TWELVE MEDITATIONS ON DEATH, GRIEF AND HOPE

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CHAPTER 1

She died peacefully in bed

Everyone said, 'dying is peaceful; it will happen before you realise it. She won't suffer.' I believed them. I imagined the drowsiness that comes before sleep, the heavy drifting away into nothingness.

Except, it wasn't like that. There was a rattle in the back of the throat; the lungs heaved to suck in oxygen; the body lifted as the chest expanded; the mouth gasped.

Life is vigorous. It doesn't give in easily. It struggles and pants to keep going.

At boarding school, we used to play a game in our dorm. We'd clutch our hands to our chest and wait to be shot, falling dramatically onto the bed, trying to simulate the Hollywood death-fall. The fun was to bounce dramatically and not break the bedsprings. In every case, death came with the imaginary shot, just like that, in a moment.

It reminds me of those old Westerns I watched as a child

with a man laid out on a dirty bed, looking suitably unwashed, a trickle of blood from a wound. He gives his last agonised speech and then nods off. There's a quick neck-drop, and - well - that's it, he's gone.

I might have accepted it once, but I know better now. That's not what I saw when my mother died. Hollywood lied. Where was the mottling skin and the change colour? Where were the gasps of breath and the extending pause between them? No-one counted the seconds, waiting for another breath and then another until no more came and it was over. No-one shuddered at the 'match blown out', without even a wisp of smoke for comfort.

Nothing.

Some people defecate. My mother didn't, but then she hadn't eaten or drunk for five days. There's only so much indignity a person can take.

You can't sanitise death no matter how much you try. No matter how much our culture wills it to be a silent, tidy thing. We fear it, and we'll do everything we can to tame it. But death isn't clean. It is a bodily process, like all the others. It's about sweat and smells and fluid. You can try to sterilise it with comforting words but it is what it is. The most inevitable of events. Natural, as people keep telling me, the great cycle of life. Our days are like grass, and like a flower we flourish for a while and then we are gone – which is all very well except when it comes to someone you love. Then death is an aberration, a disturbance in the order of things - and dying is the shattering process that leads you there. It is the extinguishing of a life, never to be repeated, never to be known again. It feels anything but 'natural'.

The best we can say is that they died with dignity – not peacefully, but graciously. There was nothing peaceful in the terminal agitations that gripped my mother in the last two days of her life and there was nothing peaceful in the body's

desire to oxygenate itself right until the end. Yet still, as one of the community nurses said afterwards: 'I've learnt one thing over the years, that a person dies as they've lived. I wish I had known her.' She arrived in the last moments of my mother's dying and I assumed she was trying to comfort me, setting me off on the sad road of remembrance. But 'dignity' and 'graciousness' are noble words, full of fortitude and they capture my mother's gallantry in the face of surrender. They honour the person who danced and laughed, and will never do so again.

I hate how we've turned death into a secret. How film and television are complicit in the lies that are told about it. Only a few know the truth: the nurses and the doctors and the carers who tend to the sick. Most of us watch it on a screen, happening to people we do not know and care little about. Others arrive after the event, when their grief is hungry for solace. They see a corpse laid out before them, the tense muscles of life fallen flat, the hands crossed over each other. They see stillness and they call it peace.

But I watched my mother die. My sister and I held her in our arms while our father pressed his hand to her chest. We watched her eyes open wide as if in shock, the whites of her eyes turning black; we saw the tear roll down her cheek. She gulped for breath and we counted the beats, kissing her when she heaved in another, relieved for a moment that she was still alive, pointlessly hoping for the next. It was as if she were drowning in a room full of air. We waited and waited. A rasping, painful breath – and then there were no more. The heart gave a few last beats, and then stopped.

The suddenness of it, the shock. Light - and then darkness, with no time stretched out in between. I thought I was going to be sick. I looked around the room. It was empty. 'Where are you? Where are you? I can't find you?'

I think I was shouting.

CHAPTER 2

Lacrima Mortis

That tear – that awful, solitary tear. It spilled out of her eye and rolled down her cheek. We didn't know what to make of it. They said she was unconscious, and yet there it was, a single tear of sadness. Her life was ending and she was losing us. My sorrow was too heavy to weigh, but her's? How could I carry the grief of my dying mother? I was powerless to help. I kissed her cheek and told her I loved her.

But that tear haunted me with a terrible sense of guilt as if I had failed her somehow. She had cried and I had done nothing. At her end, I had floundered like the child I was.

