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Streams of Bereavement

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Abstract

This article offers “streams of bereavement” narratives across time. The author seeks to present a multilayered voiced account through vignettes and poems about the loss of her father who died 20 years ago. This aims to address the complex and traumatizing nature of living with grief and the shifting and multifaceted ways a young bereaved daughter might try and make sense of such a loss. This article is in response to reading “Fathers and Sons: Bits and Pieces” and the call for more in-depth qualitative inquiries into parentally bereaved young people. These narratives are offered in the hope that humane connections are discovered that facilitate others to make sense of a similar life event.

Keywords

father, daughter, bereavement, grief, narratives, vignettes, poems **IAQ: 1**

Brewer and Sparkes (2011) highlight that “repressed emotions will find inappropriate outlets so it is best to ‘let off steam’ and not ‘bottle things up’” (p. 290). The vignette, “The Seminar,” that immediately follows shows how repressed emotions that build up over time can be particularly difficult to cope with. Then, what ensues is “That year”; a cluster of vignettes during which I picture the last time I see (and unknowingly say “goodbye” to) my own father. Finally, I offer a poem (a chat with my father) written 20 years later.

The Seminar

On my way to a seminar, I walk through the physiology lab to get to the small and quiet qualitative room. I see Rachel looking relaxed, calm, and ready. There are crossovers between Rachel and me because her Dad died when she was 13 and my Dad¹ died when I was 11. The room fills up with PhD students and lecturers. Once we’ve all arrived she starts her presentation on children’s bereavement.

I’m enjoying it until . . . she starts delving into the *personal* stories of particular children. I suddenly seem to start *feeling* really uncomfortable deep inside. She singles out one child, Emily. As Rachel talks about Emily, I imagine her standing in front of the wall that they’re allowed to throw rocks at. Emily stays there long after the others, continuing to throw rocks at this wall to let out her anger. Her anger floods into my heart and I’m washed into the scene where it’s me, a teenager, throwing rocks at the wall over, and over, and over . . . until I cannot bear the anger anymore. I feel my body hot and sweating as Rachel’s voice carries me back into the room where I am sat surrounded by “academics.”

I cannot cry, I cannot cry, I cannot cry!

I keep telling myself this over, and over, and my body starts to panic more and more with sweats and fidgets. My clothes feel like they are suffocating me, strangling me. The build-up is too much. Tears burst and fall down my face uncontrollably. Rachel looks at me, and asks, “Are you ok?”

I nod but bury my head in my hands with disappointment in myself for allowing the emotion to show in front of everyone.

I was not ready for this.

Jane gets up and leads me out. As I pass Mike, I turn and shamefully blurt out, “I’m *so sorry*.” I see Monica looking at me sympathetically through my degrading tears. She grasps my hand.

“It’s *OK*,” she kindly whispers.

“Yeah, you know, I also thought it was a sad story,” Jane says outside standing distantly. But she is unaware of the resonating extent of my sadness. The crying has risen from some untouched, protected loss deep inside. Rachel comes out and gently takes my hand.

“Come on. Come back in because I’d really like you to hear the rest of the story,” she suggests.

I nervously follow Rachel, shaking with exposed vulnerability inside. Everyone else looks so composed and so I focus on controlling the extent of my internal pain, which I do not want to reveal through my body. As I work on

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suppressing more tears, I feel my chest choking, flinching and recoiling from the pain of the memories from “That year.”

That Year

“I’ll Miss You”

I’m pretending to be asleep on our dark green velvety worn sofa in our lounge, known to us as “the garden room.” It’s that “bedtime” again. Mummy comes in and tries to wake me.

“Common Helen! Bedtime!” she says loudly.

“She’s pretending!” dobs my big sis.

“Helen, Helen,” she repeats, “Oh you’re not really asleep!” she playfully exclaims. I lay as motionless as possible, still faking. I hear Mummy go back out and a few moments later Daddy comes in.

“Yes she’s asleep!” says Mummy.

“Okay, I can carry her to bed,” Daddy suggests, playing along.

