

Storying Grief: A Familial Performance of Death and Dying

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August 2019. I'm seated at my aunt's giant kitchen table with my whole matrilineal extended family. It's the first time we have all been together in almost ten years. The glint of the moon off Sherbrooke Lake makes streaks of white light across the giant glass windows. Empty pie plates and wine bottles litter the counter.

It's late. Everyone is leaned in around the faces of my mother, her only surviving sister Margie, and Margie's grown daughter, Christa, as the three of them exchange intense, anguished looks.

My cousin's shaking flushed cheeks betray her typical docility. Her eyes are wet. "I was there," Christa says, softly but firmly. "I won't ever forget that. I was there."

I watch my mother watching Christa and I hold my breath as my mother drops her head, exhales a muted sob, and says nothing.

This essay was meant to be about storying grief. I was writing about each of the six times death has touched my family. I was tracing the way those death stories circulated, morphed, and became haunted and holy in the fabric of my family history. I was thinking about familial narrative performances of death and dying as transgressive acts that could subvert broader thanatophobic cultural values by

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eschewing the limited archive of stagnant death rituals in favor of richly detailed¹ heteroglossic family storytelling². I wanted to show that repertoires³ of embodied memory serve as palimpsests for the complex realities of death and dying, and how family narratives accrue to both make and unmake relationships not only among loved ones, but also between the individual and her cultural landscape.

This was the goal in an academic sense. Really, the goal was to write myself away from my mother's illness. I hoped more than anything that I might learn something about the uses of performative grief that could un-make my mother's mortality. But along the way, the premise collapsed. One of the stories burst open at the seams.

Now, this is an essay about picking up the pieces.

February 2016. A journal entry:

My mother is dying.

I suppose she always has been. I suppose I have too, and all of us. But when I say my mother is dying, I mean that her death has been predicted and demarcated. It's the symptoms measured, body tested, doctor confirmed kind of dying. The kind you can spot from across the room.

There are moments when my mother's dying seems not to exist. When I can recede into the banal comforts of the everyday. When I can read, and teach, and cook, and even laugh unhaunted by any specter. But the

¹ My notion of "detail" is borrowed from Alexandra Vazquez's wonderful work on Cuban music: "Details attend to us even as we attend to them. The comfort that details provide is, to some degree, due to their ability to embody familial and familiar substances, whether constructed from memory or made anew. There is often an instant recognition that calls your attention to [detail]...For similar reasons, details also carry what can feel like unbearable reminders of past violences. They keep alive history's painful parts. To detail is also a verb, as in to lend 'attention to particulars. Some of those particulars need to be laid to rest, others need to be resurrected. Some need to be resurrected so that they can be laid to rest" (29).

² I borrow here from Richard Bauman's conception of intertextuality in *A World of Other's Words* as "the relational orientation of a text to other texts" (4). I'm interested in how stories about lost loved ones creatively re-perform well-known series of events by drawing on, combining, and rearranging other versions.

³ The distinction I draw here between the archive and the repertoire is one first theorized by Diana Taylor, whose *The Archive and the Repertoire* explains the repertoire as "performances, gestures, orality, movement, dance, singing—in short, all those acts usually thought of as ephemeral, nonreproductive knowledge" which requires transmission through presence, and provides a unique sense of individual agency that traditional "archives" cannot (20).

nature of dying is rupture. The potential of any moment depends on the direction it might go. And there are moments when my mother's dying just arrives. Seemingly from nowhere. And suddenly I cannot move. In times of extreme stress, our instinct is to be completely still. As if even breathing would reify that which threatens with its very possibility. It's like when you were little, playing hide and seek with your mother, and you were certain if you closed your eyes, she couldn't see you. What is growing up, but the trading of one fantasy for another?

My mother is dying. I keep my eyes shut. I don't breathe. I un-perform this reality with all my might.

One story here might be that my mother was once dying quickly and now she is dying slowly. That is a happy story, I suppose. But stories, like people, are rarely one thing.

