I Spent A Week There One Afternoon
by EJM Spoelstra

He left the past year's dwelling for the
new, Stole with soft step its shining
archway through, Built up its idle door,
Stretched in his last-found home, and knew the old
no more.[1]

My mom didn't die. This led me to believe that I did not fit into the 'grieving a loss' category. At age 69, mom had a hemorrhagic stroke that only a burr hole could relieve. I got the phone call on a sunny Tuesday afternoon and paced in my living room as dad delivered the news from my hometown 2500 km away. From that day forward, my life was categorized as
'pre-stroke' and 'post-stroke'.

To cope with my pain, I tried some traditional methods of healing - psychedelics, switching to the other side of the bed, hot yoga, kitchen dance parties. These brought reprieve, but it was fleeting. I turned to literary and digital stories of grief, but I could not find a record that mirrored my own experience, so I needed to write it. It was either that or take up running.

I chatted to the person seated next to me on the flight home. She was excited for her umpteenth trip to Spain.
"I'm headed back to Ontario because my mom had a stroke."
"Everything will be fine. And I'm telling you, you will *never* eat an orange juicier than the ones found in Valencia. The ones you get from the Americas don't even compare. Trust me."
I was reminded of Breughel's *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*, in which the world carries on as normal while Icarus plunges into the sea.

Mom was in the ICU and the prognosis was dire. Our family had to meet in the beige antiseptic room and make the decisions that mom was unable to that had the potential to alter her quality of life or allow her to die.

Pre-stroke, mom walked the recommended ten thousand steps per day, had a vibrant social life, enjoyed her 40+ year career in neurology, and ate healthily. She painted watercolour land and seascapes and loved to travel. She smoked cigarettes until she was 60. She and I shared her last ever cigarette while she was visiting me on Prince Edward Island, Canada's smallest and most charming province. We were drinking tea on a cobblestoned patio that overlooked sloped lavender fields. Nine years later she had a stroke while doing an exercise video in her living room.

I was living in Saskatchewan when I received the phone call. I went from designing a dream house with my husband (with a backyard sauna and views of 4000 acres of canola, flax and barley fields) to weighing the pros and cons of moving back to Ontario. I have a tendency to bare everything to everyone and absorb their advice like it's gospel truth. So I bared to and absorbed from fellow bus riders, grocery store cashiers, bank clerks and anyone else in close proximity who was willing to lend an ear.

"If you leave, you will be enabling your family." "You need to set boundaries."

"Your life is here now."

"What about your job?"

"The housing market in Ontario is too crazy." "Oh dear, don't go. The grief will age you."

My cousin who lost her mom to cancer a few years prior texted, "You will never regret the time you spend with your mom." That message erased the significance of all the

other advice and my decision was made.

Growing roots in a place other than your hometown can be a lengthy, labyrinthine process. It requires patience, geographic and human connection, a good window sill for the cats, and house plants. When my roots were broken, I relied on autopilot. I breathed and lived because I knew how. Nothing could have prepared me for what was to come. I knew pain and sadness, and had experienced some appalling displays of mistrust. I thought this made me immune. How does one prepare for being stricken by grief? Is there an armour that no one told me about? I don't know if it is possible. Maybe it shouldn't be possible. Maybe the depreciation of happiness and impulsivity would be too costly.

After two weeks in the ICU, mom was moved to the stroke ward. Three months later, she moved to a continuing care facility that had a seven foot tall jade plant in the foyer. On one visit, I stopped to watch a squirrel collect synthetic fuzz from an outdoor nativity scene and carry it up a tree to insulate its nest. Life went on. Two months after that, mom came home. The stroke took the use of her left side (her dominant hand included), her vocal strength and her short-term memory. She now relies on a wheelchair and full-time caregiver support.

Sitting on the couch with dad not too long after, I said, "One day we'll be able to bless people because of our pain." He thought I said "bluff" instead of "bless", so he sat in silence trying to figure out what the hell I was talking about. I assumed he was admiring my altruism.

I ignored the grief for years. Every time I started to feel the effects, I cauterized them. I had not earned the right to grieve because mom was still with us. That is what I chose to - had to focus on. The stroke, in fact, resulted in an astronomical loss that caused equal amounts of pain.

Eleven months ago, two years post-stroke, everything started to unravel. I came

back from an overseas vacation and something changed. Perhaps it was the elation of exploration juxtaposed with the reality of my diminished mental acuity. The grief made a home on a cellular level while I was busy trying to rebuild my life. It supplanted my whimsy, faith, forgiveness, and replaced contentment with anhedonia (Greek *an-* "without",+ *hedone* "pleasure").