It’s such a rarity that Daddy gets involved, but only because he is so busy working in the hotel all the time. Recently, I’ve noticed how much Mummy’s been worrying about Daddy: his weight and his red eyes. She’s been getting them both to try and be healthier by eating salads. When Mummy was getting me to bed the other week, I was sitting on the toilet when Daddy comes into the bathroom. Mummy turns and says, “Well?”

Daddy replies, “Everything’s fine!”

He smiles and they embrace with relief. Mummy cries a little.

“Oh that’s such a relief!” she sobs. “And . . . they checked your eyes? Because they’re just so red!”

“Yes, yes, don’t worry,” he calmly reassures her.

But, today, he comes to assist Mummy with the “bedtime” routine. He scoops up my skinny 11-year-old body and carries me out. His familiar smell of grease, gravy, and graft are closely wrapped around me. We make our way down the chilly tiled corridor towards “our flat.” “Our flat” is where six of us, my older brother and two sisters, all squeeze in together. It is the back region of the hotel my Mummy and Daddy run, so it’s full of busy bustle during the day and spooky squeaks and creepy creaks during the night. As we bump along the corridor, I hear Mummy and Daddy still joking and teasing me about whether I’m asleep or not. I’m determined to hold out and make it to the bed, but eventually I start to giggle.

“Ha ha! She’s *not* asleep!” they exclaim as Daddy puts me down. Giggling away, the cold tiles compel my feet to quickly race to the door of “our flat” where there’s warm carpet. But then Daddy says, “Aw, aren’t you going to say goodnight? I won’t see you again for aaaaaages!”

I remember that I have my summer horse-riding camp to go to tomorrow and stop, pause, smile, and exclaim, “Oh yeah!”

I race back toward him, giving him the biggest hugging squeeze my tiny body can master. My small arms barely fit round him, but he greets my grabber-squeezer hug with his big, safe, kind arms and holds me warmly for a few moments.

“I’ll miss you!” he quietly whispers.

Why Is Mummy Here?

One morning at the horse camp I’m suddenly woken by one of the instructors. “Your Mummy’s here,” she whispers as I hazily stir from my night’s sleep. She starts helping me get dressed with a heavy serious look on her face.

“Oh! Why is my Mummy here?” I ask her joyfully, but she does not answer. I start thinking about what it could be and I suddenly realize!

“Oh I know what it is!” I declare smugly as she continues to get my shoes and socks on. “It must be the dentist!” *Yes, that must be it!* I convince myself. I chuckle knowingly to myself as she solemnly leads me to the caravan office and we walk up the steps to where my Mummy is sat with sobbing red eyes.

I wait, standing.

She looks up at me and cries, “Daddy’s died.”

Back to Camp

“I think it’s better if Helen goes back to horse camp,” I hear someone say from the crowded circle, surrounding Mummy stooped in sorrow.

“Is that what you want to do Helen? Do you want to go back to horse camp?” Mummy sobs. I numbly nod miserably. Perhaps going back to horse camp will cheer me up. So the next day, my eldest sister drives me back to horse camp. As we pull up to the driveway, she asks me, “Are you *sure* you want to go back?” and I nod eagerly.

On my first lesson back, I’m on one of the slow horses and it’s my turn to canter to the back of the line. The teacher says, “Ok, Helen. Your go next,” so I start to prepare. As I do so, she announces to the rest of the class, “Helen’s just lost her Dad, so let’s spare a thought for her.”

I’m shocked! As I hear this, tears well up and I kick my legs hard into the ribs of the horse, trotting to the back of the line, *wishing* she had never said that. Visions of my Daddy, struggling and fighting for breath as he choked at dinner, race through my head. I picture him grabbing his chest and then falling from the table as my Mummy desperately tries to resuscitate him. I imagine what it must have been like for my big sis who stood by watching as Mummy forgot to hold his nose when giving him the kiss of life. I anger at the *slowness* of the ambulance, which took too long to turn up and then finally arrived with the *wrong* equipment.

