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7 Arguments with Grief by Patrick Morris

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Hannah. Late 30s-late 40s

1.

I don't believe in the 7 stages of grief.

I'll just put that out there.

And leave it.

2.

Verbs are 'doing' words, nouns, 'naming' words, they name something, give it permanence.

Verbs just last a moment, but they're alive.

Except when you say, 'going to..'. 'He's going to go to the shops', 'She's going to feed the rabbit', 'He's going to die': nothing's happening. The verb's not born yet.

'Did you ring the school?' 'I said, I'm going to, didn't I? I'm going to, OK?'. 'OK!'.

But, *'I'm ringing the school'* creates action – someone's *going* to pick up, or there'll be an institutional message with a range of options for staff, students and parent/carers. *'I'm ringing the school'*. There's life in that.

I'm leaving a message: *'Hello, this is Hannah Gaspar, mother of Sadie in Year 8. Sadie won't be in this morning, she's not well.'*

Or, *'Good morning, Mr Knight? This is Hannah Gaspar here, Sadie Hynes' mum. I've got an update on Sadie, since you'd asked. It's 50-50 at the moment. We'll ring again on Monday. Thank you. That's very kind.'*

Or, *'Erm - I don't know how to – Sadie – the hospital – last night, she – we were just – Sadie...sorry, I'll...this is Hannah Gaspar, Sadie Hynes'...*

3.

I've begun this all wrong.

Beginnings and endings, the hardest.

Exactly where should I begin?

A memory.

An event.

An internal organ.

Closer?

Closer.

Yes.

With a breath out?

No.

A shock. A shock of...removal. *Removal*. Noun? Verb?

Damn. Had it there for a moment. Lost it.

A door closing? No. A void? Nooo. A nothingness? No! A...Whhooosshh!

That's not a word. 'Whhooosshh!' See? Not a verb or a noun.

[WITH PACE. AS IF TRYING TO PLUG A LEAK] If a vacuum is a 'space entirely devoid of matter' and darkness is 'the total or partial absence of light' and silence is 'the complete absence of sound', combine all 3, concentrate really hard for, say, 10 minutes on the sum total of that combination, then that's an attempt.

But the words, the words, the words, they melt even as I utter them.

And where? Where? I grasp. I remember. *Verbs, 'Doing' words*. But that implies that time exists. How can it? Time means life. Not on the table any more. The sun rises. She saw the sun rise. Sadie. Hadn't ever seen one until the day before. Her whole life, she'd never seen a sunrise. Sunrise. Noun.

Or is it 'the sun rise'? Verb.

Verb, when it happened. Now, and forever more into the future, a noun: Sunrise.

It was the separation of light by the prism in the window, I'd brought it from her bedroom, on the wall. The rainbow effect, the...refraction, *noun, naming word*, caught her. She watched it move, inch its way towards her, along the wall. So. That's a memory. I'll forget it soon enough.

I do this. Pick at the threads and pull them apart. Always starting over.

It's what I do.

I've lost all of my friends. One by one.

Once, two in one day. That was a record.

They've given up on me. And my 'journey'.

'My *journey*'.

Noun. And I'm not on one.

4.

[LAUGHS] The cold. Is what I remember. The cold. When she was born.

It was a pool, but she came out so quick, she was my second, that they didn't have time to fill it up, so we both got cold.

The water wasn't hot enough either, not like the first time I remember thinking. Saying.

The midwife, she was cold too. More lukewarm, give her her due.

I knew where she'd come from, this baby, I could tell that story, though it still feels like magic, I know the story, we pretty much were the story, she and I.

I knew time very well back then. You could say I was friends with time. It moved in a line. A day. A week. 12 weeks. 20 weeks. 40. 39 in my case. Her case. 39, 38, 37, 36, 35, 34, 33, 32, 31, 30, 29, 28, 27, 26, 25, 24, 23, 22, 21, 20, 19, 18, 17, 16, 15, 14, 13, 12, 11, 10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1, 0.

-1, -2, -3, I never could get negative numbers. Negative times a positive equals a negative? Negative times a negative equals a positive? 2 negatives make a positive? How? Multiplication. Reproduction.

I had reproduced. And it was a positive.

Her dad and I were the negatives.

And in that cocoon of cold and heat and sweat and breath and voices and silence, there was a name. A Proper noun.

Sadie.

5.

I have a single photo. Printed. I carry it with me, always. I NEVER look at it. No one is allowed to look at it. I deleted the image on my phone so no one would ever have that image, no one would ever be able to look at that image, not even me. It exists, but never to be looked at. Now that's temptation. But every day, I recall it, in more detail. She was 10 in it. 10's an interesting age for a girl. Well it was for Sadie. Interesting. She is wearing her favourite button-down shirt, striped, pale yellow shorts with spots, and a cowboy hat, I don't know where she got it from I certainly didn't give it to her. She looks like she could be unaware of the camera, her father took the photo, she's looking away, towards something, or someone, like her best friend has just arrived at her birthday party. Her arms are out, her left arm is out, her right arm is pointing at the camera, right into the lens. Like we're being accused of something. Yellow wallpaper behind her. It wasn't my house. The walls, yellow, flowers. Not my house. I always wanted to climb into the photo to get a better view, to see into her eyes, it's like she's always just slipping out of view.