There is no place to go when the dead are dead and you need forgiveness.

Which is why I frantically researched the *lacrima mortis,* the tear of death, in the dark hours of night, scouring the internet in hope of solace.

There was less information than I had hoped. In one discussion, a nurse said she had witnessed it twice in twelve years of work. A 1993 study done at the Te Omanga Hospice in New Zealand recorded the *lacrima mortis* in 14% of patients. The doctor, I.Lichter, had hoped to analyse the chemical compound of the tear to ascertain whether it was emotional or not, but a single tear was insufficient for analysis.[1] Possibly, then, it was a physiological event, like the sudden opening of the eyes: the muscles relax and the tear rolls out.

My relief on reading this was joyous. It was alright, she wasn't sad, she didn't suffer. I had been granted an absolution of sorts.

And then I found another article, which was altogether different. Titled 'The Moment of Death', it featured in the Journal of Pain and Symptom Management (JPSM). A study had been conducted into apparent moments of lucidity just before death. They analysed EEG input from the frontal cortices of thirty palliative care patients who were unconscious, and converted it into an algorithm. The data range was from 100 to 0, with 100 representing full awareness, 50 unconsciousness and 0 brain death. They discovered that 73% had a spike just before death, with some having levels associated with full arousal without seeming to be awake. There was no conclusion as to the cause but a tentative paragraph read, '*it is tempting to suggest that the BIS spike and neurophysiological changes responsible for [lacrima mortis] may represent a qualitative change in consciousness at the moment of death rather than the agonal throes of a dying brain. This same neurophysiological change may account for some of the end-of-life experiences including deathbed visions. This hypothesis is*

1. Science-frontiers. Com, No. 94, Jul-Aug 1994

supported by animal studies that show that neural correlates of heightened conscious processing are generated at near death."[2]

Now I am left wondering. Did she see a light? Did she see her parents? Was she consoled in those last minutes of life? Had she left us already?

The questions burn me up. I can't call her and say, 'tell me what happened!' I can't pop round to sit over a cup of tea and listen to her story. At that moment, even as we held her close, she was in her own subjectivity, experiencing all that excluded us. When we were the closest to her, she was the furthest away.

Death is abandonment for those who are left behind.

And I wished some of my friends understood that, those who never called and those who were too busy to see me.

'Hi, are you around?' I texted. 'I'd love to see you.' Between the lines, I was saying, 'please, help me. I need you to hold me. I need you to listen to me. I'm flooded with pain. I don't know what to do with myself.'

Some said, 'let's catch up in a few weeks' time,' others said, 'You're doing so well,' as if that excused them. The messages which asked, 'how are you?' were the cruelest because there was no reply when my answer was honest. Only a few leant their time and ears to be with me.

You can count your friends on one hand…

Grief is solitary, but we are social creatures and a kind word soothes. A hug heals. We can get back onto our feet when a friend smiles and holds out a hand. 'Being there' is a virtue, but so few practice it. In the end, I lost my courage to call them. 'Bother them?' I told my sister, 'why would I do that? To remind them I live alone and have no one to hold me. To say I'm struggling and I can't stop crying?'

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2. *[The Moment of Death, JPSM, 21 April 2017,* https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpainsymman.2017.03.003]

They wanted me to be strong so they could get on with their lives. I obliged, but I lost my mother twice because they kept away.

My mother used to say, 'expect nothing of anyone and you will never be hurt.' I tried to heed her advice but I wasn't skilled at it. I lost faith in many of them though I doubt they noticed. Carrying on, was my mantra, that and mastering compassion. When all was said and done – when the tears eased, the tiredness lifted a little and the weary depression at the meaningless of it all abated - I wondered how many people I had let down over the years, who I had forgotten to call, whose pain I gave scant attention to, and who I failed to help because of my own selfishness. Grief burns but it also admonishes.

I want to tell them: I'm sorry, truly I am. Mea culpa. I didn't understand, but I should have tried.

CHAPTER 3

'She slipped away.'

I hate this statement. It makes me think of people sneaking out of for a cigarette during a dinner party. It smacks of children's playgrounds and slides by a pool – look! She's slipped away, right under the water.

Worse, it depicts the soul – if there is such a thing – as some sort of substance that slithered out of her body and slunk away, like a snake in the grass. It makes my mother seem wily, even sly: 'can I get away from them without being noticed?'