I have a friend whose mother died of the thing that hasn't yet killed my mother. Every time I see her, she asks me how my mother is. I don't know if this is empathy or politeness or jealousy. Every time she asks, I answer that my mother is not well, but okay, as in *—not yet dead*. And I don't know if this is empathy or politeness or arrogance. But I feel guilt. And I feel fear.

Now, the summer is ending. It has been 208 days since I last saw my mother. This is the longest we have been apart for the entirety of my 32 years. She is 2,170.7 miles away from the bed I now sit in, writing, knowing I should really move to the desk I bought myself months ago, ignoring the keen aching in my hips and knees, remembering the twisted shape of my mother's body in a different bed—all the knolls of pillows I built beneath the blankets to cradle her weight when her joints could not, when parts of her insides were still leaking out through plastic tubes into plastic bags I emptied down the sink.

There is the pandemic. There is my mother's compromised immune system, ravaged by the same chemicals keeping her alive. I cannot go to her, cannot sit on her couch and let her cook spaghetti for me or help her organize the pantry or ask her about the new potted plants or listen to her sing softly by the fire and join in when I know the words—daughter things.

I want to go home. I want to take my mother's hands and see the shapes her face makes as she speaks. Instead, I find myself on the phone with her asking questions I don't really want to be asking but can't not ask. I don't like this task. I don't like listening to her slow breath, to the catching in her throat, to her failures at remembering. But I want to understand; I *have* to understand.

In 1998, my mother's beloved oldest sister Linda died from lung cancer. I was in 5th grade. I did not feel close to my Auntie Linda. I did not know her well. What I remembered of her was the long-sleeved red dress she wore to Christmas when I was 5. Too much lipstick. The smell of smoke. How much she looked like

my mother. After she died, I wrote a poem about her for my Drug Abuse Resistance Education (D.A.R.E.) class. It was about the dangers of smoking. My poem won an award and I had to read it out loud at an all-school evening assembly in front of a crowd of teary-eyed parents. This is what I remember most about my Auntie Linda's death: strangers crying in a gymnasium while I rhymed "cancer" with "answer" next to a giant projected photo of my aunt in a red dress, looking so very alive and so very like my mother.

Years later, when my Auntie Sherry became ill with cancer, my mother told me the story of my Auntie Linda's death in detail. I listened and asked no questions. Sometime after that, I wrote down a long, sloppy version of what my mother told me. I went back to it again and again, trimming details, looking through old photo albums to fill in the gaps, chronologizing, imposing order. Eventually, a story assembled itself:

Auntie Linda was born in 1949. Everybody called her "Lin." By the time my mother was born in 1960, my Nanny⁴ was tired of raising children. Eleven years is a big separation. It is enough to turn the word Sister into Mother. My Auntie Linda bathed my mother on Sunday nights. She let her play in the water until her fingers pruned. She sang her songs and brushed her hair and picked out her clothes for school. She performed maternal—a thing my Nanny had lost the patience for.

My Auntie Linda met a boy from a rich family. Ran away to Australia. Married him under his parents' critical eyes. Sometimes love can't outlast disapproval. The boy left. My Auntie Linda came home with her head down.

"What kind of a woman can't even keep a husband?" is a sentence no mother should say to her daughter.

My Auntie Linda got a job working in HR for the government. Long hours. Long days. She smoked them away. She met Wally when she was 24. Remembered to smile. Tried again. Wally was a kind man. Adored drinking. Adored my aunt. They married. Bought the house next door to my Nanny and granddaddy. Sometimes proximity is a gesture of grasping.

January marks the passage of time better than the other months. On the day it became 1998, my Auntie Linda called my mother. Her arm was tingling. It wouldn't stop. Go to the doctor, my mother said.

⁴ "Nanny" is what we called my mother's mother.

A pinched nerve is a mild injury. The treatment is patience. Time heals, they say. With mutated cells, time is the enemy. Some bodies try to kill themselves.

On January 13th, the tingling was not gone. Go to the doctor, my mother said. My Auntie Linda got an MRI. Then an x-ray. Then a Cat scan.

