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zine
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of life

Featuring

Let Us Redefine Grief (As it Redefines Us)
Right Place, Wrong Time
Is it too late to learn how to bike?

by
Anson M


Let Us Redefine Grief

(As it Redefines Us)



Along the Zhujiang River, in between Guangdong and Hong Kong, the late 1970s. A boat capsizes – its passengers, all refugees, including my grandfather's mother, brother and nephew – never make it. My own mother, a young child at the time, remembers the day 'like a black and white movie.' How many other families, that very day, were also draped with the same black and white? Grief dials each number of each relative across both sides of the river, and the repetition of it all seems to re-shatter each heart. My grandfather never speaks of the day again.

As they say, the most natural phenomenon in the world – alongside life – is death. It is an inescapable headline of news reports; the taboo topic of where I lived yet often the subject of my family's dark jokes; my old school, I remember vividly, was built right across a cemetery. Amidst the permeation of the macabre into the collective mind of society, especially in the city I grew up in, we have desensitised grief and the true weight it holds. We are told that time heals all wounds, that pain builds character, when over 20% of individuals develop some form of depression or anxiety after the death of a loved one. Undergoing this an event that entirely destabilises our perspectives and experiences, seemingly redefining who we are, we neglect that this change is also never a simple, linear journey that either tumbles into a never-ending void or a definite upward curve of recovery and acceptance. We must reread between the lines and rebuild the multitude of pathways that allow us to grasp grief, at least as much as we can. It is the only way for us to better confront it.



Today, I will not (and cannot) tape together the shards my family left behind, or offer any resolution to tragedy – **there isn't**. There are fragments forever lost to history; some hide, still wedged in the corner of our souls, ready to strike at any moment; some are painted over as gallows humour and throwaway remarks that shield our true emotions. But we cannot view this as merely a consequence of time, or a character-building exercise; meanwhile, we can never progress if loss overwhelms us to the brink of existence. So how do we 'manage' grief? That is, how do we let us live alongside it – honouring those who have left, while striving towards the best version of ourselves?

Lifting up the splinters of time, we can choose to toss them away, ignoring the seared remnants of our psychological wounds. This is not entirely unfounded, and often a survival tactic within precarious living conditions. It is highly evident in men, as cited in a US National Library of Medicine study, as a demographic who particularly 'struggle to reconcile feelings of vulnerability and manly ideals of strength and stoicism.' This type of suppression, sometimes permanently rejecting the pieces that make us human, then finds itself in the hands of siblings, partners and children, forming an intergenerational rippling (or shattering) effect. We all inevitably receive, hold and lose some of these shards, whether we want to or not.

Yet the heartbreak of loss, the absence of love, should also not erase us entirely. Media portrayals of grief often symbolise a visceral, overwhelming collapse of identity that propels us towards some form of meaning. Yet in other instances, such as Wes Anderson's film *Asteroid City*, we see how this definition ignores the complexity of it all. Anderson's protagonist, Jones, an actor of a play. When his partner (the playwright) dies, he relives the tragedy as his character similarly loses his wife, unable to publicly mourn. The portrayal of the play has its vivid, Anderson-esque colour palette, but real life is an uncharacteristic



black and white. He gradually crumbles between the real and the fictional: 'I still don't understand the play.' Likewise, we grapple with how we are expected to process death, and who we become after, in a space that leaves little room to even do so. **The cost of confronting loss is this confusion.**