Erich Lindemann, a writer and psychiatrist who specialized in bereavement, described the physical effects of grief:

… distress occurring in waves lasting twenty minutes to one hour.

… a feeling of tightness in the throat.

… a lack of muscular power.

… an empty feeling in the abdomen.

… intense subjective distress.[2]

Waves of somatic distress? Check. I would sit on the couch and stare unflinchingly at the wall. Lack of muscular power? Check. See above.

Empty feeling in the abdomen? Check. Get barbecue chips and Pinot Noir to fill abdomen.

My heart was broken and my mental strength deserted me. I didn't know myself anymore. My past experiences were meaningless. I was meaningless. Sleep was a refuge (my dreams are always adventure rom-coms). The intensity of my feelings of crisis could be due to the fact that I stopped all mood stabilizing medication for the first time in twenty years. With my doctor's supervision, I tried new medication, then more medication, then less, then none. My struggle felt more authentic this way. I needed a baseline to understand myself.

A therapist suggested looking for a literary resource that I could relate to. I went all in and applied for a part time job at the public library. I instantly had access to hundreds of thousands of resources. I did before too, but it was different now. If I

wanted to keep my job, I *had* to come to the library. I also quickly developed the common habit of judging books by their covers and borrowing them. Now I have a stack of 3-7 books with thought-provoking covers that match nicely with my decor at all times.

In the name of learning from other perspectives of grieving, I read Joan Didion, Matt Haig, Brené Brown, Leo Tolstoy, C.S. Lewis, and all of Sophie Kinsella's oeuvre (we all need a break sometimes). At times I thought "What does your story matter? How is this helping me? You're probably a millionaire, so dead or alive, everything you say is bull shit". My favourite result from the literature is that memories started to come back. I pushed away all my experiences of joy because I convinced myself I had no room for them. I included a few of them in this piece.

An aptly timed opportunity brought me to a farm in Breiðdalsvík, Iceland earlier this year. I wrote at the kitchen table in front of a window facing the setting sun. There were three sheep in front of the window. One white, one black, and one grey. The grey one had a limp. I told my host Siggy and we hoped he just had a pebble in his hoof.

One afternoon I climbed the mountain behind the farm. I took the path that the postman forged a hundred years ago. It had tall grasses, streams, suspicious sheep, wild blueberries, and rocks plush with *Cetraria Islandica* (Iceland moss). When I reached the summit, I saw that there were two more summits. I gave myself permission to turn around and head back down. I sat down on a pillowy rock to fight a mental battle and eventually decided to trek upwards.

When I reached my final destination, I built a land marker, took my clothes off, opened my arms wide and let the wind wash over me. I hadn't planned on that. I was just fanning out my sweaty shirt and it felt nice to cool off. Icelandic people have a myriad of words for wind, just like Inuit people have for snow. I bathed in a *hafgola* - an Arctic sea breeze. I had been waiting for a profound moment since I started naming my feelings eleven months prior. I needed a switch to be turned on or maybe off. It wasn't until that

moment that I believed I experienced a loss.

Hafgola revealed this truth and took with it the weight of my grief. Even as I began writing this I considered ‘not-a-loss’ (which sounds like nautilus, which led me to the introductory excerpt) as a title.

Three years post-stroke, mom and I watch HGTV, and enjoy salted black licorice and hefty chunks of gouda on the couch. We swoon over the grandkids and talk about my brothers.

She encourages me. She speaks eloquently and makes her own decisions. She uses her non-dominant hand and various tools to create abstract acrylic paintings and asks my opinion on her works (it’s the only time I use my art history degree). She scolds me for biting my nails.

An amusing deficit is that she cannot navigate the steps of online shopping. My parents have been surprised to receive numerous packages at the door including a bedframe from Malaysia, two copies of an 11 x 14 photograph of a forest, and a Marshall amplifier suitable for a mouse-sized guitar.

Yesterday I mowed the lawn. I worked hard and it was hot and annoying. When I stopped to survey my job, I noticed the trees. I noticed their sounds, smells, silhouettes and colours. They brought on a swell of joy. You know that feeling? It’s when you involuntarily take in a sharp breath because something is so… for the heart. It affects your whole physiological self for a split-second. Limbs are weightless, senses are suspended, all sensory receptors are blocked. Time is frozen. It feels like a gust of an Arctic sea breeze passing through you.

[1] Excerpt from “The Chambered Nautilus” by Oliver Wendell Holmes Sr.

[2] Lindemann E. Symptomatology and management of acute grief. 1944. Am J Psychiatry. 1994 Jun;151(6 Suppl):155-60. doi: 10.1176/ajp.151.6.155. PMID: 8192191.