

*April 13*

Leaving JFK for Los Angeles on American Airlines Flight 33. The flight departs from the international terminal, the same terminal Flight 587 left from. Looking up at the monitors, I see its replacement, Flight 619. It now departs at 8:30, a half hour later. There will never be another Flight 11, 77, or 587. As we taxi to the runway, a Japan Airlines 747 crosses our path. It may be the same 747 in whose wake Flight 587 became entangled. When I see “JAL” across the fuselage, I can’t help but think of Joseph, Anthony, and Lily—the three members of the Lopes family who have been taken from us.

The weather is overcast for takeoff, so I cannot see our exact path, but I believe that we are taking off over Jamaica Bay and the Rockaways. I am calm.

Landing at LAX, another JAL 747 crosses our path as we approach the gate. Lorraine, Nick, and four-year-old Maddy meet me at baggage claim. We drive down to the Irvine Museum, a shrine for California Impressionism.

*April 14*

Zoe, twelve, is developing into a bird watcher. I’m thrilled to be able to help her along. She has her Uncle Joe’s love of animals, but she also seems to have a head for identification and organization, which he never had. It’s the perfect combination for a bird watcher. We start working on a trip list and quickly have a dozen birds seen just from the backyard. She is particularly interested in hummingbirds.

A hike through Wildwood Park with Lorraine, Nick, Zoe, and Maddy. Zoe has a pair of opera glasses and we are doing a good job of adding to our list. She’s not content to just see the birds; she wants to

see the entry in the field guide as well to confirm the identification. A black-headed grosbeak is a great find. Later, I fall behind the family and have some time to myself. I'm thinking about the question of going forward with Joe. How does he come with me? It's still not clear to me. It is clear to me, though, that staying by myself and being afraid to enter into new relationships would *not* be going forward with Joe. That would be clinging on to some unreal image of Joe—as a helpless child needing me to protect him. I still don't know how I could be with someone else and still stay connected to Joe, but I don't face that issue yet. If it ever presents itself, I will face it. And Joe will be with me as I face it.

*April 15*

Maddy's room is a swirl of toys and clothes. Felix, a huge lump of Australian shepherd, lies in the middle of it. I have brought three Baggies of ashes with me. One is to stay with Lorraine. I hand her the shopping bag and she extracts the ashes.

"Puss is in a Baggie," she says. "Is this all him?"

"I think it is part casket, too. I need to call and find out about that. I found some screws and things in there."

Zoe comes in, Lorraine hands her the ashes. "It's Uncle Joe. That's how we all end up. This is how I want to end up." They discuss where to put the ashes. It's complicated by the fact that they might not stay much longer in this house.

*April 16*

Lorraine tells Maddy that she can't go outside. Maddy responds, "Yes, I can, Mama. It's my world!" What's startling is that she absolutely believes this. Her mom is constantly saying no to her. She is resilient, though. Seconds after being rebuffed she is back with a new demand, delivered with the absolute conviction that she should and will get her way.

From her car seat she asks, "Uncle Bill, where's Uncle Joe?"

"He's in the sky," I offer.

“Where?”

“In the clouds. He’s with God,” I say, feeling that I have to give her some kind of answer. I can’t think of how to talk about death with children without talking about God, even if I am uncertain of my own beliefs. She doesn’t seem to need my explanation, though. “He’s right here,” she pipes up. I turn around and she is wiggling her fingers. “See, he’s right here.”

“Good! You keep him right here with us.”

*April 17*

San Francisco. Dinner with Ray Herrman and Gary Greene. Ray is Joe’s oldest friend. According to Ray, he and Joe came out in the summer of 1975, when Joe was nineteen. Tony Lopes took them under his wing and showed them the End Up, a gay bar that became known for an East-West connection. Gary met Joe around then. They tell me the story of the Cher concert at a casino at Lake Tahoe. They paid the headwaiter to get a front row table. This was during one of Cher’s down times. The audience was not very receptive, except for them. They were so enthusiastic that Cher came over after the show and shook hands with them. Joe and Gary frantically tried to remove their glasses in order to look cooler.

