

# The Pure Lover: A Memoir of Grief

## David Plante

### PROLOGUE

Nikos Stangos died April 16, 2004. We had been loving partners for some forty years. He died of cancer—of the lungs, spine, and brain. I was with him when he died, in our bed, after six months of physical and mental deterioration. All the while, I kept a daily diary, but only after his death did I find myself compelled to write down separately—now no longer a part of daily life but within the sphere of grief—the thoughts and feelings that came to me. Recollections came to me at home, out on a walk, suddenly in a market, waiting in an airport terminal, one after the other, without any order that I was aware of. It was as if all my nearly forty years of life with Nikos contracted into no time, into no place, as if from outside our day-to-day relationship, so a recollection from late in our lives together was followed by one from the very beginning, an event remembered from his last weeks in London followed by one long before, in Greece or Italy. No doubt some inner reckoning of my grief was evolving. These notes seemed to me spontaneous but random, yet I sensed that grief knew more than I did about the evolution of grief, knew something whole while I knew only flashes of the whole.

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Perhaps it is a stage in grief's evolution to want to try to put some order in the notes I took, much in the same way there is a stage in grief when the bereaved suddenly wants to put order in his lost lover's clothes, papers, the effects in his desk drawers. Over and

over, I arranged and rearranged the notes—the markings of grief's way—and slowly tried for some coherence in time and place.

Do the fragments come together as a whole? I imagine this: an invisible Greek amphora, larger than all the assembled fragments, shaping the larger invisible whole.

You lay on the rug of the sitting room floor to listen to Bach partitas, the only music you could listen to, recorded by Richard Goode. You'd sometimes sit up and exclaim, as if amazed, "I know every note!"

Entering the bathroom, I saw you standing before the washbasin, after chemotherapy, brushing your hair out in falling clumps. I was alarmed, but you said matter-of-factly, "My hair will grow back." I said I would clear up, and did, to save a lock.

Together, we made and remade our bed to satisfy your need for order—to the detail that the label on the blanket had to be on the lower-left corner of the bed—but the bed was never made right.

Again and again, you asked, "Why aren't I better?"

A friend wrote, "Fate is cruel, trafficking in nightmares." I asked myself why I did not feel this applied to you, but was too general to apply to you, to anyone in particular.

I did not feel that religious faith applied to you, to us. Religion applied to others, but not to you, for faith was too general, and you in dying were too particular for such generalizations.

I woke you from a nap to tell you I was going out to shop for supper. When I returned, you were up, walking about in your pajamas, agitated. Alarmed, you asked, "Where were you? I was so worried."

You had forgotten I'd told you I'd be out. I helped you back into bed, then lay beside you. You took one of my hands in your thin, cold hand and brought it to your chest. "Thank God you came back," you said.

Every night, in bed with you, I thought: I am falling asleep with someone who is dying. All during the night, often woken by you because your back pained you, I'd think: I'm in bed with someone who is dying.

Most of the days, during the intervals from sleep when you were half asleep, you would ask me, over and over, what day it was, where your cats were, what was happening. I asked you, "Are you anxious?" You asked, "About what?" I didn't want to say, about dying, because I didn't want you to know, but wondered if you did. Puzzled by my question, you answered, "No."

You became frustrated when you couldn't remember what you were just about to say, something that, clearly, remained as a *sense* for which you had forgotten the words. Frowning, starting out as you tried to concentrate, you looked haunted.

One evening, you looked at me then turned away and asked, "Where is David?" Shocked, I wondered: does he mean some other David? You turned back to me and said, "You, you're David."

Together in our bed, falling asleep, you said, "I can't tell where the edges of the bed are."