My mother didn't slip anywhere – she died, in our arms. And wherever she went, if she went anywhere, she didn't cross time or space to get there, she didn't 'move' at all. There was a moment of life and then – there was nothingness.

As for her being 'asleep' – think about! A dead person isn't dosing on the couch, or dreaming of beach holidays.

They are a corpse; they are growing colder and stiffer with every passing second.

My sister and I laid next to her. Four and a half hours with her body - the softness of who she was congealing and solidifying. We dared not place our heads where she once comforted us, holding us tight against her stomach because that was hardening. Instead, I buried my nose in the nape of her neck; it was the one place that was still warm, and I could smell the scent of her hair.

A sleeping body vibrates with life. It is firm with the imperceptible throbbing of blood and energy. A hand against the cheek is warm and purposeful. Life is being shared, love and kindness too. When my sister laid my dead mother's hand against my face, I was chilled by the bent finger that could not right itself.

A sleeping body moves; it turns and sighs. A corpse is rigid. When they lifted her off the bed to take her away, she was as stiff as a statue. Once she had danced with life, whirling me around the kitchen; now death had turned her into a mannequin. It had snuffed out her essence.

It's like the mournful face who says, 'I'm sorry you've lost your mother.'

I say 'thank you' or 'how kind of you', but what I want to say is this: 'She isn't a set of keys. I haven't lost her or mislaid her. If I had, I'd have gone looking for her. I would have called out, 'Mummy? Mummy? Where are you?' After all, it's common to mislay your keys, but foolish to lose your mother.'

I imagine a conversation over tea in the church hall after the funeral.

'I'm so sorry you lost your mother. You must be devastated.'

'Yes, I feel awful. The last time I saw her, she was in the sitting room.'

'Really? Have you looked under the stairs? Or in the garden?'

No, of course I haven't! I know where mother is. She's a pile of ash in an urn on my father's bedside table.

Death has obliterated her.

CHAPTER 4

'Grief is a journey'

If grief is a journey, then tell me where I'm heading. Point me in the right direction. I don't see the destination, I don't even understand what it means.

Am I a hiker scrambling up a mountainside to get to the peak? Are you telling me I'll see better from the top? The lay of the land and the world stretched out before me? Look how magnificent it all is! So beautiful, so majestic! Are are you hoping I'll have a transcendent experience, the aha! moment of the mystics: Behold, I have seen the interconnectedness of all things and I know now that my grief is misplaced.

Don't forget, the mist can fall fast on the mountain top.

Maybe you're saying it's a windy road through difficult terrain. There are many obstacles along the way and I'm carrying a heavy rucksack on my back. Slowly, over time, I'll throw those weighty burdens out onto the road and arrive at

the end of it all, free of my grief. I'll walk through the city gates into a delightful place filled with cafés and green parks, a secular town to Bunyan's celestial city. But grief isn't penitence, and there's no Wicket Gate to pass through. I am missing my mother, that is all.

I'll tell you about grief. It's like being in a dinghy alone on the ocean. I don't know where I'm going or what I'm meant to be doing, but I'm trying my best to stay afloat. Suddenly there is a squall. It comes from nowhere. The wind blows, the thunder roars, rain pours down and waves raise up like mountains. My dinghy is tossed this way and that; it heaves at the seams. I pull on the sail, I move from this side to that to steady it. I am frightened. I hold on for dear life as the ropes cut into my palms. And then suddenly there is calm. A ray of light squeezes through a cloudy sky. I am shaken, exhausted, but I have survived and my little boat bobs along once more. Until another squall comes and threatens to capsize me, and then another and then another.

Those who know, say the storms ease over time and the periods of calm stretch out. Slowly, the sun shines more and the skies are clearer. The little dinghy sails about as best it can. There is no end to the ocean, no final destination. There are only ports of call and shallow seas where I can lay my anchor and rest a while.

Rest. That is all I want to do. Everything tires me: work, socialising, cleaning the flat, cooking the food, taking out the rubbish, putting away my clothes, laundry and ironing – task and more tasks. Weeks have passed since her death and the months are growing in number. I feel myself drifting away from her: I can't hear her voice, I can't see her eyes twinkle, I want to remember how her hands expressed her thoughts, turning in the air as she spoke. But I can't. Everything is blank. She is gone, gone, hardly a memory – and then suddenly, I swirl on my heels. I see her over there - look! I

hear her voice calling my name… and vision is a knife-stab in the gut because she disappears into particles of light.

I have this tap at the base of my ankle which I can't turn off. It leaks energy all day and all night – drip, drip, drip.