This is one of a handful of stories that define Joe’s young adulthood for me. We go through some of the others, like the time Joe was working the counter at the El Rey theater and Sly Stone came and ordered a hot dog. Joe was so nervous, he dropped the hot dog on the floor. Joe and Ray both worked at the theater, Joe as an assistant manager, when it was robbed at gunpoint. Ray also cooked up a scheme for reselling tickets that got them both fired.

*April 19*

A walk through San Francisco’s Castro district, the gay Mecca. At the All American Boy clothing store I buy two T-shirts. In 1979 I went there to outfit myself in one version of the gay uniform at the

time—painters' pants and a tank top. I was wearing the painters' pants the night I met Joe at the baths.

Walking around the Castro I think of all of the gay men who have walked these streets in grief because of AIDS. I was relatively untouched by AIDS, but now I walk the same streets, heartbroken. On my way back to the Richmond District I pass the Ralph K. Davies hospital. Tony died there in 1995.

John Lopes tells me that the package I mailed before I left has arrived. He knows it contains Joe's ashes. He asks, "Can I open it up? I just want to let Joe out so that he feels at home."

One of the cups of Joe is divided up so that his siblings all have some to put in their backyards. John plans to put some in the backyard at his dad's house.

I have a brief talk with Ray's mother, Lu, on the phone. "Thank you for being such a good mother to Joe," I tell her. Joe was blessed with many mothers. He adored his own mother and was the favorite of Oma, spending weekends alone with her in her apartment in Hong Kong. Lu adopted him as a teenager, and Joe kept in touch with her all his life through Ray. It's clear to me that I am not the only one who wanted to take care of Joe. He was like a puppy in that sense, bringing out the nurturing instinct in people.

*April 20*

The fog is just breaking up as we make our way out along the Marin headlands to the Point Bonita Lighthouse. This is my first chance to meet Joe's high school friend Mary Rosinski. Ray and George Fossett are there, as well as Joe's family. Our nephew David has driven up from San Diego to join us. We gather just short of the lighthouse, along a dirt road that hugs the coast. A few feet from the road's edge, the land plunges dramatically to San Francisco Bay. The side of the cliff is covered with spring wildflowers and calla lilies. It's the kind of day that makes people fall instantly in love with San Francisco. It is almost beyond belief that the sky is so blue and the hills so green. Wisps of fog still cling to the towers of the Golden Gate

Bridge. Someone has written a question on one of the benches: "Do you want the short or the long answer?"

I pass the vase with Joe's ashes around so that people can touch him. Lorraine reads a brief letter to Joe. I read Sandburg's poem, "For You." I throw the ashes down the hill. A thin, ghostly vapor hangs briefly in the air before disappearing. We linger, too, until finally the crowd breaks up and heads to Mike and Fran's for lunch.

That night Janet, Kevin, Zoe, and I go bird watching at the San Rafael Sanitary District, then out for bowling and dinner. Despite feeling tired, I am very happy to be doing this. I want to fulfill my responsibilities to my nieces.

*April 23*

On Sunday I flew back to New York City for a press conference at Lambda Legal Defense Fund to press the case for awarding spousal benefits from the Workers' Compensation system to domestic partners. I returned to California on Monday afternoon and spent the night with Mary Rosinski at her home in Alameda. We are both struck by how odd it is that I am staying at her house without Joe. She said that as she was making the bed up she had this nice feeling that he would like this very much.

Tuesday morning, after Mary leaves for work, I spend some time in her backyard. Although she and Joe hadn't seen each other in more than twenty years, they developed very similar tastes. Her house is decorated in a Mission/Arts and Crafts style, and there are several cats running about, one of whom cozies up to me. Joe would have spent the morning in the backyard under the grapevine designing his own little Alameda bungalow.

