

Final Conversations

by Mirinda Kossoff

In the short space of a month, my two oldest and dearest friends died: one of cancer three days before Christmas and the other suddenly in the first month of the new year. The first death, even though it was anticipated, sent me into deep grief and the second, so shocking, devastated me.

Tessa never married and had no children but had a successful career in the top echelons of journalism. Alice had two sons and four grandchildren and a change-making career in higher education. Alice and Tessa didn't know each other. Had they met, they would have liked each other. Both had fierce intellects. Though we didn't live close geographically, I traveled with each of them, visited back and forth, and phoned regularly. I could go to either of them for support and advice and they could receive the same from me. Each in her own way was the sister I would have chosen had I the choice.

I shared thirty-six years of history with Tessa. She had endured more than three years of surgeries and several different rounds of chemo. During that time, we both hoped her cancer could be conquered and that our friendship would pick up its old rhythms.

By December Tessa was dying. I couldn't write. I couldn't think of much else but Tessa and how her day was going, whether her pain was under control, if she had the strength to make it to the bathroom. If she knew how much I loved her.

I was dying with her. I struggled to keep myself separate from her dying process, but I sleepwalked through my days. I went through the motions of prepping for the holidays, buying presents for the grandchildren, and sending cards, but my thoughts were always with her. Every conversation was precious, every exchange of information

crucial, because I knew it could be our last. I thought that if I could lighten her day and help her feel less alone in her journey, then I was doing the best I could to support her.

As she grew sicker, she moved in with her brother Sam, who lived in upstate New York. The two had been close since childhood. I was relieved that she was with him. Tessa's local friends and I kept each other up to date on her condition and her mood. Through it all, she never complained, never asked "why me?" or expressed a fear of death.

Tessa did not believe in an afterlife and was matter of fact about her approaching end. She told me, "When I'm gone, I hope people laugh." At one time, angry with her brother, she related that she told him, "If I weren't dying already, this would kill me."

A native New Yorker who lived and worked in Manhattan, she loved the ballet and was an incisive critic of dance performances, the theater, and the movies. On my annual visits, I stayed in her one-bedroom apartment. She always gave me her bed and slept on the sofa, which she often did when alone, falling asleep to the sounds of the TV. I know this, because once she fell asleep while talking with me on the phone, the TV mumbling in the background.

On one of my visits, we were at a Sam Shepard play on Broadway, when she said in a stage whisper, "This is crap. Let's go." We were sitting in the second row but that did not stop Tessa from rising in the middle of the first act and heading for the door. Embarrassed as I was, I followed.

I visited Tessa twice in the last six months of her life, once at Sam's house and once at her Manhattan apartment where I helped her organize the art and sculpture she'd spent a lifetime collecting. While I was there, she hosted a restaurant dinner with a select group of friends, perhaps thinking it was a goodbye dinner but not saying so.

Each time I saw her, she looked thinner and frailer, bald or with hair growing back. Toward the end, she was in hospice care at Sam's house. When she could no longer climb the stairs to her second-floor bedroom, hospice set up a hospital bed in a room on the main floor. We spoke by phone almost daily. I told if she didn't feel like talking, she shouldn't pick up. There were times when she didn't answer, but most days we talked. It was our last tenuous connection.

I dreaded the day that seemed to arrive alarmingly fast, the day Tessa said she was fed up with being bedridden and needing powerful drugs to keep the pain at bay. “I can’t take much more of this. I want out,” she told me.

“I know you’re suffering, and I can let you go when you’re ready, I said, as I squeezed my eyes shut to lock in the tears.

A couple of days later, on December 22, I phoned Tessa and Sam picked up. “The hospice nurses are tending to Tessa. Call back in fifteen minutes,” he advised.

When I phoned again, Sam picked up a second time. “Tessa is having a hard time,” he said. “I don’t think she’ll last the night.” Hearing our conversation, Tessa asked to speak to me. I knew what was coming and my gut froze.

“I’m going to die tonight,” she told me in a papery thin voice.

“If you’re ready, then I’m at peace because you will be at peace, I replied. “But I cannot say goodbye. I will tell you one last time that I love you dearly and that you will leave a big hole in my life.”

