

THE GRIEF DIARIES

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Nonfiction by Elizabeth Felicetti

How to Grieve Your Father

Read novels. As soon as you finish one, start another. *Don't run out.* Those new books you've had on hold at the library, that you are still 34th in line for even though you put yourself on the list three months ago? Just buy them. Devour them. Stay up late reading them. Read them when you can't sleep. Have back-ups ready.

Agree to preach the funeral, because you're clergy. Everyone will ask how you will get through it. Practice it so you know the points where you choke up, and drink a sip of water right before those points. Smile hard the whole time you are up in the pulpit. People will smile back. They have to; your father just died and you are preaching his funeral. You can do this. Afterwards, you will be sure that you can do anything because you preached your father's funeral. (You are wrong, but you will feel powerful.)

Afterwards, be annoyed when people tell you how much they liked it. They will do this for a couple of weeks. Feel guilty. Look away when they compliment you. Believe that your siblings are secretly jealous that they didn't get to do it, and don't believe anything nice that they say. Pick fights with them. After a couple of weeks, when people stop telling you how wonderful you are and what a good job you did and how proud he would be of you, be annoyed some more.

When people ask you how you are, tell them you can't talk about it. Only talk about it to the dog. Cry on the dog. She seems to like it. But be careful because she gets covered in pollen and thinks goose poop is a delicacy. Relentlessly send your friends needy texts. Experiment with sending a text to your siblings, but then get mad at them and pick a fight instead.

Be prepared for it to spill out at strange times, like during your ukulele lesson. Try not to think about how you played the ukulele for him the night before he died. Try not to think about how you talked about his death twelve days later in your sermon for the "Uke-charist," a Eucharist (communion service) with ukulele music which you and your innovative clergy friend invented. You felt you had to preach it even though your father had just died, because you said you would. You were *fine* at the Uke-charist. You even *enjoyed* yourself. (Feel guilty about that.)

In your lesson, after your sweet teacher arranges a chord melody of "Autumn Leaves" that is a little too hard for you but will keep you absorbed (*read*: focused and numb) for weeks, start to cry when he plays it through. Will yourself not to cry and then sniff up the tears and runny nose as quietly as possible. (Of course you don't have any Kleenex with you. You preached your father's funeral, so you are invincible and don't need Kleenex.) Explain in a steady voice you are sorry but your father loved this song and you will be OK in a minute. When he says "It's all right, just cry," be grateful.

Cry for the rest of the lesson. Be grateful when he asks for a copy of your Uke-charist sermon.

Start to cry in inappropriate places, like the grocery store, when you see citrus

and know you will never taste his good citrus again. Or in the middle of Costco, when you upgrade your phone and lose his saved voice mails. The ones singing happy birthday. That awful one where he couldn't tell if he was talking to you or your voice mail.

After you cry in Costco, your husband will insist you see a therapist, even though you tell him *this is normal. This is what grief looks like*. Remember how difficult your husband was after his father died, and understand. Forgive him. (Mostly. Also wish he had just cried in Costco instead.)

Your first therapy appointment won't be until after you scatter his ashes.

Scatter his ashes five months after the funeral, because it takes longer to cremate people in Arizona, where he lived, than in Virginia, where you live. Agree to officiate the short committal. How hard can it be? No one will ask how you will get through it this time, because no one thinks it will be hard.

Your mom can't make it all the way up the hill where he wanted to be scattered, so agree to scatter partway up. Decide to lug the ashes yourself instead of letting someone take them in the golf cart. Clutch them awkwardly, gasping in the high altitude. Glare at anyone who tries to talk to you. Get annoyed while it takes a long time for everyone to assemble. Sweat, because you walked and clutched the ashes. Get irritated when no one sits next to your mother.

She will change her mind about how she wants it to go at the last minute: she will no longer want you pour out his ashes all at once, as you have been trained to do. Instead, she wants you to invite people to scatter handfuls at a time. And say something as they do.

This is not what you agreed. This does not fit into the *Book of Common Prayer* committal service.

Smile and say of course.

Hardly anyone will scatter ashes. She is the only one who will say anything. Lots

of ashes will be left over. Wonder what to do with them now. Look at the clumps that landed on the side of the hill. Feel angst about leaving them exposed there. Carry the half-full box of ashes back down the hill.

Afterwards, avoid alcohol. It will make you cry or swear at your sister.

Afterwards, be annoyed when a neighbor offers to spread some at a horse pasture and someone else offers to take some to a golf course and your siblings offer to take some all the way up the hill *where he asked to be scattered anyway*.

Everyone will look at you when they make these suggestions. Somehow, you are in charge of the ashes. Wonder where these people were when they were supposed to be flinging ashes off the hill.

Start to drink. Swear at your sister when she asks what to do with the rest of the ashes.

Love the therapist.

After you have started seeing her, your mother will fall and break her hip. Drive to the therapist's office crying and composing her funeral homily in the car. Make notes at the stoplights. The therapist will tell you this is normal and that a broken hip doesn't mean death is imminent.

Christmas will come. His birthday will pass. Your birthday. Your mom will sing to you. Save it on your voice mail.

Start to feel a little bit better.

Then your mother will fall again.

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