

Writing Through Grief

Ash Rehn



When my father died, I suppressed my grief with busyness. There was a lot to organise, I told myself. I couldn't write. It made no difference that his death was timely, expected even. The effect of grief is not always predictable. The funeral, the wake, going through the disarray of his things and being there for my mother: they all took up time.

There was a part of me, however, that knew I had to write. I should, and I had to, *write through this* for it to be any different. So there were also days when I simply forced myself to write at least 2000 words. Ironically, I required an excuse for that too. I needed a break from my mother.

I wrote about seeing him in hospital both alive and dead. I wrote what I knew about him and I wrote about the relationship between us. Coffee made, laptop open. As lines of text went down on the screen I descended canyons of grief. Some, I realised, had been waiting there for me for years. Chains of words, like trusty ropes, permitted me to slip down into the wide ravines and gape in awe at the awfulness of it all. Others were tight, surely unfathomable, dangerous even. This is why we have therapists. Someone to hold our hand as we descend into those fearful places we dare not go alone.

In the year preceding my father's passing, I'd been reading Karl Ove Knausgård's *A Death in the Family*. Knausgård's life, but not his life. A genre I call ficto-memoir that I find appealing and irresistible. It was also a kind of grisly preparation. Dad's long hospitalisations had taken on a clockwork frequency. I knew time was running out. I immersed myself in reading stories of death as both distraction and conditioning.

Writing, Knausgård tells us, is *drawing the essence of what we know out of the shadows*. My father writes in tiny diaries. Never more than a few words a day, or a quotation.

*Happiness does not consist
in pastimes and amusements
but virtuous activities. (ARISTOTLE)*

*Believe not what you hear
and only half of what you see.*

Danced until 2am!

I, on the other hand, fill journal after journal. Most of it self-indulgent stuff, dreams, complaints about people and events. Pages and pages. We are different, my father and I. But in the discipline of turning-up, the documentation of the inane and the archiving of life in chaotic fashion, we are madly alike.

Writing through grief upturns time. Or perhaps it is more authentic to say my awareness of time is suspended. And to regain control it is I who must suspend time. When I have to be somewhere else, I set an alarm. And I hold myself to rules like:

- *No Clock Watching*
- *No Internet*
- *No Social Media*
- *Switch Phone to Do Not Disturb.*

I put a sign on my door: *Stör mig inte! Jag skriver!* ☺ (my partner is Swedish). And coffee, always coffee. So it begins.

In *The Spare Room* Helen Garner describes anger, not sorrow, as *the most exhausting of emotions*. My anger took the form of headaches, back pain and a paucity of patience. Grievings and grievances returned to me. Small infractions seemed unforgiveable, past losses innumerable.

I am exposed to grief every day. People bring their grief to me because I am supposed to know what to do with it. Aside from time, it is how we relate to grief that makes the difference. As Knausgård puts it, *understanding the world requires you to take a certain distance from it*. Writing gives distance.

The practice of writing is like observing a corpse. It can be beautiful. When I watched the muscles in my dead father's face twitching and releasing, the tautness of skin giving way, letting go, I was relieved. I wanted to believe he was relieved. But there's horror too. This is the unknown. In spite of stories of white light all we really have are gods and faiths. The horror is simultaneously a possibility of nothingness and the likelihood we will be at a loss or overwhelmed at inopportune moments, like when the plane ascends from the tarmac at Brisbane airport and tears start streaming down your face.

In those gaping canyons, the words fall together. Explanations, examinations. Time spins away. Soon hours have passed. When the words don't come, you can walk. Take notes on your phone. Jot in a little red journal your boyfriend found on sale and gave to you. Because suddenly everything will be thrown around. Family relationships will be disrupted. Friends may not know what to say. You will have to draw some boundaries, throw some things back to them, make your own space.

At my worst I am middle-aged, disaffected and grieving. My memories are without meaning. I am Edward in Hollinghurst's *The Folding Star*. Or worse, Lark in Holleran's *The Beauty of Men*. There is no turning back.

And then I remember the difference: I can write about it.

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