Sam said he would phone me when it was over. By the next afternoon, I hadn’t heard from him, so I phoned. He told me Tessa had died fifteen minutes before I called. We both cried. I was glad her suffering was over. But I was bereft.

In the following difficult days, I took comfort in knowing that I still had Alice, my close friend of sixty-four years, the passionate advocate for education who knew everything about me. We grew up together, shared the same history in the same small southern town, attended the same schools, knew each other’s parents, and roomed together for two years in college. I still remember playing with her in her family’s three story pink Victorian house and our mutual loathing of frat parties in college, especially after some frat boy called us FFFs, short for frightfully fertile females, when he saw us sitting together on a bench. We both had two sons and two marriages. Alice loved travel as much as I and we both loved books, often sharing recommendations.

After her divorce, Alice relocated from within driving distance of me in Virginia to Phoenix to be close to her son and granddaughters. COVID had kept us apart for three years. I visited her in Phoenix in early December 2022 and except for sleeping, we never stopped talking. Words between us were so easy and one story or memory

provoked another. We discussed everything from books, ideas, and travel to family, friends, food, and our shared history. Alice had an easy laugh and, in the southern tradition, was one of the best story tellers I knew. She remembered the names of friends' families and what each member was doing, who they married, and what their offspring were up to.

The day after Christmas, Alice travelled to Japan to visit her son Pete, her daughter-in-law, and her two grandchildren. When she returned, after some jet lag recovery time, we set up a time to talk on the phone. I wanted to hear all about her trip. She didn't complain about the fourteen-hour flight to Tokyo or the additional travel with her family to ski country. She emphasized the best parts of the trip, like being able to spend one-on-one time with her busy son and how gratifying it was to have that alone time with him.

On the phone, Alice had a clipped cough and a sandpaper voice. She said she couldn't get past the jet lag. I asked if she'd seen a doctor. She emphasized how much she hated going to doctors. She was in tip-top shape, exercised regularly, ate a healthy diet, and was on no medications. Her mother had lived to 104 and I knew Alice would outlive me. I did, though, suggest she see a doctor soon.

We talked for our usual two hours and when we were ready to sign off, I thought of how precious her friendship was, especially since I had just lost Tessa. "I love you Alice," I said, feeling that love deep in my belly.

"I love you, too, Jean," she replied. She had a pass on calling me by my middle name, the one everyone used when I was young. She said this with the kind of tenderness I hadn't heard in her voice before.

The next day she was dead, a likely deep vein thrombosis from the long flight, lying in wait to assault her heart. The news came from a former high school classmate who learned about it from Alice's first husband, also a classmate. Seeing Alice's name together with the phrase "we've lost another classmate" felt like I was being tasered.

"No," I wrote on the email chain. "It's not true. I just talked to her yesterday." Then I got Pete's email and I had to accept the devastating fact that she was truly gone. I screamed and wept and wanted to shake my fists at the universe for this cruel trick.

I had a video call with Pete and his daughter Claire in Japan. We wept together. We wept again at a video memorial service her sons had organized. I was the second speaker behind Alice's brother, because, of all her many friends, I had known her the longest.

Grief paralyzed me. I took no pleasure in my normal activities. Life lost meaning. I obsessed about death and was riddled with anxiety about losing yet another friend or family member or dying suddenly myself. Why bother to do anything because nothing mattered. At the doctor's office for a minor malady, I started weeping. The physician prescribed an antidepressant to add to the one I'd been taking for years. I never took the prescribed pills.

Neither Tessa nor Alice was religious. They didn't believe in an afterlife, nor did I. But now I desperately wanted to. My two best friends were so alive to the world. How could such vibrant, intelligent minds dissolve into nothingness? Where does the energy and the essence of my beloved friends go? My science-based, factual approach to death did not stop me from looking for signs from each of them. In the week after Alice died, I saw an angel-shaped cloud. I asked Alice to send me another, but after months of looking in the sky for signs, I saw none.

