



With compliments

A grieving young widow finds her attempts at presenting a brave, made-up face to the world are all too successful

Words: Virginia Lloyd Illustration: Robert Ryan

Compliments, like beauty, are mostly in the eye of the beholder. I had always found it amusing that the morning I'd been too lazy to wash my hair would be the same day someone would tell me how great my hair looked. Or that it would be on the girls' night out, when I was wearing my low-rise jeans and hyper-conscious of my untuned abdomen, when a well-meaning friend would casually enquire: "Have you lost weight?"

Never did I observe this phenomenon more closely, or more painfully, than in the months after my beloved husband John died after a long struggle with cancer. He was already terminally ill when we fell in love, but he looked as healthy as any handsome man in his mid-40s, right up until his last few months.

When John died I was 34 years old. We had been married for 11 months.

My loss – inevitable and cruel to witness, as a result of his painful secondary bone cancer – was so profound, so harrowing, so physically overwhelming, that it was literally indescribable. Language failed me. Which, for a former book editor and corporate communications manager, was nothing short of ironic. I could not grieve by speaking or writing. Instead, I wailed, I howled, I collapsed to the floor in heaving sobs, torrents of fractured words bubbling out of my throat not fully formed. Even now I can hear myself wailing, picture myself on the sofa or slumped against my pillows in bed, sometimes sprawled face-down in the hallway or falling to my knees for the lack of ability to do anything else while the tears poured out of me, my body wracked and shaking with the physical effort of such intense crying. In these moments the grief felt like it would never stop, although somewhere in a corner of my mind, thankfully, I knew it would not continue like this, could not continue like this.

There was nothing to say. Nothing that could change the fact of John's death; nothing that could bring him back; no words that came close to approximating the abyss that had opened up inside me and everywhere else I looked.

In the privacy of my own home, I confessed my most despairing thoughts into a dictaphone, which I had brought home one day from the office – having returned to work within weeks of John's death – and stashed in my bedside table. The micro-cassette recorder became a safe pair of ears for things I felt I could not share with anyone. I could say anything, at any time, to the dictaphone. It could be four in the morning, or first thing on waking; a little observation of my day that would have made sense only to John, or a stream of words, mixed with gasping sobs and drizzling snot, that gurgled up from my wretched subconscious.

I did not feel that I could inflict this incoherent babble on my family or closest friends. How could I expect them to know what to say to me, when I could not articulate anything myself? When, at the end of each agonising new day, there was no new vocabulary or grammar that would relieve my pain? Only by sobbing and stumbling into the impersonal void of the dictaphone was the worst of my pain eased.

By stark contrast, my ability to function in public remained intact. My exterior facade was impeccable: on returning to work, I wore earrings, took care with my outfits, coloured my hair. It never entered my mind to start wearing tracksuit pants in public, or to stop applying lipstick. For me these daily rituals of costume and presentation

provided continuity with my former self, the friend and lover and wife and care giver who had abruptly lost the axis on which her life turned. If I continued dressing as I used to do, applying foundation and eyeliner and blush, thinking of what to wear to work the next day, and generally moving through the world as if I were part of it, I fantasised that perhaps one day I would feel my life begin slowly to turn again.

I was not remotely convinced by my efforts to represent myself in public, but my habitual attention to exterior detail seemed sufficient for most people, certainly for those outside my inner sanctum.

The compliments started innocently enough. Well-intentioned acquaintances, not knowing what else to say, would offer small encouragements that at any other time would have been gladly welcome.

"Gee, Virginia, you're doing really well, you look great," colleagues said.

"You look wonderful," an old boss said when we ran into each other at a concert.

"Your skin is glowing," I heard on more than one occasion.

My complexion turned my face into a traitor to the rest of me. I didn't want to look attractive. I didn't want to attract anyone. I wanted to be with John. And if I couldn't be with John I wanted to be invisible.

The words stung me like I'd been slapped in the face. The compliments implied that because I "looked good" I must be recovering. I must be feeling better. To me it seemed impossible that to the outside world I could "look good" and yet be yearning privately not to wake up the next morning. The compliments made such a declaration impossible.