Routine is good for me, people say. Work occupies the mind; it steadies the body. I don't dispute it, and I have to earn my living. I rally what I have left inside to get up and hurry out of the house, along the road and down into the London Underground. I sit at my desk. I smile in the classroom and I fill the day with energetic teaching. All of that I do, because I must. People say, 'how well you are doing!' Others add, 'you're really working through this' as if I were a kid scribbling out equations. They don't see me at home flopped on the sofa, hungry but unable to cook, hating the mess but doing nothing to tidy it up. They don't smell the bin which needs emptying and the food in the fridge that's slowly growing mould. They don't know how I tired I am, not only in my body but in my mind too. Everything hurts

CHAPTER 5

Let go and move

When someone says to me, 'you've got to let go and move on', I see myself hanging from a monkey bar on an assault course and falling to the ground. I've never quite understood how I'm meant to move on after that, not if I've broken my ankle or my leg. At the very least, I'm going to need a crutch.

But I did try to let her go, in the days before death. We all did. She was suffering too much. I whispered in her ear, 'you can stop fighting, Mummy.' I laid my head beside hers and thanked her for loving me, for being everything she was to me. Lying profusely, I said I would be fine without her, laughing at the fact that she would be with me always, which was a lot more convenient then having to travel far to see her. I said she could turn her back on me and walk away towards the others who were waiting for her, her parents

and grandparents, all those she had loved and lost. I did these things to let her go. Not for me, but for her.

I couldn't will her back. I couldn't say: 'Return! Return! I can't live without you.' To do so was to will her suffering – her brain damage, her dementia, her cancer. Selfishness has it limits and love wills the good of the other. If death was the only way to ease her suffering, then death was her saviour. Not ours, but hers.

To let go then, was to free her of the burden of life. It was never to free-fall away from her.

Still, I did try to unhook my mother from my heart; I tried to lift her up and out as if she were a fish caught on a line, letting her hurry away into the sea. But death isn't an angler and she wasn't a mackerel swimming in shoals under the water. It yanked her away from me and ripped my chest apart.

Death. I have no understanding of it. A leaf falling from a tree, my sister said. Yes – no. A life torn from the structure of the universe like a window wrenched from its frame.

I wrote that the day after she died. Until then, I had never realised how physical grief was, a visceral pain in the neck, in the face, in the mouth. My head swelled like a pounding tumour. My palate ached to the point of agony. My stomach burnt and boiled. My heart hung bleeding outside my chest.

And all the while I stood stunned in the presence of her corpse calling out, where are you? Where are you? I can't see you, I can't hear you? I don't where to find you. You are gone, gone....

We held her hands and studied them, every vein and every blemish; we looked at the shape of her nails and the breadth of her palms; midwife's hands, she used to say. We traced our finger down her nose and smiled at how it bent a wee bit to the side. We cupped her cheeks, and remembered the rouge she used to put on those high bones. Her skin was

still soft but her mouth wouldn't close, and there on her tongue was the smear of toothpaste I had wanted to remove the night before. For the last time, we moistened her lips.

After they took her away, my father bought a bottle of champagne and mince pies to toast her. 'To M,' we said, clinking our glasses. My father downed three in one go, but my stomach was squeezed tight against food and drink, and my sister said she felt sick. We sat pinioned to the sofa in the room where she had spent the last four months of her life. The house was in darkness, and the silence which made the large space feel larger still could not be filled with our three lonely breaths.

I have no memory of going to bed; I don't even know if I undressed.

The next morning, with the winter sun shining through the windows, I went into the room and saw her glasses on the table; beside them were her hearing aids; on the floor were her empty slippers, moulded to the shape of her feet. They were all that remained, intimate scraps that had once adorned her. They were desolate now and alone, as if they were weeping in their own inanimate way. Without her body, they were purposeless. Her slippers were empty space.

Quickly we gathered them up and hid them from our father, and went to make breakfast. The first breakfast in a universe devoid of her. The first cup of tea, the first piece of toast, the first of everything.

Moving on is inevitable. It is the tick-tock of time, relentlessly pushing the past behind us. You can't stop it. It isn't a choice. It just happens. And the physicist's claim that time is an illusion seems a cruel joke as space expands outwards and is filled with new things. Then suddenly, it slams shut like an accordion, screaming the air out of it. You are back in that room the seconds after her death, feeling what you felt then and saying what you said then. Nothing has been filtered out,

nothing has been processed. It is pure memory. She is gone, she is gone, she is gone – and you can't find her.

