

A new love, an extended family

Art and Allison Daily overcome loss with love

MAY, 9 2009

STEWART OKSENHORN

ASPEN TIMES WEEKLY

ASPEN, CO COLORADO

ASPEN — When Allison Snyder learned that her new friend, Art Daily, was a huge fan of Mark Helprin, she wrote to the prize-winning novelist. Snyder believed that Helprin might, in some way, be able to help Daily through the immense grief of having lost his family — his wife, Kathy, and their two young sons, Tanner and Shea — to an unimaginable accident.



- Jim Paussa / paussa.com

Helprin was touched by the story, as anyone would be. Daily's family was killed, in February 1995, when a boulder dislodged above Interstate 70 in Glenwood Canyon, and bounced into their car — with Art alone spared, his body unscratched.

But the writer had little to offer Daily.

"He doesn't need me. He needs my writing," Helprin wrote back, declining Allison's invitation to extend further aid to Art. The response, Allison says, despite the polite tone, "was a complete rejection letter."

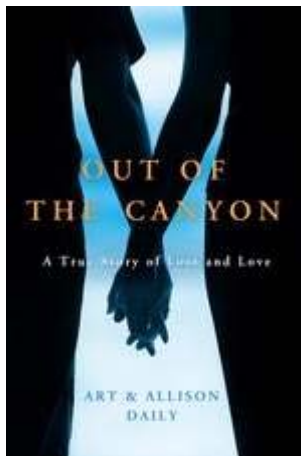
Which didn't stop Allison, a pretty, blonde tennis pro from Texas who had likewise experienced sudden, wrenching loss — the suicide of her brother, Rod, some years earlier.



- Courtesy Daily family

"I'm weird that way," she said of her refusal to stop corresponding with Helprin. She kept writing to him, often five pages at a time, detailing the life she was making with Art, which came to include marriage (she is now Allison Daily) and the birth of two sons, Rider and Burke, both now approaching their teens.

"I'd tell him everything I was doing, what the boys were doing," she continued. "I don't think he'd ever come in contact with that before, and it intrigued him. In a weird sort of way we became friends. He'd tell us about how he was raising his daughters. I knew there was this connection."



Art was, at first anyway, mortified that Allison was pestering his favorite writer. But he had a strange connection to Helprin of his own. A few months after the accident, Helprin's "Memoir from Antproof Case" was published. Daily read the novel, and loved the story of an old man who reflects back on his extraordinary, up-and-down life and writes it down for the son he adores. But the final page got Daily's attention like maybe nothing he had read before. To Daily's mind, Helprin's writing abruptly changed tone. He stops being a storyteller — with an offbeat tale about an aversion to coffee — and seems to address the reader directly, providing wise, warm, big-picture advice.

"He shifts gears and goes into a few paragraphs about how you keep love alive after someone moves on," said Daily. "It was extraordinary. It was the explanation I was looking for. He put it in words I hadn't been able to quite capture for myself. It was like

he was talking to me."

On a wall of his Main Street law office, Daily has a collage that includes photos of Kathy, Tanner and Shea, and the closing thoughts from Helprin's book: "You learn ... that love can overcome death, and that what is required of you in this is memory and devotion. ... To keep your love alive you must be willing to be obstinate, and irrational, and true Without this, you will live like a beast and have nothing but a broken heart. With it, your heart, though broken, will be full and you will stay in the fight until the last."

Helprin and the Dailys have stayed in regular touch with each other through letters; they have also met once in person, a few years ago, when Helprin appeared at a book event in Denver. Among the more recent topics of their correspondence has been the practice of writing itself. Art was beginning to put his experience down on paper — mostly as a way of sharing with Rider and Burke what had happened in Glenwood Canyon, and afterwards. In time, Allison started writing her story: Rod's suicide, her own divorce, how the simple act of reaching out to Art — a stranger at the time — led to a new love, a new family. When the two saw how their voices interweaved, they wanted to make it a book. Helprin chipped in on the business side. "He gave basic advice on what to expect in the publishing world," said Allison.