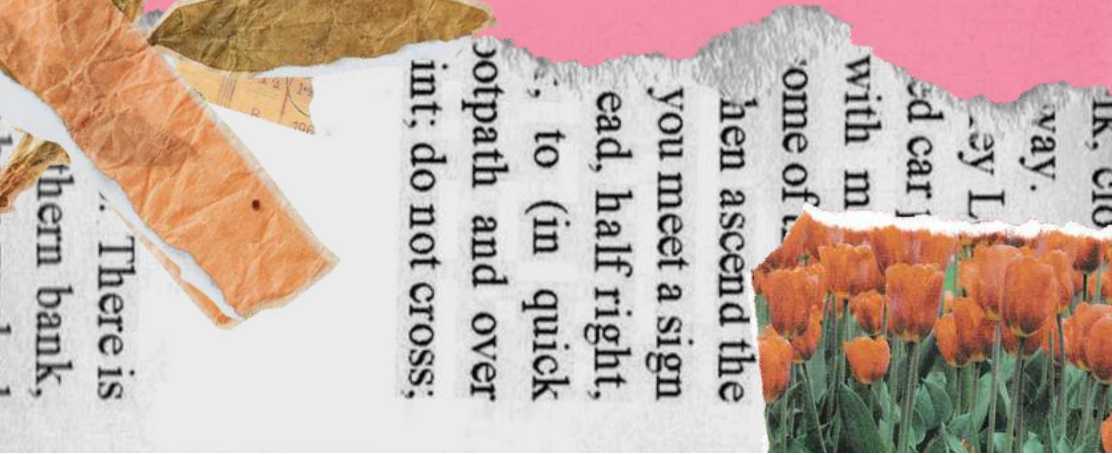


'Doesn't matter,' the play's director assures. **'Just keep telling the story.'** There isn't a fantastical Hollywood ending where all wounds are sealed, where the actor affirms a renewed, defined purpose. "The power of these losses, it's among the key milestones in our lives... The cosmic force of our lost people," Anderson explains. The film leaves no conclusiveness, but we leave with a sense of resonance – because there is a possible avenue to a future, however ambiguous. It may still be an avenue of jagged edges and missing pieces, but we also find comfort that we all inevitably receive, hold and lose some of these shards, whether we want to or not.

So I implore all of us to try. Grief indeed moulds our worldview, a tainted and cracked window to the world that seems fragile at best. There is no right way of fixing it. But by simply discarding the unwanted, jagged splinters we feel weakens us, also dismisses a very human aspect of us. Shoving it aside and calling it resilience diminishes the strength it takes to extract our source of anguish and build on the potential to seek a self who trudge on, **not in spite of, but because** of the adversity of our experiences of loss.

Today, I do not intend to change how one should grieve, when each loss is so personal, and each impact on the mind and heart can never be quantified. There are dreaded phone calls to be made, plays to be reenacted, shards to be lost. I am plagued by the indescribable tragedies of those before me, whose abandoned slivers of their lives trickle down. **(So are you.)** However, in face of a phenomenon that will never vanish from this Earth (until it vanishes all together), we must not shelve it away, in favour of a false sense of a new self that devalues suffering as weakness. The undeniable changes in our understanding of ourselves should stride along the way we see grief altogether – all-encompassing in its pain, but also for its ability to open up new versions of us, hopefully for the better.

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Right Place, Wrong Time

Prologue:

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Interestingly enough, the adjacent stack of DVDs, sitting quietly on my bookshelf, remain chronologically ordered (despite my challenges in the temporal side of things). My finger trails from Hitchcock's *Rope* and ends at *Paddington 2* - an interesting dichotomy. I am absorbed into a bank heist in Brooklyn, resurrected as a vengeful assassin in a Tarantino flick, and eventually an anthropomorphic racecar. And along the way, the various directors and writers and actors do more than entrap me inside their fictional universes - they show me a glimpse of their real worlds, too. Of course, they are not comprehensive. They are simply how we remember history: fragments, cutouts, impressions of a time un-lived by most living. Still, I immerse myself into another reality, for just an hour and a half, or perhaps in several episodes or a few hundred pages.

Chapters 1-2: A Little Bit of History

"Shall we rewrite history?" This piece of dialogue - extracted from a long-winded ramble in one of my favorite E.M. Forster novels - has always stood out to me. It spoke more of the writer than his stories, although their contents are nothing short of bold and progressive: anti-imperialist, critical of heteronormativity and full of class satire. Simply put, I was surprised. It was set in a time I'd always associated with English stuffiness and societal constriction that reeked of excessive formalities and colonialism (simultaneously, somehow).

Similarly, Robert Browning's poetry has always intrigued me. It is easy to generalize the past as unwelcoming - for there is truth within - but to learn of a man championing for feminism, both presenting and critiquing the wrongs of a society in which he was privileged, blurs my preconceived notions of the past. There are intricacies in every era that make the two composers seem out of time, almost reframing history, for they are writers: they understand and reflect on their present, hoping for a better world.



INT. A FLAT IN HONG KONG, 1960s - DAY

Even in stories where I see myself, or my home in Hong Kong, I feel akin to a tourist at times, taking pieces of fabric from the past and threads of unheard voices that materialize in the media I consume. A large chunk of the DVD collection is a set of Wong Kar Wai films. And somewhere buried in my wardrobe is a vintage clock. I bought it because it reminded me of Wong's In the Mood for Love - but I chucked it in there after the incessant ticking started to give me a headache. (Perhaps the source of my time perception issues.)

Ironically, the film doesn't use the clock to show time, either - it is the placement of magazines, change of clothing and vivid step-printing effects that Wong subtly curates the inevitability of time. The surface appearance of a forbidden romance is also an exploration of missed connections, gender roles, and immigration in a Hong Kong long gone from the 1960s, instead of just admiring the gorgeous visuals, Maggie Cheung's iconic cheongsams, and young Tony Leung. Another film of his from years prior, Happy Together, strikes a few chords as well.

1997 was the handover of Hong Kong, a time of social conflict familiar to my parents' generation. Wong, in a turn of events, sets the film in Argentina - the furthest possible from home. Yet he manages to sift out the pervasive loneliness beneath a national identity crisis that resonates with the contemporary political issues in my hometown today. I'd always complained how fast-paced and hostile life was back there, but Wong hands me a reminder of where home is, and a needle to sew back the patches of lost time and memories that I had ungratefully forgotten. Home almost feels new.