All I can do is wait. Wait for the panic to pass. Then I scramble onto my knees and up onto my feet; brush myself down and remember that I was blessed to have her.

I take a step, and then another. I walk on.

I do this because it is her wish for me. She gave me life that I may live.

CHAPTER 6

Grief is all about the griever

Grief turns you into a child. The infant's terror of being left alone returns with primordial force. Abruptly the world is empty and dark. Its danger is everywhere.

I saw a boy on the underground the other day. The seat between his parents was taken, so he sat opposite his mother and stared at her for two stops, suffering the space between them until he could bear it no more, and scrambled over to sit on her lap.

It reminded me of Harry Harrow's experiments on love and attachments. Working with baby rhesus monkeys, he tested their ability to cope with strange situations. Having removed them from their mothers shortly after birth, he gave them a 'mother' made of soft terry cloth. He discovered that the baby rhesus monkeys could survive most fears and would inch out into the world to explore it, if they had their

'mother' to run back to and hold. When the mother was removed, they crouched in terror, rocking themselves and crying.

My sister had two dogs and when the elder died, the younger, Chai, fell into a deep grief. She had lost her surrogate mother and refused to eat for days.

Today, I feel like my ten-year-old self left on the doorstep of boarding school, trying to be brave, feeling sick to the core at the thought of being left behind. Those return-to-school experiences were a foretaste of death, and though things are different now - I'm an adult with autonomy and agency – I feel the abandonment still. Except this time it is different. Now there is no stretching out of space and time. There is no watching her disappear down the lane and onto the road, leaning out of the window to blow me kisses, her hand waving. There's no consolation in knowing that she is somewhere in the world, getting on with life, waiting for the days to pass until we are together again. One moment she is there – and then she is not. And the 'not' is absolute, unredeemingly so. It is pure negation.

And in this negation stands the griever, stunned and solitary. Everything you feel is within yourself, a motley mess of emotions. It is a form of solipsism, yes, but it can't be otherwise. By definition, your subjectivity is subject-focused. It might extend out from yourself into the world, but it cannot know the world independently of itself.

I may worry for my father; I may share feelings with my sister – 'are you struggling to focus?' 'are you tired all the time?' - yet it is me and me alone who stands in the me-ness of my grief.

I have to get up in the morning, get dressed, sit on the tube, go to work, smile at the children; I have to stop procrastinating and get down to mark their essays; I have to care about them when all I want to do is eat cake and stay in

bed. My attention span is seconds long. My tolerance-level is zero. Films shorten the day and books absorb me for a while. I am tired all the time, but I can't fall asleep. The wine bottles tempt me when I open the fridge door – as does the gin – but I've managed to keep away from them for now. I want sugary treats and cups of tea. I want to be six years old again.

We are genetically designed to sniff out threat in the world. Short of dying ourselves, the greatest threat is exile. Banishment from those who love us and care for us. Death is exile, and grief is its truest expression. It thrusts its hands down into the deepest and most ancient part of us. It squeezes our heart, it grips our guts. It has nothing to do with reason. Reason can try to master it, but it always fails. Grief is the terror of being left alone in the world. It is desertion.

To mitigate the fear, I want to talk about her all the time, as if the talking will bring her scattered molecules back together again and make her real. I want to tell you what an amazingly strong and dynamic woman she was. How beautiful, how infinitely loving; unselfish to her core. Argentine in her heart, a girl from the vast, open spaces. She cared little for status and wealth; she taught us to value the tramp as much as the Queen. Her sorrows were hidden. Her laugh was infectious. She painted, she cooked. She looked for the good in everyone, and never gave up hope. She mixed her sayings and never lost her accent. Forgiveness was her nature. Her faith was as wide and as quiet as the pampas on a windless day. I loved her unreservedly, because that is how she loved me. True love is freedom: it has no boundaries and imposes none. It guides but never judges. It sees what others cannot see. It makes everything else bearable.

To lose that is to lose the world.

CHAPTER 7

Time heals all things

I want to understand this, but I can't – not really. I keep getting stuck on the word 'heals'. It assumes grief is a disease of the body and mind that must be cured. Or a virus to be endured like the flu until it is over. Certainly it can feel like morbidity, a carnal pain, a psycho-physical ache that is all consuming, something that distorts perception and weakens the power of thought. But is it really an ailment? To say that, is to say that my sadness is wrong, something that shouldn't be - and I can't accept it. St Augustine saw death as a disorder at the heart of the universe – a diminishing of its plenitude - but not the grief that accompanies it.