I keep kicking the horse as *hard* as I can. I get angry with Daddy for leaving us all without life insurance at 45, which

is why Mummy's at home at her "wit's end," not knowing whether to sell the hotel that's been rotting into the ground.

It's not fair! It's not fair!

But . . . I cannot stop thinking about when he died and . . . I wasn't there. Maybe it didn't happen. He'd *never* leave us. Maybe he's still alive somewhere. I keep kicking and kicking and kicking all the way round wishing I could go faster and faster and faster and faster.

Everyone Wears Black

"I'm not going to wear black!" Mummy declares all morning, "Everyone wears black!" I think about what I should wear. I don't know what I end up putting on, but at least I'm ready. I fall in with the rest of the crowd waiting for "the car." Mummy didn't want a Hearse. "The car" is *just* for "the family"—the five of us—Mummy, my eldest sister, my big brother, my big sis, and me. We dash across to the car park as "the car" arrives, and we all bundle into the back seats. Something is said in all the hurried commotion, which makes us all laugh and giggle. But Mummy warns us that "we shouldn't laugh." Immediately, our "good feelings" feel bad, and we all guiltily hush down.

"Well, maybe Daddy doesn't want us to be sad. He'd want us to laugh." I quietly suggest.

"Hmmm, yes," we all nod thoughtfully.

"Yes Helen, you know? You're quite right," Mummy tells me. I look up and see her looking down at me as she puts her hand on my knee and gives me a smile.

We pull away from the car park. It's a sunny day, and as soon as we arrive at the church, we all scurry down the path to prepare to walk through the mass of people waiting for "the mourning family." We're organized into a line before starting "the mourning walk."

We wait.

I look through the church porch and see a big hole of darkness. I don't know what awaits us. I shake with nervousness and keep looking at my family for reassurances, but everything is a blur. As I hear the organ playing, we're told to go in. Walking from the sunny fresh outdoors, I then feel the coldness of the church drifting through my flesh and bones. I fold my hands together in front of me letting my head hang to the floor. Sobbing and wobbling, I sneak a look up at the masses of people looking down at us *sadly*. I see a thousand words of upsetting sympathy written in their glistening eyes. I feel thrown into a pitiful flood, and pain hits me overwhelmingly with pathetic tears gushing uncontrollably as my head returns to the floor, avoiding the extra distress from others. We continue trooping on through the gazing mass of watchful, woeful eyes, before finally arriving at the front and sitting in our specially reserved pews. Wails of cries surround us as we try and sing along to the first hymn, beginning the long sad service of "goodbye."

At the end of the service, the pallbearers carry out the large long mahogany wooden box on their shoulders. We dutifully follow, heads down, quietly sobbing in a line. As we reach the outdoors, we stop outside the church and watch as they carry him off for the cremation. I tug on Mummy's jacket saying, "Mummy, Mummy, I want to see him."

She turns sharply, "Don't be silly!" she retorts, "Of course you don't."

But I do. I *do* want to see him. I want to check that he's in that box.

Getting a Dog

I'm leading the black mongrel happily around the kennels on a cold autumn day. Mummy's decided that we can finally get a dog. We were burgled *again* a month ago so she wants an Alsatian to deter burglars, although she thinks it was an inside job. Mummy chats with the warden.

"He's called Scooby. We think he's a mix between a whippet and a Labrador," I hear the warden say. "He's only a few months old. He was born in August sometime, but we don't know the date." I suddenly get a warm sense. Daddy died in August. I wonder whether Scooby's been sent to look over us. I run over to Mummy with him and he trots alongside me.

"Can we get this one . . . pleeeeeease?"

"Hmmm, I did want to get an Alsatian," Mummy considers. "He looks like he'll lick burglars to death!"

"Aw, Mummy pleeeeeease?" I beg as I bend down and give him a cuddle and scruff his head. "We've gotta have him. Look, he's so sweet! I know he's the one!"