The prognosis for Stage IV lung cancer is 3-6 months. My mother took out a loan. Flew from Chicago to Halifax every weekend.

Aggressive chemotherapy affects the frontal lobe. Optimism is no match for misfired neurons. My Auntie Linda stopped smiling. Started asking my mother the same question over and over. "When is young Ron coming?" Soon, my mother said. Lying is okay when the purpose is to placate the dying.

When my Uncle Ron was a young man, he left *Family* for *Music*. He wore bell-bottoms and bandanas. He played guitar on the side of the road. He grew his hair long and put needles in his veins. My Auntie Linda went to all of his shows. Cut out newspaper clippings of his band. Made scrapbooks. This is called adoration. My Uncle Ron settled in British Columbia with his wife. Had three kids. Heard about my aunt from my mother. Come now, my mother said. But there was no money.

February and March were cold that year. Spring in Nova Scotia comes slowly. To be dying in gloomy weather is perhaps a kind of comfort. At the end of March, my mother knew. Took out another loan. Flew her brother across the country. She tried to warn him. About bald heads and misfired neurons. But the dying body of a sister is not a thing you can prepare for. My uncle walked into a room filled with IV bags. The blood left his face. He couldn't remember how to smile. For years after that.

My mother organized a final outing with the whole family. All five of her siblings plus my Nanny and granddaddy. They dressed Linda up and took her to the Timberlea Tavern for steak. The eight of them together for the first time in years. My Auntie Linda sat at the head of the table. Had two bites of steak. My Uncle Ron held her hand through the entire meal. Ate his dinner left-handed.

Someone took a photo. Seven smiling faces and my Auntie Linda in a pink oversized button up with no hair and a cigarette between her fingers, her lips flat and tight, her eyes not quite on the camera.

When my Uncle Ron went back home, my aunt entered the descent. My mother says she thinks Linda was waiting for him. To have an older brother is a thing I'll never know.

My Auntie Linda never left her home again. She wanted to die in her bed, inside familiar walls, next door to her mother. A hospice nurse came to the house to administer pain medication.

My mother flew out again on April 5th. A Saturday. She sat alone with my aunt all afternoon. She stroked her forearm. She listened to her breathing. She watched her face contort.

When the hospice nurse arrived at 4:00PM, my mother sent her home. Said she would take care of her sister that night. She told my Uncle Wally and my cousins that it was close. Told them they should say good-bye. Waited until they were done and the room was empty.

Everything that is my mother is in her hands. This is what it means to be a surgeon.

My mother filled three syringes. Laid them on the bedside table. Kissed her sister's forehead.

Liquids deposited into veins enter the bloodstream immediately. My mother used her fingers to empty the syringes one at a time into her sister's arm. My Auntie Linda's muscles relaxed. Her breathing slowed and slowed. The room fell quiet.

My mother has very steady hands. They never waver.

On April 5th, 1998, my mother killed her sister.

A life starts and stops but a story is not so easily bounded. Stories are slippery. They surge and recede, echo and stumble; they skulk; they metamorphose. Rereading this story now, I can see how something is wrong. It is trying too hard. I wanted it to perform the prison of maternal expectation, to showcase the slip-page between sisterhood and motherhood, to tenderly expose the kind of care that can constitute killing as an act of love. It's not really doing any of those things well.

Have you ever been disavowed of something so immense it undoes you? It's not like waking from a dream. It's more like being told you were never asleep and there are no such things as dreams. My mother killed her sister. I can't imagine

such a monumental act. What does it require to take the life of someone you love? What does it feel like to keep it a secret for years? To carry such a heavy untold truth; to bear it with shame and pride and love and grief, alone? I think of my mother as forever in grief; grieving from the moment she emptied that final syringe. Except, it turns out, she didn't. This story is a lie.