"Out of the Canyon" — to be published Tuesday, May 12 by Harmony Books, an imprint of Random House — tells the Dailys' infinitely sad, improbably uplifting story. The book is one thing — a well-told account of a brave, unlikely recovery from the unthinkable. But stronger than words are the Dailys themselves; simply being in their presence — compassionate and humble — is like being surrounded by an enormous grace. It is the convincing exclamation point on their book.

Art and Allison will appear at a book event Saturday, May 16, at 4 p.m. at Explore Booksellers in Aspen.

• • • •

The relationship with Helprin is but a mini-chapter in the Dailys' story; he gets a few quick mentions in "Out of the Canyon." (Writer Pam Houston, who has privately coached Art and Allison, has a more prominent role in the book, and wrote the foreword. The collaboration came about when Allison e-mailed Houston out of the blue, and the writer, instead of hitting the delete button, as is her habit with mail from strangers, read the note and instantly decided to meet the Dailys.) In their reaching out to Helprin, though, there are themes that echo most everything the Dailys have experienced: perseverance, disappointment, faith, inexplicable connections. And above all, openness: Allison writes to a man she doesn't know, asks him to help in her husband's healing, goes on to share some of the most intimate parts of her life. Eventually, she gets out of it a friend, and a significant helping hand on her book.

"If there was a blessing that came from this loss, this accident," said the 68-year-old Art, a New Jersey native who landed in Aspen in the '70s after attending law school in Boulder, "it was the openness it created for me, and that it left with me. When you experience something like this, you just become this huge, raw wound. That openness — I'd never been that way before in my life. And that openness allowed me to move forward. I had to have that to create a new life for myself.

"That new openness has never completely closed up. And that's been a good thing."

Art would need an open heart to let Allison into his life. Allison, spending a winter in Aspen following a divorce, heard of Art's tragedy. Though she had never met him, she was moved to make him a tape of songs, and write him a note. The words were intimate and heartfelt, but not intended to lead anywhere; Allison planned to return to Texas 10 days later. But Art wrote back, holding out the possibility of a friendship: "There is a part of me, secret, unobserved, that is quietly beginning to search for someone to love again," Daily writes in "Out of the Canyon," reflecting on his mental state at the time. He chooses to ignore the part of his mind telling him it is unacceptably soon — just a month — after his wife has died to become involved with another woman. But the two share their grief, their comfort, their hopes, and an acquaintance quickly evolves into an intimate friendship, then a romance.

That might have been the easier part of Art's newfound openness. He also had to accept things he couldn't have even dreamed of.

Two months into her friendship with Art, Allison went on a hiking trip through the Grand Canyon. On a steep part of the hike called the Tanner Trail, she saw something — first a flash of color, then a boy. Only not a boy exactly, but a vision of a boy — “half invisible and almost up in the sky,” writes Allison. But it is not a momentary experience: The presence stays with her for hours, long enough for Allison to get a detailed grasp on his appearance: long, light brown hair, soft features, wearing a yellow fleece. It is Tanner Daily, and Allison asks why he is there.

“I need to talk with my dad. I have things I need you to tell him for me and Shea and mom,” is his answer, as Allison notes in “Out of the Canyon.” Tanner describes his after-life experience, mostly joyous and hopeful, but with a sadness for those who miss them terribly. Shea and Kathy also appear — off to Allison’s periphery, but clear enough that she can sense what they are feeling. It is the first of many times that Allison has had an otherworldly contact with Art’s deceased family.

“I had some experiences as a young girl, I would know something that was going to happen,” said Allison. “I thought there was something wrong with me for knowing these things. Growing up in the South, I thought maybe that was evil. So for years I kind of pushed it all away.”