I'm thinking about the word *partner*. In the stories I have seen on the Internet about yesterday's press conference, Joe is referred to as my partner. Technically, we were registered Domestic Partners in New York City. Both terms are inadequate. A partnership can be a very temporary relationship. Joe was my *life* partner, no doubt about that. It wasn't just because we were to be together for life, but because

of the way our lives were connected. He was my life partner, and yet my life may not even be half over and he is gone.

By lunchtime, I'm in Petaluma, north of San Francisco. This is the home of Vintage Bank Antiques, the source of several fine oil paintings in our apartment. George Fossett has come over to meet me for lunch. I am convinced that George was already a friend of Joe's when I met Joe; he is convinced that Joe and I were already a couple when they met. Either way, George was one of Joe's oldest and dearest friends. They both went through Macy's executive training program. George had a successful career first at Macy's and then later at the Gap. Eventually he dropped out and ended up as a pastry chef in Calistoga.

We have lunch and go through the familiar stories from the past. Joe called George "Georg," in honor of the Christopher Plummer character in *The Sound of Music*. "Oh, dear God! Georg!" was a favorite saying of his. One story of George's used to elicit howls of laughter from Joe. It took place at a market where George and a friend were shopping for produce. The saleswoman asked George, "Does your friend need a bag?" George thought he heard, "Is your friend a fag?"

Later that day I get a call from the flight service manager at JFK. The medical examiner has completed the identification of all remains from Flight 587 and there are additional remains of Joe. As much as I know that Joe was gone by the time his body was destroyed it still hurts to think of it being broken into pieces. The first time I did not ask about the state of his body. I only hoped that it was whole. This time I want to ask. It is always better to know the truth. George offers a comforting shoulder as I process this new information.

I call Lorraine from George's garden to tell her about the new set of ashes. We'll have to do a second round of scatterings. The Ashes Tour—Round 2. We have a good laugh at this.

*April 24-26*

Wilbur Hot Springs. I have contracted a bad cold, the first time I've gotten sick since November 12. I spend a day lying around doing nothing but reading and sleeping. That night I take a walk along the

access road. Cliff swallows flutter above. A scattering of clouds have turned a reddish purple in the sunset. The only sound is that of the river rushing by. I can't resist looking up and asking, "Are you there, Joey?"

I'm tired of having to ask. I'm tired of having to hang any hope of happiness on this thin thread. I call out, "I wish it had been me!" This is the first time I have ever vocalized this wish, and I feel guilty about saying it out loud. I don't even know if it is true. I could never wish this on him. In some ways I think I am better equipped to handle grief than he was.

As I return to the lodge, Valentia, the resident cat, comes toward me. She is strikingly beautiful, black, with a hint of brown, and green eyes. Joe never met her; she is new since our last visit. I sit down and call for her to come so that I can pet her. She refuses. Eventually, though, she comes and sits near me. A lesson, perhaps. I can't just summon up Joe when I see a pretty sunset, yet he may still be close to me, like Valentia.

The next morning I have my own private ash scattering at Wilbur. The morning is cool and I am still fighting a cold. I walk about a mile from the lodge, following a dirt road until I reach a dry creek bed. I turn off the road and follow the creek bed for a few hundred feet to where small pools of water have formed. I have encountered no other human beings on the way out. I set out a towel, Joe's picture, the copper vase with his ashes, and the book of Sandburg poems. I collect a handful of wild flowers and lay them by the vase.

Joe and I first came to Wilbur in November 1980. Joe was very much still grieving the loss of his mother, although he didn't show it. Years later he told me that at one point he went off on his own to have a good sob. Echoing his grief, I burst into loud wails as I sit down. There is no one to hear me, no fear of offending or bothering anyone. I can let the still-raw passions flow, let them spread among the grass-covered hills of Wilbur. I want Wilbur—this ancient repository of geothermal occurrences and human aspirations for healing and health—to know about this particular pain. It can absorb it.