Grief expresses love, and that which comes from love can never be a sickness. I loved my mother – I love her still. As long as I love her, I will grieve her. To heal me of that, is to

take that love from me, and I can see no purpose in life if I must live without it.

Rather, I am trying to integrate grief into an awareness of who I am. I am laying down new ways of seeing the world. I am more cautious in what I claim to know. I recognise my former arrogance, the claim to a wisdom I never had. All around me I see the invisible weight of sadness that people carry. I feel I have joined 'the silent group of mourners', and I realise with alarm that we are the majority.

Of course, I might have misunderstood the saying. Perhaps it's about time and not grief, and if it is then I'm willing to listen. If time is the measurement of change then, yes, my grief will change. Not from one state to another as if I were walking along a road to some designated end – here's the staging post for denial, here's the one for anger - but sporadically, one day this, one day that. I've noticed it happening already. Sometimes my grief is positive. I hear the gratitude in my voice: how lucky I was to have had her, and to have had her for so long; many are not so fortunate. In such moments, I feel as bright as the noonday sun. I smile; I laugh. My body is light and I feel I could dance once more. Other times it is negative – I watch a toddler throw its arms around its mother's neck, and my stomach lurches. I want to warn the child: you don't know what's coming.

I told my sister the other day that the childless have one blessing, and one alone: they will never inflict this suffering on their children.

I think of St. Augustine again, and warn myself. He indulged in grief and recognised something sinister in it, a focus on the self which negated the love he had had for his friend. Grief is mutable, it is forever shifting. Like love, it begins in the self but moves out towards the other. When it fixes itself and becomes an adornment, then it is no longer grief but a self-regarding sickness. I must remember that.

And I do, until I am pottering about my flat and a thought flashes across my mind. It says, 'Call Mummy'. There is a second of happiness at the thought of hearing her voice, and then a cliff-edge tumble down onto the rocks of anguish below. I smash against them, and I can't get up.

CHAPTER 8

In Memoriam

I keep looking at the order of service.

The photograph of my mother laughing on the beach captures her beauty (she really was very beautiful) and her vivacity. People marvel at it.

But something is wrong.

It takes me a while to recognise the problem: the dates. They record her birth and her death. Her beginning and her end.

My mother is a historical fact. All verbs are in the past tense.

CHAPTER 9

Blessed are they who mourn because they will be comforted

The second night after my mother's death (I don't remember the first), I took her pillow to bed with me. I held it close and hid my face in the depths of it, breathing in her scent – the lavender, the shampoo, the odour from the tumour growing on her head. Each molecule entered into me, and I not only smelt her, I felt her. I was at my most animal then, relying on this sense to marry her to me.

And that's when I heard her voice. Clear and distinct

'You're smelling my illness, you're smelling my death. Put the pillow down.'

She said my name, and I jerked my head out of the mass of squashed feathers. Only the living talk. Only the living speak in the present tense.

Where are you? I can't see you.

It was dark.

I clenched the pillow to my chest, but I knew she'd spoken the truth. Reluctantly, hesitantly, I peeled it away and pushed it off the bed onto the floor.

What happened next is ineffable, as all such experiences are.

I saw her face, timelessly beautiful and flushed with life. It was her, but not her. I knew her immediately, yet in all ways and in all things she was different. Light radiated out of her and she was more luminous than a stained-glass window, more real than she had been before her death, more loving than I had ever known her. She existed in a fullness of being that was incomprehensible, impenetrable. The borders of herself were fixed and yet not fixed, pulsating with the light-hazy presence of innumerable people. I saw dimensions my mind could not comprehend, squeezing all that was illimitable into tight limitation. And around them was an arc of burning white, the presence of something magnificent.

The light that radiated out from her was love. Expansive. Unending. It sparkled with joy. It throbbed with freedom. It was completion; there was no place where it was not. It reached down to touch me, to comfort me, to tell me that she had not gone nor had she forgotten me. It was an affirmation and a confirmation.

All is well, all is well, all manner of things are well.

When I awoke at three in the morning, my room was cold and dark. I remembered the vision, I felt the remnants of its consolation. But the world was still the world, and downstairs, in the sitting room, was her empty bed with the sheets crumpled from where her body had lain.