Both Allison and Art now embrace the idea that, even by today’s standards of anything-goes family units, they have a unique one. Allison very much considers Tanner, Shea and even Kathy as part of her family. There are pictures of the three all over their house off Cemetery Lane. Rider and Burke think of Tanner and Shea not only as their guardian angels, heavenly spirits looking out for their well-being, but their brothers. All birthdays are celebrated, even if the guest of honor can’t enjoy a piece of cake and blow out the candles.

Allison was at first scared of her visions, then shy about revealing them to the world. Her sixth sense isn’t something she talks about in day-to-day life.

“She realized early on, she couldn’t bring any meaning to the story unless she told the whole story,” said Art. “We agreed: The spiritual part — maybe that is the main part of the story. Maybe that’s how it all happened, how our life together began.”

For Allison, probably the biggest hurdle has been accepting Kathy’s presence in the extended family. “It must have been impossible for her in the beginning,” said Art. “It was their house, and Kathy had been here a long time. So Allison was surrounded by their presence, their memory. And a lot of the town was still watching out for me.

“She was good about it. At one point, she put it all on the table and said, ‘This is what is going on for me. You have to see it from my side.’”

One outcome of that conversation was taking down the photograph of Art and Kathy kissing that had hung on the refrigerator. But Allison has come to welcome another woman in the picture.

“She really protects and watches over our family,” said the 43-year-old Allison, whose two jobs — helping run Pathfinders Angels, which provides aid to cancer patients, and as bereavement counselor at Aspen Valley Hospital — involve assisting others in times of extreme need. “All three of them do. Not on a constant basis. But when we need them. I feel we’re protected in a very unique way.”

“I’m not intuitive like Allison,” said Art, who has not been visited by such visions. “I’m not familiar with these kinds of experiences. But I don’t doubt them anymore.”

• • • •

Of all of life’s clichés, one of the most truthful has to be that there is no greater pain than losing a child. Having two young children and a wife perish in a violent accident, being there to witness it, and surviving the ordeal physically unmarked, ups the ante considerably. As Art Daily writes in “Out of the Canyon,” reflecting on his thoughts a day after the accident: “It feels as though the entire fabric and composition of my world are gone. Who am I now? The trackless darkness is deepening around me, without bottom or end.”

Yet Art did find a bottom; and Allison too. The grief has not ended, but it has been put in its place: “We all have grief. We all deal with grief, whether it’s loss of a job or a human or an animal,” said Allison. But together the Dailys restitched the fabric of their lives in a wonderful, mystical way. “Out of the Canyon,” for all its sadness and struggle, is about coming out the other side deeper, wiser, with an enhanced appreciation of life’s blessings.

This is the challenge the Dailys took on – to take the most overwhelming tragedy and actually turn it into something uplifting.

“I knew early on that I had to make something more of this than just a loss,” said Art. “I knew, and I know now, that I had to honor them in some meaningful way. This couldn’t be just a passing of three wonderful people. I knew I couldn’t quit. I had to lift my eyes higher and higher, and turn this into something joyful.

“I knew at the time, and I believe in my heart today, I was just following their direction in this. This is what they wanted for me. I don’t have any doubt that Kathy and these boys had a great deal to do with Allison coming into my life. They’ve had a great deal to do with a great many miracles that have happened in my life since then. I’ve had a lot of help.”

I was curious to know what the Dailys thought was behind the rebuilding of their lives. Did they truly believe in miracles – that they were given each other, and two boys, and happiness, by divine forces outside themselves? Or did it have more to do with will, exemplified by Art’s determination to make something transcendent out of tragedy, and by Allison’s insistence on a relationship with Mark Helprin.

“One depends on the other,” said Allison. “Whatever a person’s spiritual belief, that cannot help them unless they’re doing the work inside. They’re mutually dependent.”

“We humans are very powerful beings,” said Art. “We can withstand great storms and can keep going against amazing odds. I don’t think we understand how tough we really are till something happened in our lives to make us dig really deep.

“That has the potential to bring out the very best in us. But you’ve got to want it. It’s the openness. That’s the blessing in a terrible wound – the openness it creates. We’re meant to persist, to stay the whole course.”

stewart@aspentimes.com