As Maria Popova wrote in a beautiful essay on dying: *Whatever our beliefs, these sensemaking playthings of the mind, when the moment of material undoing comes, we—creatures of moment and matter—simply cannot fathom how something as exquisite as the universe of thought and feeling inside us can vanish into nothingness.*

The physicist Alan Lightman has written lovingly about death. In his book, *mr g*, Lightman gives us a narrator who creates time, space, and matter from the void. But creation raises the question of its opposite—dissolution/death. Toward the end of the novel, mr g sorrowfully watches an old woman on her deathbed, her memories spooling out as death approaches.

“How can a creature of substance and mass fathom a thing without substance or mass?” wonders mr g as he sees one of his creations succumb to his laws. *“How can a creature who will certainly die have an understanding of things that will exist forever?”* When she dies, mr g notes the incomprehensible number of atoms in her body and

breaks them down into the major chemical elements plus a smattering of the ninety-odd other chemical elements created in stars.

He tells us that in cremation these elements combine and recombine and then scatter into the wind and soil. Having chosen cremation, in two months, Tessa's atoms will spread and diffuse throughout the planet. Her borrowed atoms now belong to everyone and everything. We share those atoms. It comforts me to know that her atoms might slip into the atmosphere I breathe.

Alice, as was typical of her thoughtful and generous nature, donated her body to a tissue bank. At some point, her unused remains will be cremated or put into the soil to begin a new cycle of life.

Deep in my grief, I nevertheless realized that each of my friends had left me something more than treasured memories.

Some of Tessa's friends have become my friends. A portion of Tessa's treasure trove of art, clothing, and jewelry, carefully collected over the years, came to me: She purchased some of the items when we traveled and shopped together. I remember our last trip to Santa Fe when she bargained with a well-known Navajo jeweler. She wanted to add another carved sterling bangle to her collection. Now I wear that bangle—and two others she bought at other times—every day, a threesome I had once admired on her wrist. Sometimes I wear a pair of her earrings, a necklace, or a jacket. I feel I am taking her with me as I go about dressed in her finery.

Alice has left me the unparalleled gift of a relationship with her son, Pete, and granddaughter, Claire. Alice had been helping fourteen-year-old Claire with her essay writing. Ever the educator, she had suggested books for Claire to read and topics to write about. On one of my video conversations with Pete and Claire, I mentioned that I knew about this collaboration.

"I know I can never replace your granny Alice," I said, "but I'm a writer and would love to help you with your essays."

Without hesitating, Claire said, "I would like that," and we agreed on a date and time to have regular video meetings.

Now, Claire and I talk regularly about her life and her observations as much as we do about her essays. Like her grandmother, she is a thoughtful and observant

person. I treasure her as much as my own grandchildren because she is an extension of Alice. In helping Chloe, I hope to further Alice's legacy.

Pete has told me that he plans to bring the family to the States for the 2023 winter holidays and will be within driving distance in Virginia. Meeting them in person will be my best gift of the year.

Despite the gifts my friends have left behind, the question remains: How do I go on with my life without Alice and Tessa? Every day, there comes a moment when I think of them. I must stifle the reflex to pick up the phone to talk with them. Instead, I talk to them in my mind.

When I left for a trip in August, I keenly felt their presence. Instead of thinking about what to tell them later about the vacation, as I would normally have done, I felt they were experiencing it with me. Tessa approved of a white rain jacket I bought. Alice was intrigued by the Abraham Verghese novel I was reading.

The essence of these two loving influences in my life are ingrained in me, carried forward as I go about my daily life with a deep knowledge of who they were as people and how much I absorbed the things I cherished about them.



Mirinda Kossoff is the author of *The Rope of Life: A Memoir*. She regularly writes essays as well as blogs on her author's website: www.mirindakossoff.com. Kossoff has been a chameleon in her work life, from hospital social worker, assistant managing editor at a large newspaper, communications director in academia and nonprofits, freelancer, to artist, metal smith and jewelry designer. She has written and published essays and articles throughout her life, including a few for national magazines. She penned a weekly column for a local paper, was an essayist/commentator on regional public radio, and taught essay writing at Duke University continuing education.