CHAPTER 10

Doubt is another element of faith

I had expected a crisis of faith. They had always been party of my religious journey - the doubt, the anger, the fear, the jabbing finger at the person of God. Who are you? What are you? How dare you call this the best of all possible worlds! If you can make a heaven, why did you make an earth? Insights were matched by fears that the insights were fallacious. I would draw close, and then run away. I was like the child standing on the fence, afraid to jump off because she wasn't sure she would be caught.

Yet the crisis never came. Or not in its familiar form. This time it was more subtle, more pernicious. I needed the comfort of a celestial parent so I clung onto God, but I distrusted the vision I had had on my mother. I nurtured a secular denial of the comfort it gave me, a masochistic searching after its falsity.

The mind can play tricks. It sees patterns in random

combinations and misinterprets sensory data. I remember seeing Father Christmas walk down a London road in the middle of summer, only to realise it was a woman in a red coat. I mistook a hanging shirt for an intruder. We are designed to predict; we are always guessing at the best possible explanation and trying to minimise our errors.

If my vision had been of that sort, I would have realised immediately. I would have switched on the light and spied the explanation. Rather, it smacked of psychosis, and that worried me.

Perhaps I was schizophrenic, hearing voices and seeing people. I had reconstructed reality from an unconscious stimulus, and I couldn't tell the difference.

Or extreme distress had caused me to hallucinate. I was a Freudian tragedy, practicing wish-fulfilment to a pathological degree.

I feared both interpretations, and like a child picking a scab I pondered them excessively. Both invalidated an experience that filled the world with meaning. If a vision so full of beauty and hope was a mental anomaly, then all other experiences which gave dimension and depth to this world were glitches in the order of things. Without God – or at the very least, without the promise of God – there was emptiness, like a gallery stripped of paintings or a theatre void of actors. Beauty, love, joy - these were brain processes, nothing more. They were the by-products of an organism set on survival. And what was the point of survival? To pass on my genes? But I had no children; I was the unimpressive end of an evolutionary journey. The language I thought in and the language I wrote in had only one purpose: to verify the stark, cold reality in which I lived.

I knew my Vienna Circle and my Identity Theorists; I knew the material fundamentalists. I taught them in the classroom. I had toyed with their proud defiance: we are

stronger than you theists because we reject all need for meaning. Crutches are for the weak; we have none. Look at us walk!

Except a veteran hobbling along the pavement with her crutches is hardly a weak person, and defiance has a psychological bent to it, like any other.

And no one could deny the reality of my experience – the having of it was not open to dispute. The problem was the cause, and for that there was no definitive answer. To root it in God was no more problematic than to root it in a brain-state. Neither could be proven true, absolutely true that is. Both had their issues, their assumptions. When it came to truth, the universe is elusive.

So I returned to God and the vision of my mother smiling in a circle of radiance. In doing so, I stepped back into a world of colour and light where the hard edges of things were only part of the story. I embraced my finitude: my ignorance and hominid-brain. Doubt walked hand-in-hand with limitation. I had no need to put on blinkers like an old cart horse, blocking out what might startle or distract me. I could say with confidence: I choose to walk here, not there. I surrender my demand for answers. I will not live aggrieved in an empty, desolate reality. Here my mother exists in light; there she is but ash.

CHAPTER 11

Idolising the departed

When I rest in the vision I had of my mother - when I marvel at the experience alone and try not to understand it - I find myself praying to her and not to God. Her 'transfiguration' imbues her motherhood with an illimitable love that is close to divinity. The woman I once knew – the mother who tickled me in bed when I was little and took me by the arm as we walked the cliffs – has shed the limitations of her earthly self and entered another state of being. And I am called back to her again and again, as if I have found in her faultless perfection an ideal of beingness, not Platonic in nature but truly and fully she, her sense of humour made excellence, her quirky interests made faultless. When I close my eyes, I feel her close. I don't need God when I have my mother.

A 'voice' warns me of idolatry and I answer it: let me be. I don't know God. I don't know the first thing about 'him', not

really, not truly. Everything I say about God is incorrect because my mind is limited and God is not. I might say, 'God is omnipotent and omniscience' but those are words that have no reference. About God, I am reduced to silence.

Not so my mother. I can tell you about her warm flesh and soft hair. I remember her cat-like delight when we rubbed cream into her hands. She loved to crawl into bed with us in the morning and chat about things. She hated anything slimy. As my sister said at her funeral, she peeled her peaches, took forever to dry her hair, danced in the kitchen and cooked fabulous food.