Mummy looks down at us thinking. She talks it over with the warden and chats with my brother-in-law about it. They walk around for a bit and Mummy comes back a while later.

"OK, yes, we'll get him," she declares. "It'll be good for you."

"Yesssss!" I yell. "Thanks Mummy!" I give Scooby a squeeze, feeling his soft black fur on my face.

We get Scooby home, and he quickly settles, like part of the family. He stretches out on the floor next to us as we eat our dinner at the dining table and he slowly closes his eyes.

"Aw look at him!" my big sis says.

"He's making himself at home isn't he?" my brother comments. "What does he think this is—a hotel?!" We all laugh.

"He saw the sign on the way in!" Mummy jokes.

But I know why he's settled so quickly.

Bonfire Night

"Yeah, her Dad died, in August," I overhear Lou whisper to her friend as I trundle quietly behind them awkwardly, watching them spy back at me. I wave the sparkler around

and catch up with Lou. I haven't seen her for 4 years since we parted schools at the age of 8. But our parents have always been good friends. This year we've both started new and different schools. I haven't told anyone at my new school that my Daddy's just died. It's hard to keep it together when friends talk about their own Dads; that's when I *really* miss him. But I don't really want people to feel sad or sorry for me. Instead, I slouch at the back of the class making "cheeky" jokes; being funny is really helping me fit in!

We go and stand on the edge of the feeble fence by the huge impressive bonfire. I feel the incredible heat from the fire as it burns our faces. We watch waiting for the stuffed Guy Fawkes on the top to be engulfed by the flames.

"Has your Mum found you a new ballet class yet?" Lou inquires.

"No, not yet," I gloomily respond. Our sparklers quickly fizzle out, and we hurl them onto the fire. Then we start throwing sticks that we find on the floor around us. "Have you seen the Karate Kid?" I ask her.

"Yeah I have! I've always wanted to do martial arts!" she replies.

"Yeah me too!" I agree.

"We should look for a class!" she suggests.

"Yeah," I add.

Finally, we cheer as the Guy catches alight and is soon to be burnt along with the rest of the fire.

"Let's go and get another sparkler!" Lou cheerfully suggests. So we both turn and go off to find her Dad.

As we're running through the dark muddy field I catch the sight of the back of a man with a flat cap on his head, the same tweed flat cap as my Daddy's. Excitement rushes through me! *I knew he was still alive! I knew it!* I change direction, sprinting over to the man and tap him on the back. He turns around, then looks down and finally finds me. A strange face smiles kindly.

"Oh hello! Are you lost?" he enquires.

It's not Daddy.

"Er . . . oh, sorry," I shamefully mumble.

Completely confused, I look around totally embarrassed. Feelings of the energetic excitement quickly turn to shame that trickles into my stomach—guttled. Heartbroken . . . again. I feel lost. I am lost. I shoot off, looking for my friends.

20 Years Later . . .

Spreading the world with what you left me,
In a squeezed time-frame,
All the proverbs on your office cupboard door,
Kept treasured; enveloped in my memory,
Opening when opportunities face me.
Eyes smiling; you live through us,
Paying lip service; my spiritual reliance,

Working all the hours; sacrificial consequence,
Family business importance,
Windsurfing was your escape; always trying to balance,
"Sitting on the dock of the bay"

Taking opportune moments.

Not a man of many words,

That's what people say,

and what I remember,

Only if things were absurd!

Recession attacked your heart!

For educational significance.

"Oooo, that's why I'm easy,

I'm easy like Sunday morning"

It's not always easy. . .

because you're *not* here and you still *died* Daddy.

Faultless; in my heart

Gazing at the stars,

still feeling your presence anyway

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1. On August 6, 1991, my father, Tom William Owton, died from a heart attack at the age of 45 years.

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Bio

Helen Owton is a third-year qualitative PhD student at the University of Exeter, studying (sports) people's embodied experiences of chronic illnesses. She earned a master's in psychology of sport and exercise from the University of Chichester. Her research interests are multidisciplinary, drawing from sociological, psychological, and counseling concepts.