I visited my hairdresser and asked him to cut my hair savagely shorter. What I really wanted was to be unrecognisable, visibly changed. "I'm trying to disappear," I longed to tell friends and strangers alike, "to be as lifeless as possible while still breathing". But my new style only drew further compliments.

These words of encouragement and superficial support were a disturbing mixture of comfort and distress, a sweet moment that left a sour aftertaste. I drew solace from knowing that at least I appeared to be coping, while at the same time I knew it would be shocking to reveal to others how far below that surface the real me thought and functioned. There wasn't just a gap between how I appeared to others and how I really felt: it was an ever-widening chasm that was impossible to bridge. I couldn't fault my friends for wanting to help, but neither could I escape feeling gently pressured by their compliments. I was trapped by my own physical appearance, by the very surface of things.

So my dictaphone confessions grew longer and more frequent. There were so many things I felt I couldn't speak aloud to the people who loved me. All those irreverent parallels I noticed between selecting John's final resting place at the cemetery and our culture's obsession with real estate. How I felt so much sexual energy in the days after John died. The morbid puns I came up with while searching for the



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words for his gravestone. The time I told the guy at our bottle shop that John had died and he replied: "Oh, that's sad news. He was a good customer."

Sporadically I had kept a diary in stolen moments over John's final months – not that we knew they were his last months, living as we did from day to day – but I could not bring myself to maintain a diary after he died. Recording a daily entry seemed sacrilege; as if writing down what I'd felt or thought about granted significance to each new day without John in it. Speaking into the dictaphone, by contrast, felt anonymous and free of time.

When I gradually turned to paper to jot down phrases or details as they flooded back to me, I did so in a casual way, using random pieces of notepaper, the reverse side of a receipt, a two-dollar notebook from Chinatown. They were scraps and fragments, sloughing off me like dead skin.

Months passed. The chaos of my grief had by now unofficially become a private matter. Too much time had passed for me to keep bringing up my underlying distress with friends who, while supportive, could not imagine or understand the cavern of despair that opened up in front of my

eyes in unexpected moments – in front of the computer at work, on the bus on the way home, or trudging along an aisle of the supermarket.

Moreover, I was sick of hearing myself talk about how I felt, whether with friends or into the dictaphone. Sick of the inevitable routines of my grieving – collapsing each night in howling tears, pulling myself together hastily each morning to turn up at work, pretending that these routines were helping me grow stronger even as I felt myself tearing apart at the seams.

One day I saw an invitation online for new writers to submit manuscripts for a festival of 10-minute plays. It was about nine months after John had died. On the spur of the moment I decided that my angst over finding the right words for John's gravestone might be a suitably dramatic and concise subject for a short play. I had never thought about writing for the stage in my life. But I was surprised at how easily I drafted and submitted my short play, unaccompanied by the self-doubt and censorship that usually plagued me.

The play was my first attempt at speaking in public about my loss, unlike the dictaphone confessions, occasional notes, or orphaned lines of poetry unfit for human consumption. Simply putting the words together in a way that told a story, rather than the dislocated and fragmented thoughts that existed on the scraps of paper around my house, was cathartic. It was liberating to tell complete strangers exactly what I had been thinking, rather than to sugar-coat or edit my thoughts for the audience of people who knew me best.

I wondered what had changed to force me, finally, to write. The worst has happened, I remember thinking. My husband is dead. What is there for me to lose now?

Fear had left me. One more thing that had changed forever.

My play made it into the first round of the selection process out of more than a thousand entries, but progressed no further. Still, the encouragement of total strangers was just the sincere and unintended compliment I had been looking for.

I had never read about the sorts of things I endured in those weeks and months after John died, nor had I ever read about a woman widowed so soon, or so young. So I decided to try writing about some of my experiences. I would try to shape my scribbled notes and late-night confessions of grief and longing into a story both personal and universal.

Virginia Lloyd's *The Young Widow's Book of Home Improvement: A True Story of Love and Renovation* is published this month by University of Queensland Press.