

Twenty-Five Cents

The moment I grasp what grief is like, it contorts, a slippery eel rolling through each crest of pain and questioning. The relationship I try to hold with it undulates and slithers through my hands.

In the first week after my dad died, sorrow was a suffocation of the soul. All the air was knocked out of me. I was crushed like roadkill under monster tyres of an eighteen-wheeler road train on its grief-fuelled slog north, bulging with Belmont Red cattle licking their immobile upper lips after the biggest feed of their soon-to-end lives, this last supper compounding the weight running over my being.

Each surfacing memory of my father added its own blow. I lay flattened out by the rubber tread of intrusive thoughts, desert dust caking my skin, the ochre particles a coat for my pummelled exterior.

One early morning, in a stupor, I rolled my head to the right, my beaten eyes seeing grief in the form of an umber-shaded wedge-tailed eagle. It lumbered its way towards me. Wings thick as trunks, legs feathered from hips to its pincer-like talons.

It stood on my splayed-out carcass, hooked beak and downy chest juttied out, taunting the cars passing our house, 'What are you going to do?' The tooting of their horn, a feeble challenge. Unmoved, the eagle watched them drive past with its beady eyes, ready to tear me apart and feast on death's remains.

My insides felt splintered as I tried to make my way through what each day required. Grief had undone me, and I struggled to live in a bare-minimum fashion. Bones and joints seemingly no longer connected, my chest a pool of molten lead. Pain raced beyond all scales of measurement.

Grief told my inner concierge it would be staying for months, if not years. I worried I would never bounce back.

Grief took its toll. From an exhausted body stuck in battle mode with mourning for the first four months, to sinking into a bog of un-adrenalised and unrelenting heartbreak, grief was no butterfly to pin down. It held power over me. I resented its presence.

I was naïve, presuming to know how bereavement would impact over time. As each moment passed, grief exceed what I thought it would be.

Grief is

more	numbing
more	pointless
more	revealing
more	time
more	than stages
more	than magical thinking pages

Grief is more isolating

more	surprising
more	inciting
more	brutal
more	gentle
more	memorable
more	horrifying

Grief is more loss of ease

more	loss of keys
more	adrenaline
more	sleepiness
more	brain explosions
more	taxing
more	sunk into doubt

Grief is more platitude-defying

more defining
more pining
more hollowing out
more crying out
more shouting out
more reaching out

more

more

Grief is always

more

~

Time did not change grief, but grief changed over time.

After stepping out of the fight-flight space of early grief, then sitting in the ensuing months of sorrow and rumination, I needed to approach grief differently. I knew that gentleness was not weakness, and yet I had withheld that tenderness from myself and tried to thicken skin it through painful territory I had no clear map for. I was lost and cautious of whether grief was a friend or enemy.

Treating it as foe had not helped, so I stepped towards my pain with kindness, holding it with gentle, open hands.

Approaching grief with compassion and curiosity shifted my relationship with it. Bereavement became an unfolding, a slow revealing and unravelling of all the layers of hurt. And there were many, some recent, some historical. I kept counsellors in business as I chewed and cried through each one.

Grief edited me without shame, rubbing out plans and values, then re-writing them with me, based on how I might enter back into a forever-changed landscape. One death can recast your entire world. It takes substantial time to rework the script.

These were seasons of relearning and rearranging. I was scared to do so, to adapt, to revise my life, fearful I had forgotten how to live fully. I lost confidence in who I was and where I fit.

A year on and while the sharpness of the pain dulled, grief dominated my head and heart space.

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When I was a kid, my family lived on the same street as Gran and Grandpa for a few years. We would often go to their house and play board games - Candy Lane, Chinese Checkers, Trouble, Guess Who, Snakes and Ladders, Test Match, Connect Four, Battleship - all the classics. Their cupboards overflowed with choice and competition.

My younger brother Steve and I would argue about which game to play, eventually setting one up on the nesting coffee tables, settling ourselves into combat position on the light-grey mottled carpet of the lounge room. Gran would leave curried prawns to simmer on the stovetop, the smells wafting in with her as she carried in a bone China tray of orange cordial and biscuits. Our impatient hands turned the game pieces in our fingers while Grandpa sat in his maroon-leather reclining throne, imploring how good Gran was at cooking – *we already know that, Grandpa! Just let us eat and play.*

Both Gran and Grandpa allowed us to warm to the contest with a few easy wins before turning up their skill level. I loved the challenge of it, having to earn the victory. On the occasional times it happened, it was sweeter than the cordial Gran had poured for us.

Gran's strength was Chinese Checkers. Rarely did anyone beat her. As I was setting up the board one day when I was ten, confident of ending her winning streak, Gran asked me to sit on the couch with her. Her voice sounded stern. *Am I in trouble?*

I plonked myself down as she took out a brown photo album and a pack of newly developed pictures.

