A SAMPLE CHAPTER

STILL FIRE INSIDE

A Memoir on Love, Loss and Life

Emma Pascale Pearson

Still Fire Inside

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Praise for Still Fire Inside

When I am sad, or need hope, I know I can read something that Emma Pearson has written, and she will give me a lift. Her words are beautiful, heartfelt, and provide a guide for others who are figuring out a way forward through loss. Still Fire Inside is the gentle hug and push that we all need to help us embrace life!

Nancy Saltzman, Ph.D. Author "Radical Survivor: One Woman's Path Though Life, Love, and Uncharted Tragedy"

Emma takes the reader into the heart of the human experience, the co-mingling of love and grief. Her authentic vulnerability welcomes readers not only into her story, but also their own. In her words we experience beauty, honesty, and ultimately are invited into the uniquely human journey through that which breaks us open. What a gift.

Michele Neff Hernandez, CEO and Founder Soaring Spirits International Author "Different After You: Rediscovering Yourself after Grief and Trauma"

None of us knows how we will react when tested. Emma Pearson has been tested, tested and tested again. Her extraordinary ability to repeatedly raise herself up after unimaginable losses is matched only by the clarity of understanding she brings to the experience. This is not to say she has all the answers; no one does, but she asks the right questions. She is prepared to face the pain and the beauty inherent in loss and examine each equally. She brings vulnerability and honesty to her writing, and she refuses to tidy grief away into something palatable and containable. Raging at the platitudes and clumsiness of "well-wishers" she also appreciates and values true moments of connection - to her inner world, to those around her, and to something deeper. As she says herself: "You will not catch death from me. On the contrary, you might even catch life from me." In the midst of so much loss, this is a truly life-affirming celebration of love and loss, of suffering and growth.

Sasha Bates, Psychotherapist and Author "Languages of Loss" and "A Grief Companion"

Is healing following the death of a beloved possible? Remarkably, Emma and I believe it is. But healing is not a destination we will arrive at one day. Rather, healing our broken hearts and broken lives has become our day-by-day way of being in the world. Still Fire Inside is the raw, powerful, unimaginable, painful, hope-filled story of life, love, death, rebirth and healing that Emma is living. Read this book. Pay attention to the messages that speak to your heart. Carry these messages with you. Say yes to them over and over again. Remind yourself that grief is alive just as love is alive. Choose love.

Tom Zuba, Author "Permission to Mourn: A New Way to do Grief " and "Becoming Radiant: A New Way to do Life"

FROM STILL FIRE INSIDE

Rewriting Friendship Contracts:

The ones who stayed, the ones who couldn't, and the ones who learned

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In early grief, I resented the absences, the silence, the avoidance. I bristled—or even seethed—at the friendships that dropped away, at the vast numbers of supposedly dear friends who stepped back out of awkwardness, fear, discomfort, busyness. The ones who didn't know how to be with me in this new landscape and, instead of fumbling through and learning to be with this new version of me, vanished.

I resented, too, the ones who rushed in too quickly, trying to fix the unfixable, telling me I was too angry, too sad, too changed. Or amazing and courageous and strong! Or the ones who never asked me anything at all and just talked about themselves.

That time has passed. Many friendships have gone by the wayside. No one's fault, really—or at least as much mine as anyone else's. Even though I could later articulate what was helpful and wanted, and what was not, most people couldn't stay. With distance and perspective, I now see my friendships as an ever-changing web of relationships—some requiring pruning, reshaping, or rebalancing.

Perhaps there was no great betrayal after all. Just inherent clumsiness and human limitations. A reflection of how poorly we are trained to exist alongside suffering.

As well as letting many friendships go, I have made new ones—friendships that fit the person I am now, and the one I am still becoming. And some of my dearest, oldest friends have learned how to be with me. Not that I could guide them early on. But some hung around long enough to learn. And learn they did.

I never anticipated that long-standing friendships would have to be rebooted and upskilled. That, with much compassion and not too much ego, the friendship script could be edited, agreements revised, and language updated. The friendships that survived the wild early landscape of multiple griefs have become richer, stronger, more honest, and much more reciprocal.