August 2019. I'm seated at my aunt's giant kitchen table. Moments ago, my mother placed her hand on her sister's and smiled, teary-eyed. "Just us two now," she said. "I bet Lin and Sherry are looking down laughing." My Auntie Margie smiled, then sighed. "So terrible in the end," she said, "especially for Lin."

I can't help myself. I know the story my mother has told me. I know about the three syringes. Did my mother tell my Auntie Margie, too?

"What happened?" I ask.

I am surprised when it is Christa who answers. "It was awful," she says. "Mum and I were in the hospital and we called Wally but he didn't get there in time. We were just waiting and..." her voice trails off and she swallows hard.

"In the hospital?" I ask. "I thought Auntie Linda died at home." I look at my mother who is looking at Christa.

"That's not what I remember," my mother says.

Christa's shaking flushed cheeks betray her typical docility. Her eyes are wet. "I was there," she says, softly but firmly. "I won't ever forget that. I was there."

I watch my mother watching Christa and I hold my breath as my mother drops her head, exhales a muted sob, and says nothing.

Now, the summer is ending. It has been 350 days since that night at my aunt's house and 208 days since I last saw my mother. She is 2,170.7 miles away from the bed I now sit in, with the phone pressed to my ear, asking her questions I don't really want to be asking but can't not ask. I want to understand; I *have* to understand.

"Mom, I thought you told me that Auntie Linda died at home, that it was you who... helped her die."

She is quiet. I don't like listening to her slow breath, to the catching in her throat. "When did I tell you that?" she finally asks.

And now I can't remember.

"After Auntie Sherry got sick," I say, less and less certain.

My mother is quiet again. "I don't know," she says. "I remember I flew Ron from British Columbia. I remember we all had dinner at the Timberlea Tavern. I remember my dad wouldn't go to the funeral. I remember I gave the eulogy."

My mind is racing. *Mom, you told me you were there! You told me about the syringes! You told me you made a choice!* I want to shout all these things into the phone, but somehow, I can't seem to say much of anything.

My mother makes up an excuse to get off the phone; she needs to make dinner.

Later, she texts me images from our 1998 photo album. Her entire family at the Timberlea Tavern. My Auntie Linda on the couch at my Nanny's house in a bright pink sweat-suit, her bald head shiny. Her face so like my mother's. An image of the printed eulogy my mother gave; corrections made in my mother's familiar scrawl; her now 59-year old-hand gripping the edges of the paper:

"I remember Linda tucking me in at night. Sitting on her lap while she sang to me when I was sad. How she taught me at Sunday school. How she taught me to square dance at St. Margaret's school when I was barely old enough to walk. I remember our trips to Queensland beach and how she would wipe the sand from my feet before I got into the car. We would stop for ice cream at the Dairy Treat, a double dipped large chocolate cone, dripping down my chin in the heat and wind in the back seat of the car. Such good memories. She was always so good with kids.

In my teens, I would raid her closet for clothes and shoes to go to work. I remember sleeping on the couch in her Fairview apartment, that is if I hadn't lost the keys to the door to get in. I remember how she called me Annette Marie. I remember all the phone calls to Calgary, to Montreal, to Tucson, to Chicago. She always called. How I wish I had called more.

I was always proud to be the sister who looked most like you, Linda. Who would not be proud to be compared to you in any way? You were kind and unselfish, full of energy and life and oh, how I will miss you."

Where does a story begin or end? "The fiction is that they do," writes Rebecca Solnit, "rather than that the stuff of a story is just a cup of water scooped from the sea and poured back into it" (27). I'm not sure where to scoop, or what I'll find if I do. I can't bring myself to call my mother again. I can't find the right words or maybe I can't find the courage to say them to her out loud: How did it come to be that my mother wrongly believed she ended her own sister's life?

I'm thinking again about grief and storytelling. Judith Butler writes that "grief contains within it the possibility of apprehending the fundamental sociality of embodied life, the ways in which we are from the start, and by virtue of being a bodily being, already given over, beyond ourselves, implicated in lives that are not our own" (*Precarious Life* 28). Solnit writes, "To love someone is to put yourself in their place... to put yourself in their story, or figure out how to tell yourself their story" (1). Empathy and grief: both acts of imagination; both ways to get from here to there; from the singularity of one's own lonely experience to the tricky, convoluted webbing that keeps us, always, entangled.