I remove a chunk of bone from the ashes and roll it between my fingers, wondering what part of Joe it is that I am holding. His body,

that compact, lithe vehicle in which he moved through this world, was the vessel of the soul that touched so many. I take a minute to celebrate it—its small frame, its slender build, its Eurasian features. Joe was a mix and a blend. His body, like his character, defied easy characterization. I loved his soft brown eyes and dark hair, whether hanging to his shoulders or the buzz cut of his last years. The chin! The chin! And the prominent Adam's apple—perhaps his most masculine parts. These constantly drew the attention of my lips, as did the tip of what he called his “potato” nose. I can still see the swell of his biceps, the gentle curve of his buttocks, the pools and valleys created by the interplay of collarbone, muscle, and tendon. His skin was light brown, darkening in the summer. His body hair was sparsely distributed; enough around the mouth and lips for a modest goatee, the surprisingly thick run of black hair on his lower legs, small tufts on the big toes and under his arms where I was barred entry, a legacy of childhood tickling trauma. The view from behind was lovely as he walked, the lower legs bowed out like parentheses—his dad called them soccer legs—the hips swaying sideways. Even when he walked, he danced.

I loved all this. I can see it so clearly. At times I feel that I can almost still touch and smell him.



In 1980, we arrived late on a Friday night. After registering at the lodge and unloading Joe's car, we drove a quarter-mile down the road to the parking lot. There are no outdoor lights at Wilbur; at night the darkness is profound. Joe clung to my arm as we walked back. It was my first exposure to his mortal fear of snakes. It was also my first experience of how tightly Joe could attach himself to another person and to me in particular. It was a physical attachment, both of his hands clasped tightly around my right arm, but it was symbolic of an emotional attachment as well. The photos we took that weekend are among my favorites. We're both clad in hooded sweatshirts and sweatpants. Joe is in yellow and red; I'm in blue and gray. Our hair

extends freely over our ears. Joe's got big floppy bangs. One picture was taken by another guest of the two of us standing with our arms around each other. The camera easily captures the fact that we are very much in love.

We returned to Wilbur the following spring when the hills were green and lush and dotted with the colors of wildflowers. Wilbur was still a hippie outpost in those days and in the large, communal kitchen vegetables and soy products dominated. Joe and I performed a sacrilege one afternoon by cooking hot dogs for lunch. A couple and their young daughter were also in the kitchen. The mother enthusiastically announced that they were having tofu. The little girl, who was perhaps six or seven, hung her head and said with a resigned whine, "I don't like tofu." Joe and I laughed about this all the way home, and the little girl's statement became a permanent phrase in the vocabulary that we as a couple employed only among ourselves. If one of us proposed something that the other was not keen on the other would often mimic the tone of voice of the little girl in the kitchen at Wilbur and say, "I don't like . . ."

It was seventeen years before we returned to Wilbur, which by then had renovated and gentrified. The oil lamps had been replaced by solar-powered lighting. The bathing area was enclosed and lit at night by Arts-and-Crafts-style lanterns. Much of the original charm remained, though. The basic structure of the 1904 lodge was untouched. The waters, the landscape, and the intense sense of solitude and isolation had not been altered. We spent a few nights in both 1998 and 1999 during two-week swings through California. We took no pictures at Wilbur on either trip but, if we had, they would have revealed a couple still very much in love. It was a different kind of love, and for me at least, a much better one. In 1980, other forces were competing for my heart. By 1998, those forces had long since been quelled. I was free to love Joe, and I did. I was by then a bird watcher and much of my time at Wilbur was spent in pursuit of Western birds that I never saw in the East. Joe often accompanied me, especially in 1999 when he had his own set of binoculars. As we walked the roads of Wilbur, I kept both eyes focused upward. Joe split his duties between the sky and road, one eye watching for birds,

the other looking down to guard against snakes, lizards, and other reptilian threats.