New detail today – a stain on the wall, the yellow wall, just to the left of her head.

I would actually kill anyone who looked at this photo.

That's not just an expression. I would. I would kill them.

6.

[ATTEMPTING TO CONVINC HERSELF] A new exercise.

If, from a single point in front of me, I describe a clockwise arc with one hand, and an anticlockwise one with the other, the two ends of each meet. They create a space. Outside, we can count. Forwards, backwards, negative, positive, it doesn't matter, we can count. That's us, that's me, on the outside. Time in a line.

Inside, it's there, but we can't go there. We have to stay on the outside, even though the pull's towards the inside, the pull is always towards the inside. That's the game. You break the rules, the game's over.

I am working too hard to believe this.

So you have a temptation. To break the rules. But what if you say, the game's not only over, but once you're in the oval - shall we call it an oval? - there is no return.

Say, just say, I climbed in, to go after Sadie...can I do that? Follow her into the...the...space. That's a nothing noun, 'space'. It pins nothing down, it makes nothing permanent, it names nothing.

What am I talking about, even that, even saying 'climbed in', as if it's actually possible. It's impossible, there's not a verb alive that can do it! There's not a stony noun that can name it.

It's just a game, they keep telling me, an exercise, a way to tell a story.

They keep telling me I'm holding on too tight, they keep telling me, 'It's 2 years now, they keep telling me 'You've got to find a way to let her go'.

There's 4 verbs out of 10 words in that last sentence. 'Got, find, let, go'. That's a lot of life. That's too much life.

'way'. The only noun. And it stinks. Of 'journey'.

7.

I've always imagined violence. For my death. A very specific violence. My face being scraped along the ground at speed, skin ripping off, bone chiselling on the gravelly ground, head hits a stone, another, and another, then a stump, and that's the moment. I come to a stop. My chest is still moving, my body is still breathing – is that actually still breathing? – it's moving magnificently, heroically, people very quickly surround me. My jeans are ripped, on the belt, on the flies, odd places, my

pants are showing, my top is up, my hair, lots of it has come away, there's a rip in the cheek, my shoes are ripped, there's rips in places I've never seen rips before.

This is 'the picture'. What they're seeing. I don't think. I'm not capable. I don't know any of this. So my chest is still taking in oxygen and expelling CO2. A minute passes. Two minutes. Blood's now coming out of my ear onto the road, and from my nose. Such a definite mark, blood on asphalt. The life that's around me is astonishing. Urgent. They know about the oval, they can see me 'slipping away' – verb – and they're cursing the ambulance which hasn't arrived, and my breathing is much shallower, and someone – again, I'm not hearing any of this or experiencing any of this – someone says, 'she's cold', so someone else brings a blanket. And it's a warm, August day, it's hazy but bright, and the street's quiet. And I 'slip away'...

Why is that bit so easy? And the next bit so hard? I 'slip away'.

To where? Inside the oval? Ha! It can really take the piss, our language. Says, 'go on, imagine'. 'Go on, imagine!' 'Make up a story!' 'Go on!'

To where? Where to? Where did this life, this superb and singular life, this whirlpool of memories and experiences and sensations, this astonishing current of Positive go?

Where is she?

OK, so there is no Place, no 'There'.

A hole. No, a realm. No, a Negative: 'Consisting in or characterised by the absence rather than the presence of distinguishing features'. OK forget 'distinguishing features', forget 'characterised by...'. You're left with '...Consisting in the absence of...'. 'Consisting In The Absence Of'. 'Consisting in the absence of'.

So there's these two arcs whose two ends meet, here, and here. Living, the act of...*this*, is the positive. Dying, the antithesis of being alive, negative. Verbs, you see. They do the doing. Tenses are involved. I had a daughter. I have a daughter. I have a daughter who dies. Who is dead. She was alive. She is dead. She is always dead.

So that's forever present tense. So in one sense, she is present.

Hold on to that. But not to her.

I'll try that – in the future tense. I'm going to go and try that. I will not hold on to her. I will. I. Will. Let. Her. Slip. Away.

I will let her. I'm going to. I will. Pronoun, verb, doing word.

Put time back in a line.

Slip.

Away from the negative. -39,-38,-37, -36 -35 -34 -33 -32 -31 -30 -29 -28 -27 -26 -25 -24 -23 -22 -21 -20 -19 -18 -17 -16 -15 -14 -13 -12 -11 -10 -9 -8 -7 -6 -5 -4 -3 -2 -1

-1

[SHE BREATHES IN TO BE COMPLETELY FULL OF AIR. A FEW SHORTER BREATHS IN TO FILL TO CAPACITY. HOLDS IT FOR A FEW SECONDS. BREATHES IT OUT AS IF OVER AS LONG A PERIOD AS THE ACTOR CAN DO IT.]