I lost all that when she died, and in its place I have the memory of an experience: of expansive light and radiating love. To that experience I direct my concerns, and to that experience I share my thoughts: 'You know that boy who was tortured and murdered by his stepmother? Can you go and find him? Give him a hug and look after him.'

Yes, grief has turned me into an idolator. It has lowered my vision and given me comfort. If my religious friends knew of it, they would be alarmed. They would warn me of its dangers.

So I pause a moment.

I put my emotions to one side, and stop being the child who has lost her mother. I consider the vision again and I ponder my reaction to it. I stand at a distance so that I may analyse it, and in doing so I spy a side-door into the mystery of the Incarnation. It is nothing new; it has been there all along but I had never noticed it before.

My slide into idolatry is inevitable. It is an expression of my physicality. Dogs are happy with dogs, and cats are happy with cats; they know their own kind. So God has let me worship my kind without fear of impiety because in the Incarnation I have my own kind soaked in divinity.

The realisation excites me…except I am a Thomas,

needing to see to believe, to fully believe on the level of existential knowing. And I am no saint to have had a vision. St. Thomas Aquinas described the Summa Theologiae as straw compared to what was revealed to him that morning at Mass. I saw only my mother, but it was enough. It gave me hope, and if hope is a form of faith, then in faith I have found myself loved.

CHAPTER 12

The body is sown a natural body...

I had given up belief in the soul a long time ago. Philosophically, it was untenable. Not only do we have issues of interaction (how an immaterial, non-spatial soul can have a causal impact on a material, spatial body), but life after death becomes a disembodied, solipsistic dream-state.

Now, though, I'm willing to reconsider. Perhaps, just perhaps, it points to a truth of sorts. Philosophy is a discipline that clarifies thinking, it doesn't verify it. Truth might be its motivation, but it can't claim ownership. There are many ways to know a rainbow.

My dilemma is this: I saw my mother - she had form, she had essence - it was she and no one else. Yet I also saw them wrap her body in a black bag, stiff as a statue. I kissed her cold forehead in the mortuary. They took her body away and burnt it, and now she is a pile of ash in a compostable urn.

This being the case, what then did I see?

It can not have been the pure, unadulterated truth, though I wish it were. I am caught in matter; I am obedient to the laws of physics – I cannot see clearly things that are 'not of this world'. What I witnessed was an approximation of the truth, an interpretation. To say my mother is a disembodied mind is to deny the borderless-border of herself, to say she is a singular essence is to limit her irreducibility. Is my mother a transfigured, radiating being occupying space and time? Is she surrounded by all those who have gone before her? Is God really a band of white encircling light? I don't know, but I don't think so. And there is something sad in that, to wonder if she will ever feel again the wind in her face or the sun on the back. Will she ever taste a raspberry or smell coffee brewing on the stove? I am no Platonist. The joys of our physicality have intrinsic worth. I don't want my mother to be disembodied soul. A human being is not pure spirit.

Yet if I strip away what I saw, if I put aside my questions and rest in the comfort of seeing her again, than all that remains is the awareness of love, a soaking, drenching love, a love that is in all things and is all things. I saw my mother immersed in its totality; she was not obliterated by it but perfected in it because in the one there were multitudes, a joyous, unending unity of the many.

The love we know is fragmented – variegated and separated - as incomplete and limiting as the words we have for it. Just as an acorn is not an oak tree and a foetus is not an adult, so our love is not Love. Yet it points to it and holds within it a promise. When we love as best as we can, we value the uniqueness of the other; when we love as fully as we can, we ravel in its unifying force.

Love admonishes and Love comforts. When my mother fell ill and I struggled to reassess what I thought I knew

about her - our life together and who we were - Love blazed like a furnace; it scorched me and reduced to ash the myths and idols I had made of things. I reeled under it. After her death, when I lay grieving in my room, Love blazed with consolation.

How Love can tolerate suffering, is beyond me to understand. It is the great intractable question. Every answer is incomplete, every answer is inadequate. Yet what I saw filled me with hope and silenced my angry demands for an answer. I saw that Love both embodies suffering and heals that suffering; it transforms it and transfigures it. For a moment, I glimpsed the blazing enormity of it, filtered through the presence of my mother – and then I saw no more.

Visions have a noetic quality; something is given and something is shared, but they are only visions and I would do well to remember that. Still, thanks to that vision I know one thing for certain, that *if* God exists then God = love. And since grief is an expression of love, then where there is grief there too is God.