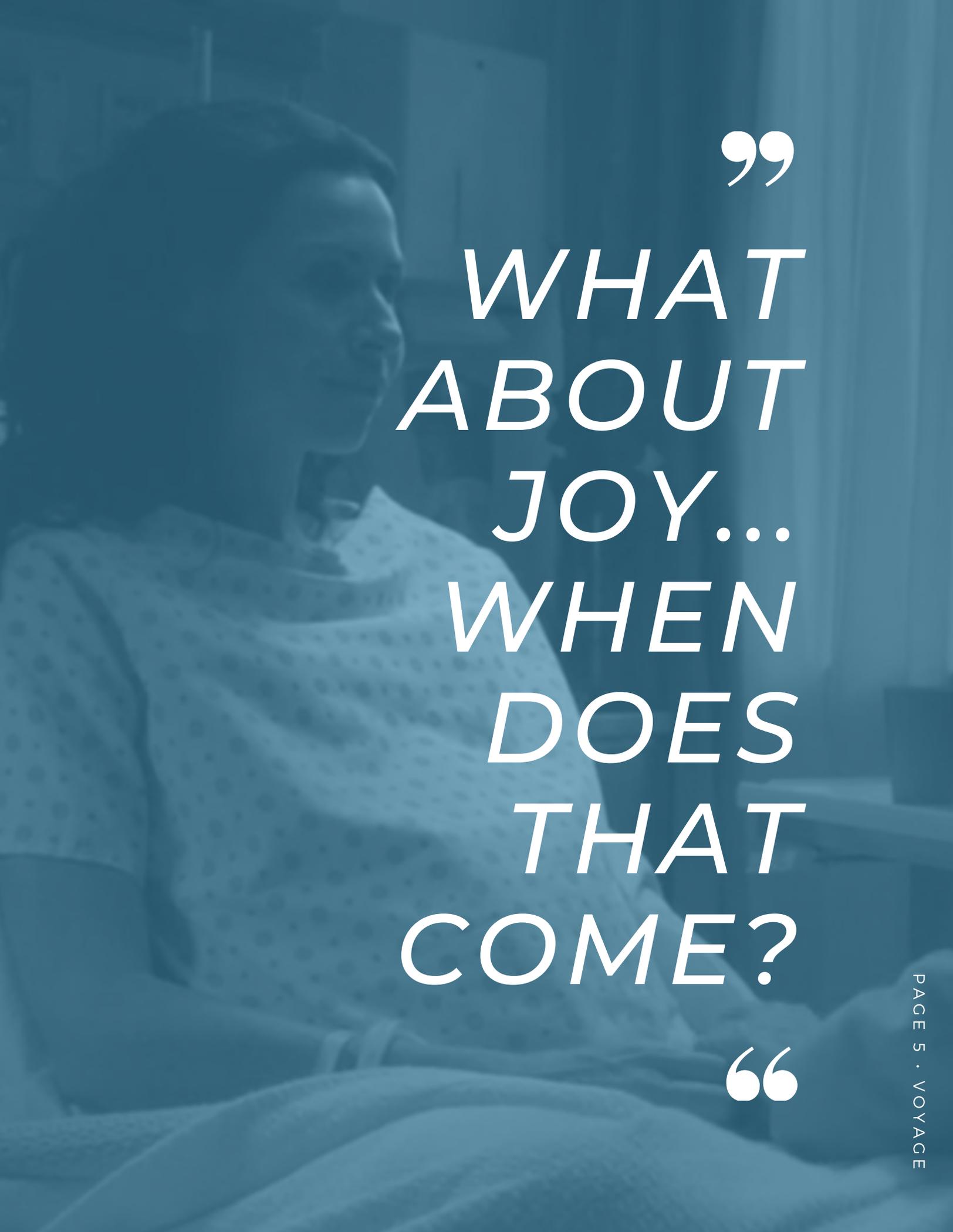
*THE THING  
NO ONE TELLS  
YOU ABOUT  
IS THE  
RELATIONSHIP  
THAT BEGINS  
AFTER THEY  
DIE.*

“

”

*I KNOW  
THERE'S NO  
ROADMAP  
FOR THIS,  
BUT AFTER  
WHAT WE  
WENT  
THROUGH, I  
CAN'T DO IT  
ALONE.*

“



”

*WHAT  
ABOUT  
JOY...  
WHEN  
DOES  
THAT  
COME?*

“



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DISCUSSION GUIDE  
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A True Story of Love, Loss

\*A COMPLIMENTARY PUBLIC SERVICE WORKBOOK COURTESY  
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A photograph of a man and a woman looking out at the ocean under a starry night sky. The man is in the foreground, looking towards the right. The woman is behind him, also looking towards the right. The sky is dark with many stars and a bright light source, possibly the moon or a star, creating a lens flare effect. The ocean is visible in the background with a small sailboat on the horizon.

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## JOURNAL AND DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR BEREAVED PARENTS\*

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