

*Staying Alive:
A Love Story*

Laura B. Hayden

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by Laura B. Hayden

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To Larry and our children, Emily and Conor, with love.

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Foreword

Staying Alive: A Love Story is a story of hope and renewal that centers on a woman's search for meaning after the untimely death of her 49-year-old husband. Coupled with other experiences of loss in her life, she is determined to, with her children, persevere.

Like Annie Dillard, Hayden draws on the rhythms and rituals of the natural world to explore her Brooklyn roots and New England adulthood. Wild creatures and domesticated critters, seashores and hillsides, proffer comfort and understanding as she comes to realize that "no more than a hairline and no less than an eternity" separate her from the man she loved. Even with the wear and tear her faith endures, it rarely diminishes.

Her purpose – to usher her two grieving children through a difficult adolescence to a well-adjusted adulthood – resonates through her own struggles. With the precise objectivity reminiscent of Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking* and Joyce Carol Oates' *A Widow's Story*, Hayden recounts the day her husband died and the rituals and obsessions of the bereaved. Forced to look at death straight in the eye, the author stares back, wide-eyed, without blinking through her tears.

Hayden also manages to be seriously droll - in an Anne Lamott way. Never is her humor more honed than in the portrayal of her deceased spouse, whose devotion, antics, and wisdom remain ever-present to those who are staying alive without him. His death becomes not only the family's heartbreak, but the loss of a well-executed life for all who knew him or will get to know him through these essays.

Whether Laura Hayden's writing deals with herself, her children, or her cadre of loved ones, it is clear that she, her daughter, and her son emerge from their tragic loss survivors, not victims of Larry's

death, an outcome of which he would be very pleased. In a culture of intentionally exposed and celebrated self-victimization, the story of this family may be considered a quiet triumph.

John McClure
Publisher

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Losing

Larry was the first to spot the three dolphins moving parallel to a shoreline under the dry California sun. One of the dolphins seemed to lead the slow progress of the other two. Another nudged the third through the rippling waters with its head. The dolphin being pushed floated dorsal side up. It soon became clear that the upturned dolphin was dead.

This behavior was no quirk for the bottlenose dolphin. A Reuters piece tells the story about a dolphin that worked for hours in a busy Florida waterway to revive her dead calf. "She pushed the calf and would come up beneath her, trying to get her to move," said a female worker at a bait shop on the bank of the Alafia River. Another eyewitness reported the dolphin "wouldn't let anyone get near the calf." Bottlenose dolphins often spend two or three days mourning their dead before abandoning them.

We stood frozen on the edge of the water that day. The procession moved so slowly that hours later, when we were back in our car, driving no more than a mile or so up Canyon Hills Highway, we caught sight of the salt-water entourage again as it continued steadily up the Pacific to who knows where.

Four months later, Emily, Conor, and I escorted our Larry to his grave.

I awake in the well of the family room sofa bed mattress, curled in a loose fetal position, listing into Larry's right arm. He lies on his back still unable to turn to his side, two weeks after heart surgery. Still unable to climb the stairs to our bedroom on the second floor.

"Morning," he says, glancing down at me as I start to unfurl.

"Morning," I repeat, moving my arm across his waist for a moment. I am careful not to touch the zipper-like stitching stretched lengthwise across his sternum.

"Getting there," I say. I start to rise to my knees and arch my body over him to avoid putting any pressure on his chest. We kiss. A mutual smack on the lips we could not maneuver in bed a day ago.

"Getting there," he repeats.

I step out of bed and move to the bottom of the mattress to put knee-high elastic stockings over his feet and legs. He wears these to aid his circulation and prevent blood clots. He rests awhile, as I get the children off to school.

"Dad's awake. You can go say good-bye to him before the bus comes," I tell them before they leave.

When they are gone I return to help Larry get up to take his walk. Movement is another clotting deterrent. I do not go off to my high school teaching job. I am on a family medical leave to take care of my husband.

Three weeks earlier I received a call at the high school where I teach English.

"They're sending me to the hospital," I heard Larry say on the school secretary's office phone. It was a Friday afternoon. The night before, we had attended Parents Night at Emily's middle school. Larry had an appointment for a stress test the next day. He had been taking a daily aspirin since his annual fall physical a few weeks earlier, when he complained about tiredness.

Three months earlier, on our California visit to Larry's brother's family, we stopped at a steep sand dune. Everyone except Larry chose to walk up and down the challenging slope. Uncharacteristically, he said he was too tired.

As a follow-up to his regular physical that included an EKG, the doctor ordered Larry to start taking the aspirin and made him an appointment for a stress test a week later. Larry downplayed the test, even though his father had died of a heart attack a few months earlier. Brought his business clothes to the appointment with him, so he could scoot to work afterward.

Instead of going to work afterward, he called me.

"They're ordering me not to drive." His voice was shaky.

I headed straight to the testing site. We left his car parked in the lot and drove to the hospital in mine. He was admitted on the results of the stress test.

That soon, the village in which all caring humankind resides began to assist us through the crisis of our lives. I called the mother of Conor's sixth-grade classmate. She agreed to bring Conor home with her after school – for an unplanned visit. I arranged to have Meme, Larry's mother, at the house for when Em got back from her field trip to the Statue of Liberty later in the afternoon. When Conor returned home, Meme brought the children to her house – two miles up Town Farm Road – for dinner and an overnight stay. I spent the night in a recliner in Larry's hospital room.