The friends who stayed and adapted were willing to listen. Willing to hear me. Even when it was hard. Even when I had to correct them, which I often had to. Even when I said things like, “I don’t answer the question, ‘How are you?’” or “Please don’t say ‘committed suicide’—instead, say ‘died by suicide’.” Friends who accepted that just in that moment—not forever, but just in that moment—my truth carried more weight than theirs.

The friends who put in the work, who evolved with me, who allowed themselves to feel the discomfort and still kept showing up—those friendships deepened. They refreshed, renewed, revitalised, and regenerated. They transcended what they were before.

And then there were the friendships that have barely changed at all. Not because they weren’t touched by grief’s seismic shifts, but because they didn’t need a complete rewriting. They had a solid foundation to begin with. They were already built on presence, on deep listening, on a capacity to hold space without rushing in with solutions or platitudes.

My friendship with Kate, a friend from university days, is one of those. A person who, even when we were both under twenty, I could see had an unusual ability to be with others’ pain, long before “holding space” entered the general lexicon.

Yet, even Kate disappeared. Not because she didn’t want to be there, but because she didn’t know how to bring her life into reciprocal conversation with mine. She didn’t know how to sit across from me and say, “Things are hard for me at the moment too, even though it’s nothing like what you’re going through.” She held back, believing that to bring her troubles—her struggles with her daughter, her complicated family life—into the conversation would be wrong. That it would hijack my own grief. That whatever she was facing wasn’t serious enough to take up space.

But I felt the loss of her. Not as a betrayal or abandonment, but as yet another grief, another secondary loss—not devastating, but there nonetheless.

Months passed between messages. Then another hesitant WhatsApp from me, wanting news, wanting to connect. Needing contact. I received light, surface-level responses. Then, finally, the real explanation:

“I didn’t want to share anything because I know I am lucky to have Carolyn (her daughter), and the kids are lucky to have their dad, and it all seems so small in comparison with your life challenges. But that is why I have been quiet.”

This is one of the trickiest things about grief. The measuring. The way people assess their own suffering against mine and decide to keep quiet. Friends who pull back, as if there's a scoreboard, as if there's a threshold beneath which pain doesn't register, doesn't deserve to be spoken aloud.

But that's not how it works. It was as if my grief set the bar so high that friends' troubles barely made a blip on the radar. They hesitated, unsure whether their struggles counted in the presence of mine. But what does that mean for friendship? For authentic relationships?

If girlfriends who still had their husbands, wives and partners didn't dare talk to me about their relationship struggles, I would barely have any girlfriends. If friends with a struggling but still-alive teenager hesitated to share their worries, I would have even fewer.

Then where would I be? Even more abandoned. So the paradox of friendship after loss is this: we need to stay connected. And to stay connected, we must talk about our lives.

But how do we stay in balance? How do we stay in right relationships? How do we share hard things without feeling like we're diminishing another's burdens? How do we grieve while still holding space for another's frustration with their ageing parent, their failing marriage, their struggling child? How do we ensure we don't dominate the conversation with our death-related grief, but also don't become the friend who is only ever listening, never listened to?

It's a tricky balance, one I am still learning to navigate. Because I still get triggered. I still want to shake some of my friends when they complain—repeatedly—about things I wish they could see as minor in the grand scheme of life and the universe. When they pick at small relationship grievances instead of appreciating that they still have their partner. When they get caught in cycles of negativity and can't see what's still good in their life. When they complain about their boss or the weather.

I am still caught off guard. I crumple inside when I hear about children turning sixteen. I ache when friends talk about their kids struggling, but still alive. I still feel, at times, the unfairness of it all.

But I have softened. I am less reactive, more spacious. Because I also know that others' problems are real. Their suffering is real. And that we all need a place where we can show up, unfiltered, as we are.

So maybe the better questions are: How do we let each other be messy? How do we let each other be frustrated, hurting, grieving, and even joyful, without measuring or assessing, without pulling away, and without silencing ourselves out of comparison? How do we cultivate friendships that don't demand equity and equivalence, but instead embrace each other's "real"?

Friendship, like grief, is a living thing. It shifts, it grows, and sometimes withers away and dies. Some friendships cannot be resurrected. Some are best shelved, without blame. Others may come back, but they will need tenderness, honesty, grace, and mutual care.

I no longer expect friendships to last, but I do expect them to be authentic and malleable —capable of adapting to life as it evolves, not just as it once was.