

DWIGHT GILLESPIE

PRICE TAGS

A MEMOIR

HOW LOSING MY SON
(AND EVERYTHING ELSE)
HELPED ME BUILD A
LIFE WORTH LIVING

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“And there it is. The crux of what this book is really about. When the love of your life passes, can you learn to cope with the void left in its wake? The answer is yes. No matter how far down you go (in my case, rock bottom), there is a way out of the abyss. However, like everything in life—there’s a Price Tag.”

— DWIGHT GILLESPIE, QUEENS, NY.

*Dedicated to my son and
angel on my shoulder*

LUKE ROBERT GILLESPIE

INTRODUCTION

I never knew what I was looking for in life until I found a measure of it, and that was peace. Inner peace, mostly. Everything I did was centered around it, even the madness. I remember taking my first drink. It was a quart of beer. I was seven or eight. Despite the horrible taste, I drank it down to the very end and got wrecked. An hour later, I puked it up (along with the rest of the contents of my stomach) in the gutter in front of my friend Dave Thomas's house. And I couldn't wait to do it again.

I would be in my fifties before I could understand and articulate exactly what it was that made me willing to pay the price of the nasty taste and the retching that followed. One day, it hit me. It was the peace I found in the one hour in between. For that one hour, everything just melted away. I wasn't me. There was no yelling or screaming, no beatings, no being the worthless piece of shit that I'd always been told I was.

Most of all, it took away the deep and unrelenting fear that went along with my childhood.

And there it was. My first real foray into the idea of Price Tags. The realization that there are rewards and punishments for the decisions we make in life. And as I came to learn, the punishments can often masquerade as rewards. That's what keeps us coming back to them.

I paid a price for keeping the monsters at bay. It started with the bad taste and the puking, but in the end, it cost me pieces

of my soul. Whatever I've done in life has come at a cost. As you read on, you'll understand that most of these costs were not calculated in advance. Hell, when it came to most things, I never even considered the price. They were what you might call "impulse purchases." If I thought through half the shit—drugs, marriages, being in love after a couple of days and deciding it would be great to live together—I never would have done it. As I say, most of these decisions were centered around drugs or sex (many would argue there's little difference depending on how you use them). Some were made around the want of love. More on that later.

There's one exception to this. There is one thing in my life that I paid a heavy price for that I wouldn't hesitate to do all over again. That is my son. My beautiful boy, Luke. He was—and is—the light of my life. He passed away in a car accident just before his seventh birthday. Six weeks later, we lost the baby (my daughter Gabby) that my wife was carrying. I'm telling you this now because the death of Luke and Gabby isn't a plot point in a story, and it shouldn't be a spoiler. It is a thing that happened, in the way that senseless things happen in this world.

Like anyone who loses a child, I was devastated. Doubly. And again, like anyone, I was sure that my loss was worse than anyone else's because of who we had lost.

You see, Luke just happened to be the most special child in the world.

I hope every parent who reads those words can relate to and argue with that. And I hope for your sake that it doesn't take losing them for you to realize just how special they are. It didn't for Luke's mother and me. We knew from the moment we had him how blessed we were. He was a great kid.

It was more than that though. You see, Luke brought with him something I had never had before in my life. Having grown up in fear and chaos, Luke's true, unconditional love was something I'd never believed existed.

Luke was my reason for being.

Then, one day, in the blink of an eye, he was gone.

Losing that boy was akin to having my soul ripped out.

You see, being Luke's dad filled my life with meaning and purpose. It was something I did well. It was, perhaps, the first thing I'd ever truly done well in my life.

Paul Simon said in a song, "Losing love is like a window in your heart. Everybody sees you're blown apart. Everybody sees the wind blow." When Luke left, it punched a gaping hole right through me.

Six weeks after Luke's passing, Gabby...let's call it, "ceased being viable" (it sounds so much better than "died"). Everything came to a head. I attempted suicide that day. I was going to hang myself in my garage. I had a total mental breakdown as I stood on a milk crate with an extension cord around my neck while voices in my head screamed at me to kill myself. I won't spoil it for you (it's a well written scene if I do say so myself), but eventually I got down off the crate and curled up in a ball on the garage floor, wondering how the hell I was going to deal with this pain.

My boy was gone. My baby was gone. My purpose and reason for being was gone, and none of it was ever coming back.

Or so I thought.

I got lost in a world of pain and heroin—it's really hard to have the latter without the former. Impossible, actually (give it time). I needed to find a way out of the abyss. I went into a twelve-step recovery program, and I began writing this book.

I wanted to write about Luke. I wanted people to know who he was and what the world had lost. I wanted it to be my homage to my beautiful boy. The manuscript originally started with my wife LM learning she was pregnant (LM is how she wants to be known in this book—more on that later).