Now I must perform this private ceremony to honor that part of our life that was just about us. We had our own phrases and gestures. We possessed an encyclopedic knowledge of each other's bodies and witnessed their passages through time, each bemoaning his own decline while trying to assure the other that his body was still a source of pleasure. We shared personal fears and secrets that we kept from others. We exposed our rawest and most vulnerable sides to each other during nightmares, bouts of depression and panic, and fits of anger. We fine-tuned strategies for inflicting pleasure and pain. We cycled through betrayal and forgiveness, estrangement and reconciliation, distance and intimacy. These are part of any long-term, intimate relationship. How we developed them over twenty-one years was unique to us.

They vanished in an instant on November 12 and the void left behind is enormous. Joe will never again reach out his curled pinkie to hook up with mine. Or sneak up behind me, put his nose in my hair, and take a deep sniff. I have memories of these gestures, but the fact that they exist now only in my memory is part of the pain. Before, we shared them. They were a constant reminder, in the same way that a child is, that something—a *we*—had been forged by our union. They belonged to neither individual, but to us. Now it feels as if they are literally imprisoned within my head. I can write about them and tell others about them, but I can never experience them with Joe again. I am one step removed from them. The gestures no longer flow freely between the two of us, living in the world as we did.

What can I say to him in this private moment? How many more times can I tell him that I love him and miss him, attempting to convey in words something that is so deep and pervasive that it ultimately lies beyond the reach of language? I can always rely on Sandburg, as I have so often since November 12, if I fail to find my own words.

Something comes to me, though. I look up and say, "I know I have said many things to you since you died, but have I ever just sat down and said, 'Thank you'?"

To thank another human being, to be truly grateful, is one of the most profound human experiences. I remember choking back tears one night at dinner as I reached my hand across the table toward Joe. It was 1987, close to Thanksgiving. I had been in therapy for a while and found myself in near constant pain. Yet, Joe was there for me. His love had not diminished. I just wanted to tell him how thankful I was for his presence. It took a long time to get the words out. He got up out of his chair and came and put his arms around me as I worked at it.

The words “thank” and “you” are only sounds. Reaching my hand across the table and Joe holding me in his arms are physical gestures. What about the emotions behind the words and gestures and the longings they represent? They are what matter. Are they bound by the body? Do they exist after a body is extinguished? Is Joe aware of my gratitude even though the eardrums through which he could hear my words and the eyes through which he could see my tears are now ashes?

I don't know. We don't know; we are bound by our bodies. I stand up and take the copper vase to the streambed. I sprinkle some ashes over the grass and wildflowers, and some in the pool of water. It is my hope that when the rains come the streambed will fill and a fragment of ash will be carried to the river where it will make its way to the baths at Wilbur Hot Springs. Some day next winter a lucky bather, without knowing it, will be touched by Joe Lopes.

*April 27*

One final visit in California, to another of Joe's “mothers.” Joe always spoke so warmly of Mary Rosinski's parents and of how they welcomed him into their family and home. It is a classic San Francisco home, high up on Twin Peaks with drop-dead views of the Golden Gate Bridge and the Marin headlands. As Jeanne takes me on a tour, I linger in front of one of the north-facing windows. I can imagine Joe doing the same thirty years earlier. It may have been one of his very first “Can-We-Take-a-Minute” Zen moments.

*April 28*

Things of Joe's left behind in California: Abraham Lincoln High School yearbooks and two scarves with Mary. A collection of 45s and assorted family pictures with Lorraine. Various stuffed animals and airline trinkets with Zoe and Maddy.

As I depart, John Lopes, that "big strapping lad," stands in the doorway in the predawn darkness and watches over me until the car pulls away from the curve.

American Airlines Flight 182 from San Francisco to JFK. The crew spoils me. They offer me a ride into Manhattan on the crew van. One of the benefits of being an airline spouse was having access to certain things that the general public doesn't. Joe could park for free at the employee parking lot at JFK and we rode the employee bus back and forth to the terminal. If our flight was delayed, we could wait in the operations center. I never rode in a crew van with Joe, though. Two of the women are talking about buying underwear. One says she doesn't wear a bra; the other doesn't wear panties. They say they should team up together for shopping. I have a feeling Joe would have been right in the middle of this conversation.