I'm thinking of the small A-frame house my granddaddy built at the edge of St. Margaret's Bay and of my mother's child body in a bed, curled tightly next to my Auntie Linda, falling asleep to the music of water reaching for sand while my Auntie Linda's fingers thread her loose brown hair. Is this memory? How do we know if what we conjure is real?

What is memory if not a kind of phantasmagoria—constantly invented, amended, aggregated, recanted, imagined and reimagined. Michel de Certeau describes memory as an "anti-museum," as "that which can be dreamed about a place" (108). Dreaming implies invention; invention requires creativity; and creativity is never stable, and often collaborative. It is certainly the case that memory matters to a person's identity. To borrow Didion's famous phrase, we tell ourselves stories in order to live, yes, but also in order to live with ourselves, to construct a survivable version of the self. But these stories don't live in a vacuum. Personal stories can point to a "bodily referent," but at the same time, they "do not capture the body to which they refer" (Butler *Giving an Account* 38). This is because the story of the self is always already imbricated with the stories of others and "disoriented by what is not mine, or not mine alone" (37). Thus, memory is distributed, dispersed, constituted anew through every moment of recall, through every telling, through all the other bodies and stories it touches.

It's 1998. My mother's beloved oldest sister Linda has just died from lung cancer. I am in 5th grade. I have to write a poem for my Drug Abuse Resistance Education (D.A.R.E.) class. I'm plopped next to my mother in front of our giant beige Macintosh computer. We are making lists of rhyming words. When I come up with a line, she encourages me to try again, and again. I can tell she wants something from me and I'm not sure how to give it. It's after 11pm and I've never been up this late on a school night before. With five siblings and my mother's work schedule, I rarely get to spend time with her alone. She smells so good to me, her perfume mixing with the sterile stench of the hospital. I want to come up with the right lines. I want her to think I am smart. She asks me to read the stanza we have just written together, and I do. I read it slowly and clearly. I try to be as solemn as possible.

“We learned all the bad things about nicotine,
 Smelly hands, bad breath, and teeth that aren’t clean.
 Nicotine is addictive, and bad for you too,
 Smoking tobacco can really kill you.
 My Aunt Linda died from using this drug,
 I miss her a lot, all her kisses and hugs.
 My aunt started smoking when she was 16,
 The outcome was death from that nicotine.
 Her funeral was sad, no one can debate,
 And what’s even worse, she was just 48.
 What I know for sure is that drugs aren’t the answer,
 I want to grow old, not perish from cancer.”

I look up at her when I’m finished. Her eyes are on the keyboard but she’s staring right through it. She reaches for my hand and squeezes it twice. “Beautiful, honey,” she says. I smile. If it wasn’t 1998, I might see how my mother isn’t *only* helping me with my assignment; I might recognize something in the way she keeps asking me to find new language as a ritual of grasping for her sister. But it’s 1998, and I just want my mother close enough to smell her for as long as she will stay.

I don’t remember ever seeing my mother cry as a child though I *felt* often that she was sad. There were gestures, postures, timbres of voice I learned to attune to, that told their own stories about who she was. All the ways my mother held her hands, stalled her breath, took up space with her silence—these were and are part of the repertoire of her grief, part of her daughter-story, her sister-story, her mother-story, and so part of my story as well. Michael Fischer writes that memory is “fragmented and collaged together like mosaics in conscious and unconscious maneuverings” (80). A mosaic makes meaning through the interaction of its constitutive parts. Some of these parts are stories; some are the shaky somatic repertoires of affect.