After a few drafts, it became apparent that it wasn't enough to simply talk about Luke and my love for my son. I would need to delve into the why. Why was he so necessary in my life? I needed to understand my childhood, my need for love, and all the rest that went into creating Luke. Only then could people understand the pain of the loss.

Then there was that pain itself. For years, I wrestled with the question I had asked myself a million times as I lay on the cold, cement floor of my garage, writhing in so much physical, emotional, and spiritual pain that I could barely breathe: "How the fuck am I ever going to deal with this? He's never coming back. How can this ever get any better than it is today?"

And there it is. The crux of what this book is really about. When the love of your life passes, can you learn to cope with the void left in its wake? The answer is yes. No matter how far down you go (in my case, rock bottom), there is a way out of the abyss. However, like everything in life, there's a price tag.

It took several years of self-abuse—followed by several more years of cleaning up and soul searching—before I could finally come to peace with the loss. I had to find a spiritual center for myself, *within myself*, in order to heal from the inside out.

In the end, it was Luke who taught me how to come to terms with his passing. His innocence and pure love became my guide to living a decent life without actively trying to destroy myself. **It was that innocence and love that helped me understand my purpose. I don't think anyone can be absolutely certain of their purpose, but perhaps mine was to tell others who have**

lost loved ones that it'll be okay. The love you felt for them will never die—that love stays until you, too, breathe your last.

I choose to share Luke's story because I want people to know that calamities like this are survivable. You can have a life after seemingly losing it all. I firmly believe this.

Death is really the only thing we human beings have to deal with. Jobs, lovers, and homes can all come and go, but death is forever. Or is it? Luke lives on to this day. His spirit fills me. While thinking of him used to cause me pain, I've learned to take Dr. Seuss' words to heart: "Don't cry because it's over; smile because it happened."

Don't get me wrong—I still get down from time to time. I miss my son. But his beautiful spirit will be with me always.

When Luke passed, there wasn't a great deal of information available to parents who'd lost a child, except for *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. **As you read on, you may understand that I didn't feel like a very good person for much of my life,** so I kind of passed that book up. Not that I'm telling you to.

I have made it my life's work to attempt to alleviate some of the suffering of those who've lost loved ones, especially children. While I discuss the pain and heartache of being reared by alcoholic and suicidal parents, as well as the fragmented relationships that resulted from my traumatic childhood, what I ultimately hope you will take from this book are the lessons I learned from the wonderful, loving, beautiful soul who taught me how to live on in his absence. If you're dealing with loss, I hope that in some small way this book is a comfort to you.

I hope you enjoy reading Luke's story as much as I've enjoyed writing it.

I pray that a little bit of Luke rubs off on each and every one of you.

God Bless.

CHAPTER 1

AS LEGEND HAS IT

MARCH 1, 1963

It bothers me to tell you about things I didn't personally witness. I've read a lot of memoirs, and that is something that always disturbs me. How do you write about an event that shaped your life if you weren't there to see it? Frank McCourt began *Angela's Ashes* with the birth of his mother. Obviously, it was an event that he wasn't present for, yet he still managed to pull it off. Somehow, his narration just seems trustworthy. Well, in an effort to gain your trust, I'm going to tell you that I've spent a good portion of my life being a very untrustworthy person. I know, that sounds contradictory. I've been a thief, a liar, and rogue for most of my years, but I am—for the most part—done with all that. No one is perfectly honest, and that's the most honest thing that I can tell you. I have culled this secondhand information from the stories that numerous aunts, uncles, and family friends have shared with me. Each of these stories has been corroborated by at least a few sources. But then again, I come from a long line of bullshit artists, so I'll say that these accounts are true to the best of my knowledge, and we'll leave it at that.

The above date was the day I was born. On that day, as legend has it, my father dropped my mother off at Paterson General Hospital in Paterson, New Jersey to birth me. Whether or not

the old man stayed around like the stereotypical 1950s-60s dad—pacing the waiting room, choking down smoke after smoke in great anticipation of the new arrival—was never part of the canonical lore discussed by the tightknit group of family liars. Though knowing my old man like I do, it seems far more likely that he said, “Barb, I’ll be right outside, you can count on me,” after which he left the hospital looking for a card game or a horse race where he could lay down a couple of quick bets. My father had the bug.

One thing that is for sure is that when my mother left for the hospital, the growing Gillespie clan lived in a cozy home in Hawthorne, New Jersey. My mother loved Hawthorne. To her, for whatever reason, living there meant that she had arrived. She grew up in the decidedly blue-collar, lower-class town of Haledon, New Jersey. I’m sure she loved looking down on her Haledon friends and bragging about how she now was a homeowner in Hawthorne. So, it must have come as quite a blow when, on the ride home from Paterson General, she noticed that my father was taking a rather circuitous route back to Hawthorne. Again, I was a newborn, probably being held tightly in my mother’s arms, as car seats were not yet in vogue. As a consequence, I don’t recall the conversation. That said, knowing both parties in the conversation like I do, I would imagine that it went something like this:

Mom: “Bob, where are we going? I don’t want to visit anyone in Haledon. I’m tired, and I want to go home.”