Episode 4: A Bygone Present

I soon become fully distracted by the vibrant books and disks, reading through each label and blurb. The slightly dusty The Complete Works of William Shakespeare pervades the tropes and cliches of today. I smile at the Percy Jackson series from my childhood; its mythical quality that transformed into the fantastical comedy of Neil Gaiman and Terry Pratchett's Good Omens as I grew older. I compare my collection of Sherlock Holmes and Philip Trent and Donald Strachey titles, all detective novels yet daringly different; I laugh at the timeless comedy of M*A*S*H that so boldly satirized war in an era of Vietnam. I cower at the trends of the early 2000s whenever I rewatch About a Boy, yet the heartwarming story brings light to a world where disillusionment and cynicism feels unavoidable, and makes me more tolerant of rom-coms.

I gain a bit of history, and hence humanity - writers, by focusing on intricacies within their worlds beyond surface level labels, allow all of us to overlook the dated expressions and era-specific commodities; within the rotary phones and phonographs and cassette tapes and pianolas that transport us from our world to theirs, lie the essence of each of us that never ages and always does.

Act V Scene III:

I wonder what the next generations will think of us. The Walkman that perches next to my Leslie Cheung cassette tapes is a novelty for me, but a staple of my father's childhood. Meanwhile, much of the past remains in yellowing pages and fossilized fragments, if they even remain at all. We will never see every single mark and detail left by the old world, yet the stories told by the writers of their time continue to bridge worlds, sanding away the barriers of time. And so I applaud the writers of today as well - they are rewriting history.

“Shall we
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Is it too late to learn how to bike?

Bicycles are everywhere. Perhaps it's your Saturday morning activity with your kids. Maybe it's how you commute. Maybe, in the city you live in, it's most people's way of living.

It's a universal skill - at least that's what most people think. It's almost assumed that everyone knows how to bike, like how they know how to swim, or to sneak to the kitchen at 3 AM to grab a bag of crisps and walk back without waking the whole family up. And like all the tasks I've mentioned, it takes time to really grasp it until it's second nature.

As a kid, I'd watch as others rode on their bikes with ease. I've owned a few bicycles in my life - a tiny toddler's bicycle; a bright pink, statement Hello Kitty one; this terrible, rusty grey one that got stolen when I was nine. As different as all of them were, they all shared one trait - training wheels that no one ever bothered to take off.



My mom always told me about how she learned to ride a bicycle. Some older kid in the neighborhood would round up a bunch of young children, all eager to bike; they'd take turns speeding down the ramp in the car park. Looking back, in some tragic, messed up alternative timeline, an awful accident could've probably happened with the lack of supervision they had. But they biked like there was no tomorrow. If someone fell, they fell. But most of the time, they just kept going. I feel like your instinct of fear only kicks in after you hit the double digits.

My tenth birthday - I guess that was what I feared. And if they didn't pry the training wheels off ~~my dead body~~ my bicycle, why change a thing? It was only when I started growing older - hence taller, that I realized the market of 4-wheeled bikes wasn't particularly nice to those over 5 feet tall.



“Can’t you just screw on the extra wheels for me?” I’d ask the guy who loaned out bikes. 5 bucks an hour, a little more on weekends, which was why my family always rode on Friday afternoons. A young boy, about five or six, breezed past me with his bicycle with distinctly two wheels.

Over time, I felt humiliated. Embarrassed. Ashamed. And some other synonymous words. For the next few years, I would try again and again on a normal bicycle, sometimes falling over, sometimes just letting someone hold the handlebars and keep me balanced to make me feel less pathetic, I guess. But some things change.

The human mindset doesn’t make sense. But one day, I was fourteen, got up and relearned the bicycle within fifteen minutes. By the end of an hour, I could turn and U-turn and do flips – okay, I didn’t, but I could ride a bike .



Something in my brain didn't seem to care if I fell - was it the overwhelming fear of shame? - but it worked; I let myself pedal as fast as I could and some miracle on Earth kept me going.

A little while after that, I found myself picking up this old skateboard I got when I was eight. I never got the hang of it then. But it felt just like riding a bike - start fast and let yourself fall if you have to. Got it in half an hour, and ended up with a minor scrape, but somehow, the little blood stained on my knees only made me want to keep trying.

I don't know what type of vehicle I'll be trying out the next time. Maybe driving an actual car, or a unicycle, honestly, if I can find one. Lots of things seem way less difficult when you unlock this childlike sense of courage (or oblivion to mortality?) Maybe I'll start practicing what I preach to bicycles to everything else I want to accomplish in the next 70-odd years I'll be on this planet.





dedicated to

Loved ones & Hong Kong

Cycle of Life – a personal essay collection.

Let Us Redefine Grief (As it Redefines Us)

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