

THE RISE AGAIN SERIES · BOOK ONE

# THE CONVERSATION

*A Novel of Grief and Living*

Stephen Franks

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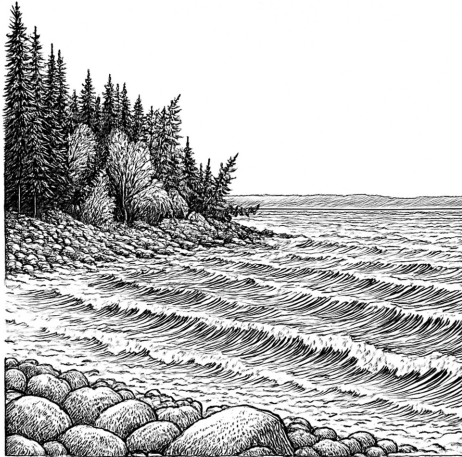
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*For my Wife Laura and my Daughter  
Ann.*

*In loving memory of Bev, Bill, and Silvia.*



*Queens Port Lookoff, 2026, "Precarious Life"*

## THE CONVERSATION

### A Novel of Grief and Living

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The first book in the series *Rise Again*, it is in itself complete, self contained, but if you like it, you might enjoy the second book *The Push*.

This novel explores grief, loss, and the process of learning to live after profound absence. I have taught for over thirty years and have personal experience with loss. However, this is a work of fiction, and I am not a trained therapist or crisis counsellor. If you are struggling with grief, depression, or thoughts of suicide, please reach out to a mental health professional, your doctor, or a crisis support service. The feelings explored in this book are real, but they are best addressed with proper professional support.

All characters and situations in this novel are fictional and do not represent real people, living or deceased. While this story is grounded in the authentic experience of grief, the specific people, places, and events are products of imagination.

Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is entirely coincidental.

I have created a Spotify playlist for you to enjoy while reading this book. It features music deeply rooted in the East Coast tradition—fiddle, folk, and Celtic tunes that are familiar in kitchens and cottages

across Nova Scotia. The playlist is titled *The Conversation* by Stephen Franks. You can find a link to it on the book's webpage at [foxislandpress.ca/the-conversation](http://foxislandpress.ca/the-conversation).

I strive to keep the playlist up to date, and I have carefully selected tunes that reflect the timing and emotions of each chapter as closely as possible. I truly hope you enjoy it.

# Month 1 — My Wife Died

*February*

*Three Words*

The laptop is on the kitchen table where Tyler left it.

The screen is too bright. Everything in this house is either too bright or too dark, and I don't know how to fix either one. Ann is in the living room talking to someone from the church, I can hear her using the voice. The capable voice. She gets that from her mother.

Tyler showed me how to open this thing yesterday, between the service and the reception that Silvia would have refused to call a reception. He typed something into the search bar, clicked a link, and a sentence appeared on the screen like it had been waiting for me.

*How can I help you today?*

How can it help me. Nothing can help me. But the boy looked so pleased with himself, standing there in

his suit jacket that was already too short in the sleeves, and I didn't have the heart to close it in front of him. He showed me how to type in the box at the bottom. How to press Enter. How to scroll. Then Ann called him from the other room and he squeezed my shoulder, just once, quickly, the way men do when they don't know what else to do, and left me alone with it.

That was yesterday. Now the laptop is still here and the cursor is still blinking and there are fourteen people in my living room eating casseroles brought by people who have no business making casseroles.

I sit down. Put my hands on the keys. Type three words.

**My wife died.**

Just like that. Thirty-four years of teaching students how to build sentences and that's what I produce. My — possessive pronoun. Wife — noun. Died — verb, past tense, intransitive. No object. Nothing to receive the action. Just the action itself, sitting there on the screen, unremarkable.

I don't know why I'm telling this to a machine. I don't even know what this thing is. Tyler called it an AI. Artificial intelligence. I know what those words mean separately. Together, I'm less certain.

I press Enter.

The response comes almost instantly, faster than any person could form a thought, let alone type one.

The words scroll onto the screen in a steady stream, like a teleprompter no one asked for.

*I'm truly sorry for your loss. Losing a spouse is one of the most profound experiences a person can go through, and there is no right or wrong way to grieve. It is completely understandable that you might need a quiet space right now, even with loved ones around.*

*Would you like to tell me more about your wife, or would you prefer to simply have a space to put your thoughts? I am here to listen, whenever you are ready.*

I read it twice. It's polished. Careful. It sounds like every sympathy card I've ever read, every grief pamphlet left on my kitchen counter this week, every well-meaning sentence spoken by people standing in my living room holding plates of Mrs. Chicken's casse-  
role.

It sounds like absolutely nothing.

I type:

**No. Not to you. Not yet. I don't even know what you are and I'm not going to hand her over to a blinking cursor on a fourteen-year-old's suggestion.**

I press Enter and the machine responds immediately.

*That is completely okay. You do not owe me, or anyone, your story before you are ready to share it. I am here whenever you would like to talk, whether that is today, tomorrow,*