

Companion to an Untold Story

Marcia Aldrich

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Making sense of a loved one's suicide can be exceedingly challenging, with every memory scrutinized for clues. Left-behind items are often given more significance in the midst of sorrow, and family histories are plumbed for evidence of depression and potential motivation.

This type of disconnected process is beautifully portrayed in Marcia Aldrich's exploration of the death of her close friend, who she identifies only as Joel.

Modeled on the type of reference book called a "companion," the work gives details about Joel's possessions, medications, choices, emotions, and other fragments that made up his life. Each page has only one entry, and the references are arranged alphabetically, creating a powerful stop-and-start feeling, akin to the kind of emotional surges felt during grief. Her writing, spare and straightforward, works very well for this technique and allows for a sense of detachment mixed with sadness.

For example, under the entry for "Role," she writes: "A part defined by a script. Joel could not have considered how hard it would be for us to play the role he wrote for us." This is followed by "Roses," in which Aldrich calls the flowers "his only companions in domestic life."

Some entries reference each other, but the majority are stand-alone thoughts or memories that eventually form a story, but without details that would provide satisfying cohesion. Using this device to convey her experiences, Aldrich artfully shows the unsettling nature of being a bystander to a suicide, depicting how confusion and regret can prevent the kind of resolution that comes with knowing the reasons behind such a decision.

Although she includes Joel's voice through an occasional paragraph from one of his letters, he remains a ghostly, unreachable character, one who seems to slip further away even as Aldrich attempts to document his life. Her collection of snippets is both a memorial to Joel and a balm for herself, creating an intimate look into one person's death and another's grief.

By turns haunting, fascinating, funny, and intensely mournful, Aldrich's *Companion* is a stellar work that goes beyond Joel's story and into the very nature of grief and loss. How do people put the fragments of another's life together when they're gone? Many times, it's an impossible task, but Aldrich shows the worthiness of the attempt.

ELIZABETH MILLARD (Fall 2012)

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