Dad: “About that, Barb, you see, blah, blah, blah, bullshit...”

And that is what would have come out of my father’s mouth—nothing but bullshit as he drove her away from her well-appointed home in Hawthorne to a rented, two-bedroom walk-up in Haledon. You see, during my mother’s hospital stay,

my father had sold the house out from under her. This wasn't planned—my old man just did things like this in the spur of the moment. It must have devastated my mother. That woman was all about appearances and impressions. To her, everything was a show. I can only imagine how challenging it must have been for her to explain this sudden turn of events to her friends. Losing the house in Hawthorne and being forced to move back to an apartment in Haledon would be a hard story to spin, even for someone as adept at interpretive disinformation as she was. If there's one thing I learned from my mother, it's how to bullshit. For instance, my father didn't have a gambling problem—he had a negative cash flow due to an inability to properly predict the physical prowess of an equine specimen in a closed area of strict scientific measurement. In other words, he bet on slow horses at the track.

My father selling the house out from under her didn't deter my mother from spitting out more kids with him. She would have my next sister, Jennifer, while still living in that walk-up. There were now seven of us Gillespies—five kids and two adults—living in that tiny, two-bedroom apartment. It wasn't until she was pregnant with my youngest sister, Julie, that we finally moved out and bought a home. Though before you get excited, let me clarify that it was a two-bedroom, one-bathroom house. In Haledon. For two adults and six children (soon to be seven). I'm sure that my mother rationalized it to herself by saying, "Well, at least we're homeowners again."

I know there are some that would say that my father was just as responsible for the kids as my mother. Well, yes and no. That wasn't the relationship they had. My mother ruled that roost. My father hated kids. He let us know that at every turn. "Yez were all yer mother's idea." He did little more than tolerate us

for my mother's sake. My mother would say, "I always wanted six children, but what would we have done without Tommy?" (Obviously, the seventh.) I don't know? Eat better? A more consistent flow of electricity? Have parents who were actually involved in our lives? I have nothing against my brother, don't get me wrong. My parents should have stopped at three, maybe even two. Hell, I was the fourth. That should tell you how ardently I believe this. The practical side of me also knows this extra money would only have gone to more bets on the soon-to-be-glue at the Yonkers Raceway.

My mother's dedication to appearances went as far as dictating how we acted in public. The only time my mother would get mad at us for being the little animals that we were was if we misbehaved in view of others. Her ego could not handle anyone thinking that she was a bad mother. In her mind, people had to look at us and believe that she had everything under control. Of course, she never did. We were always dirty, our noses were constantly running, and we had little understanding of personal boundaries. These are things that come as a result of being brought up in such confined quarters. We were polite, charming even. We were taught to always say please and thank you, yes ma'am, no sir—things of that sort. We would never dream of calling an adult by their first name. But it was all an act, and we were merely players. As soon as the intended audience was out of earshot, we went back to being who we really were. All the same, my parents were the merging of a perfect storm—she being chaos, and he being fear.

In 1967, not long after Julie was born in our new house in Haledon, my mother got pregnant again. This time it was with "what would we have done without him" Tommy. She delivered him in '68. We now had nine people living in a two-bedroom,

one-bathroom box. There was absolutely no privacy whatsoever. We fought, bathed, and even shat with each other. In 1969 or '70, I don't really recall which, my father was finally forced to put an addition on the house.

The construction began with destruction. The back part of the house was ripped off and left open for months while the workers dug out the foundation and poured the cement. Then the new part had to be framed, roofed, and sheetrocked. The whole process took about a year. The house was even more chaotic than usual. Aside from digging and pouring the foundation, my father did all the work himself with the help of a guy named Pete Flaker, or Mr. Flaker to us kids. My father was both pretty handy and pretty broke, so he didn't have much of a choice—if he wanted the addition, he would have to do it himself. He was a Princeton educated man, and the smartest guy I ever knew. He even designed the specifications for the project. Why pay someone for something you can do yourself? That was always his motto. It was also his excuse for being cheap.

When my father set about designing the addition, he made sure to separate my mother and himself from the rest of us. He built their bedroom, living room, and private bathroom downstairs. “Yez act like animals, yez can live like animals.” The time it took to finish the framing, roofing, and sheetrock paled in comparison to the rest of the construction. In fact, my father never did finish the project, save my parents' quarters downstairs. Construction ceased around 1973–74. Whatever it was at that point, it remained.

My father's gambling and my mother's alcoholism were really taking off by this time, though I wouldn't realize how bad my father's problem was until 1976. As I alluded to, my father liked the horses. The trotters to be exact. He would take me to