We were a family still in shock over Larry's father's death six months earlier. Meme had returned home from an afternoon errand and found him lying in the yard, too late. Struck by a heart attack while mowing the lawn, the day before they were to leave on a family vacation to Florida with their youngest son's family.

Larry, the hospital doctors told us less than a week before Thanksgiving, had not had a heart attack. The stress test detected an extremely high risk for one. So high that he was ordered to hospital monitoring until more tests could be administered on Monday morning.

The children visited him on the weekend.

"I'm here so the doctors can prevent what happened to Gramps," he told them. Larry played the in-house educational channel on the hospital room TV, a heavy box that was shelved close to the ceiling in the corner of his single-patient quarters. A bright yellow helium balloon the children brought floated below the TV, weighted to the floor and decorated with the simple black markings of a smiley face. Already, a get well card from his sister and a plant from co-workers were propped on a table by the window. Tacked onto a small bulletin board on the wall across from his bed was a drawing of a monkey sent by a neighbor's son. Above the primate's head "Feel Better Coach Hayden" appeared in an eight-year-old's deliberate penmanship.

We all tilted our heads upward to watch videos on coronary heart disease that illustrated how blocked arteries impede a healthy blood flow to an overworked heart. The children saw how, with an angiogram, an X-ray can locate blocked blood vessels after the patient is injected with dye; how, with an angioplasty, the doctor can guide a tiny collapsed balloon through a blood vessel from a small incision in the patient's groin to the blocked artery – and inflate it to unclog the blood vessel. Then the doctor on the screen directed a collapsed metal stent (smaller and flatter than a ball point pen spring) to the spot. We watched a blown-

up animation of the stent expanding and securing itself to prevent the artery from closing up again. The viewing had a Bill-Nye-the-Science-Guy feel to it.

Larry's angioplasty early Monday morning detected four clogged arteries – too many for the noninvasive fix. That afternoon we lifted our eyes to the more daunting video on coronary by-pass surgery: Learned how a blood vessel would be taken from his leg and grafted to his coronary arteries to improve the blood supply to his heart – bypassing the clogged vessels – and how the heart would be stopped and started again during the operation. Larry said knowing helped understanding. Understanding lessened fear – for all of us. Teachable moments before two doctors entered with details of the surgery to be performed early the next morning.

"Your heart's strong. No damage," said one doctor.

"This should be a breeze for a fit 49-year-old like you," said the other, in front of the children.

Larry had quadruple by-pass surgery the day before Thanksgiving. I visited him in CICU a few hours afterward, walked up to his body monitored by tubes, IVs, and breathing apparatus. He could only manage two gestures. The rise of a single eyebrow – an ability his children have inherited – indicated he recognized me. Then his hand moved, forming a single thumbs up.

After the children leave for school I help Larry out of bed. It has been a week since his week-long stay in the hospital, fourteen days since surgery. His recovery seems slow but steady. Today he will visit a doctor for the first time since returning home. His mother, a nurse, will join us.

He walks up and down the hallway and through the dining room, family room, and kitchen, an indoor course he has mapped and repeated more often every day, as I start the shower. I've propped an outdoor chair in the tub so he can sit under the spray.

Meme arrives when he is in his bathrobe. She gives him a prayer card she has picked up at church that morning – December 8, in honor of the Feast of the Immaculate Conception.

As I help Larry dress in loose sweatpants, a roomy buttoned shirt and fleece zippered vest, he rubs the back of his knee joint. Says it feels a little stiff. Bends the joint back and forth a few times. Says he is fine. Ready to go. He walks to the family room to rejoin his mother. I go to grab the car keys, my list of questions for

the doctor, his coat, and then head to the family room that opens to the garage. But I never get that far.

Larry is breathing rapidly, too rapidly, as his mother lowers him into a soft swivel rocker. His face has lost its morning shower glow. It looks grayish – and scared. He looks at me and says "Call the doctor."

I leave him with his mother, run to the phone, but call 911 instead. "Something's gone wrong. He's two weeks post op and we are on our way to the doctor, but he's gasping for air." When I return Meme stands helpless and Larry is slumped in the soft chair. I shout his name, tap his cheek. "Larry, Larry can you hear me?" I am slapping his face now, hitting him hard. So hard the swivel chair turns to the left.

The paramedics arrive, almost momentarily it seems, and never stop moving. I am relegated into the kitchen shouting, "He just had bypass surgery," but I can hear that this is no time for a light touch, for the gentleness with which I hugged him just two hours earlier. I hear what I think is chest thumping. I cringe and go to his mother who is in the dining room. We are in each other's arms. I pray to the Holy Mother: *despise not my petition but hear and answer me*. "No, no, not again," Meme repeats over and over. She doesn't even realize when I slip away. I know I must get to the phone to call my sister-in-law at work in the high school cafeteria.

"Linda, something's wrong and Meme's here. I'm going with the ambulance." Linda asks no questions. I can picture her tearing off her apron and heading to the exit as she utters just four syllables, "I'm on my way."

In the ambulance on the way to the hospital I scream from the passenger seat, "Larry, can you hear me. Don't leave us. Please God, don't let him leave us."

I turn to the driver. "Can he hear me?" I ask.

"Yes, he can," he says.

I continue to shout.

At the hospital I am led to an admitting desk and then some sort of crisis waiting room with the hospital chaplain. I ask him to call Father Kerwan, our parish priest, to tell him to go to my mother who would not be able to bear any sort of bad news alone. I know my sister-in-law will take care of the rest of the family –

and she does; for she, her husband, and Meme enter the room just before the doctor comes in. Just before he starts to say, "We did everything we could. . ."