'David...' *That's not good.* Anytime Gran or Mum called me David, it meant I had done something wrong. '...have a look at these photos.'

I took them, one by one, looking for the error of my ways. I couldn't see anything amiss. There were shots of my family with the grandparents, pictures from the playground

across the road. One was of my cousins Tess and Jed on the monkey bars in the background, with my wonky head stuck in front of them, sticking my tongue out.

I giggled. 'That one's funny!'

'No, it is not,' she corrected. My shoulders shrank. She was narrowing in on the problem. 'Look at all the photos. You're poking your tongue out, pulling a face. Here, do you see this one?' She flicked through to the back of the pile, holding another piece of incriminating evidence. 'I wanted a nice picture of the Sydney grandchildren. And you jumped in front of it. I can't even see Jeffrey or Jo.'

It was rare to be in trouble with Gran. I froze on the couch, unsure what to do. I squeezed my hands together in my lap.

'You keep ruining my photos,' she said. 'I might have to start charging you soon.'

I lifted my eyes and smiled at her. *You wouldn't charge me.*

'Twenty-five cents per photo you ruin from now on.' *Oh wait, you would charge me.* Smile erased. Twenty-five cents would mean missing out on a lolly bag from the school canteen. Had anyone ever faced such a large consequence?

'That's not fair. I can't pay that, Gran.' Worry built up in the back of my mouth, the smells of her cooking replaced with the stinging odour of fear.

'Well, stop mucking up my photos then.'

I told this story to a friend, sixteen months on from dad's death. We were sitting back with pizza and waffle fries at a pub in the centre of town, surrounded by screens showing ancient replays of rugby league, the squawking chatter and the aroma of chicken parmigiana filling the space. I took a sip of an IPA and recounted the times I botched up Gran's photos.

'So, I'd crouch down behind Gran as she lined up the shot, and she'd go, '1...2...'' and I would jump out and get my ugly mug in the photo. And if I had timed it well, most of the shot was taken up by my blurry head, pulling some variety of face.'

'How ticked off did she get?'

'So angry her face was shaking! Her short grey bob would keep wobbling after she told me off. And this is before digital photos, too – you can't just delete and retake it.'

'You jerk.' He reached over and stole some of my chips.

‘I know. I must have done her head in at times. But shoving my face into the whole shot – that’s what grief was like for ages. Jumping front-and-centre into the moment, clogging up my mind and emotions, leaving little space to see or feel anything else.’

‘Is it still like that?’

‘No, it’s been shifting lately. Still a sizeable part of the picture but it’s making some space for other things.’

‘It’s kind of moving out of the shot?’

‘Exactly. It’s taking some steps away from the limelight. It’s more background footage instead of the whole picture.’

‘I’m glad for you mate. That must be a relief,’ he said as he took more of my fries.

‘Yeah...’ I muttered, holding the pint glass in midair. I wanted the weight of Dad’s death to be lifted off me, but in doing so, I worried that he was losing importance in my life. *Did I not care about him as much?*

My chest tightened; the room spun a bit. *Was he slipping away from memory, from my heart?* If grief moved to the background, would I lose that feeling of connection with him?

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I was tidying up our spare room months later, something I hadn’t had the energy to do for the year and a half since the funeral. Finding an old blue photo album from the top of the cupboard, I hopped onto a beanbag and moseyed through the pages. There was a photo of the extended family on my Mum’s side. Gran and Grandpa were sitting on chairs in the front, with an array of their children and grandchildren gathered around them and some blurred gum trees in the background. It must have been winter in the late ‘90s as most of us were in now-very-unfashionable jumpers, bulky knitted creations made by someone with a fondness for clashing stripes and every conceivable shade of grey.

I was standing at the back of the shot, next to one brother and a cousin, balancing on a log. I’m smiling in a blue and white striped shirt, fringe brushed awkwardly down, covering half my forehead. I am not pulling a face, no tongue stuck out. I am not the focus on the

scene. I'm grinning along with the rest of the extended family, huddling around generations of kin and blood.

Being a part of a moment without dominating the scene – I felt a warm gratefulness that grief was doing this very thing with me. While never leaving, it relented, flavouring and shaping moments without dominating them too often.

Alongside it was a growing appreciation of my dad. Grief's softening was not leading to his disappearing. Rather, grief and connection came with me everywhere I went, forever entwined with my days, as love for Dad will never reach a finishing point.

I looked at the matte image again and noticed that Dad was carrying himself lightly in the photo, capturing a part of his personality I often forget since he died. When around good people, and in nature, he bubbled alive. And because of grief, this memory was staying alive too.

I took a final look at teenage me, sharing a moment with Dad, and smiled. *This is one photo Gran couldn't charge me twenty-five cents for.*