How did it come to be that my mother wrongly believed she ended her own sister’s life? I’m thinking of a prose poem by Rachel Levitsky:

... memory seemed to us a thread delicate and developing, which could
 become a durable and sturdy rope for we who were looking for a thing
 for why would we recall just a shadow of a thing if it weren’t at least a
 little bit true? (9)

In 1998, my father’s alcoholism was worsening. Bad things were happening to my mother—things about which I had subconscious somatic knowledge, but not yet intellectual comprehension. To end the suffering of a beloved sister is brave, risky, heart-breaking. Perhaps my mother needed to write herself into

heroism and so she did. “Memory is a shifting, fading, partial thing,” writes Solnit (12). It is “a net that doesn’t catch all the fish by any means and sometimes catches butterflies that don’t exist” (12). Part of me wishes my mother could have kept that butterfly. It gave her something she needed; and now that thing has been taken from her.

March 2018. A journal entry:

Dear Mother,

I’m tired of you. I’m tired of your illness. I’m tired of grieving you while you’re right next to me. I’m tired of the shrinking timeline. Your body as operatic expiry, this visceral telescopic witnessing of blood and breath, this fear of silence. Your dismembered bodily processes leave a stark want of metaphor in their wake. The only descriptor available is descent.

Dear Mother,

Every time I go home, I notice the space around you growing—the very architecture of your body becoming more and more diaphanous. Your face less fleshy pink. Sometimes I marvel at your ability to stand.

I found you in the basement looking through photo albums as if you could eat them. Or be eaten by them. As if you could transplant your body into the pictures you have always taken and never resided in. I knelt beside you and helped you turn the pages.

Dear Mother, I lied.

That memory is a hole. You were never in the basement looking through photo albums. You rarely leave your room. You have made a hole of your bed while your disease makes holes of your bones. No solid food for weeks.

Holes eat what they are.

Dear Mother,

Remember when we stood knee deep in the ocean and you placed the tips of your fingers in the cresting waves and you told me your mother was gone—she’d forgotten your name; forgotten how you came into this world a bloody burst of flesh—writhing and pink.

I wish I’d said something back to you but the salty air was chocking me.

I want to go back and wade over to you, touch your wet fingers, the ones you've lost feeling in now, the ones you use to wave me over when I tuck you into bed now, mother.

I can't say goodnight, mother, I won't. You'll wake, mother, you'll wake.

One truth of my story is this: I feel alone in the terror of my mother's illness. I imagine my mother has felt this, too, so many times in her life and certainly in 1998 under the threat of my father's violence and in the wake of her beloved sister's death. What stories am I writing now to birth my own heroism? What comfort might I find if, instead, I remembered that I am not alone, that my grief is shared, distributed, that my memories and experiences belong to a collective consciousness that can grow, learn, and heal by expanding the repertoire of stories constituting it? We are, all of us, engaged in perpetual acts of personal storying, of animating shared memories, of attuning to the banal and cosmic affects circulating around us. The perpetual aggregation of and movement between these acts makes possible the kind of organic vitalism that keeps memories and bodies alive. "Many people think that grief is privatizing, that it returns us to a solitary situation," writes Butler, "but I think it exposes the constitutive sociality of the self" (*Precarious Life* 22). To grieve is to be in relation.

Perhaps this essay is not quite about storying grief, but rather about the kinds of storying that make grief livable. I was searching for ways out of my own fear, for ways to subvert thanatophobic cultural narratives, for ways to save my mother. And it is she who has shown me a way. My mother made a story she could live with and welcomed me into it. And in so doing, she revealed herself to me. A life starts and stops but a story is not so easily bounded. Stories are slippery. They surge and recede, echo and stumble; they skulk; they metamorphose. Writing this essay has been an exercise in mourning, a ritual to release fear, and an invitation for curiosity in the face of overwhelm. What stories are inherited and taken to be true and why? Where do fact and fiction intersect/overlap/converge? What does it mean to speak from a traumatized body? In my grasping for a singular narrative about my aunt's death, I have discovered that such a quest is folly. Instead, I hope to embrace the messy, co-constituted non-linear poetics already inherent in memory, and to find in them not only renewed intimacy in my family, but also broader networks of connection that can be pathways towards cultural resilience and survival.



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