

Louise Brown, *What Memories Are Made Of* (tr. Caroline Waight)

Sample translation from

Louise Brown

What Memories Are Made Of

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Translated by Caroline Waight

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INTRODUCTION

Small Apple Trees

or

Every Death Is Unique

The chapel is lined with apple trees. Small trees, three to the left and three to the right of the altar. The scent of their fruit mingles with the sweet, dusty odour of the building.

The apple trees flank two coffins. The coffins bear a married couple, Karlin and Hermann, who died soon after one another. Two coffins are unusual for a funeral service, but I don't find the sight disconcerting. It's comforting, actually, to know that a couple who spent more than sixty years together will be given a final farewell together too.

The coffins are decorated with roses, sunflowers and apples. Sunbeams fall through the stained-glass window above the altar, bathing everything in a warm light. I stand at the lectern and gaze at the empty pews. In a few minutes they will be filled with the relatives and friends of the deceased. My heart beats faster at the thought that as a funeral celebrant, it is my privilege to give the couple's farewell speech. I will stand at the pastor's lectern and officiate throughout the ceremony.

In my eulogy, I will talk about the life and death of these two people. As always, I hope that I can help ease a little of the relatives' pain; that I can support them on their path into their new life without the deceased.

There is no formula for a perfect eulogy. But when a daughter says she feels as though her father was present at the ceremony, and that she found this comforting, or when a guest asks me whether I knew the deceased – then I know that my words have

touched at least some of my listeners. Or that some of those present have recognised themselves and their loved-one in them, and that these words have created some semblance of familiarity, at least for the duration of the ceremony, at a time when so much seems alien to the bereaved. It takes more than data and facts to write a good eulogy, I think. But what images and snapshots from a person's life should be added to the facts? Which memories are the right ones, the most important ones? Which ones will make it feel almost as though the person is present at this moment? In this at times painful yet wonderful role, I have thought about these questions more and more often. What memories should we hold onto? What do we want to remember? What remains of us when we die? What do we leave behind?

Several months after the service, I'm standing at a market stall, buying apples. As I hold one in my hand, I can't help thinking of Karlin and Hermann's

funeral. I can smell the apples on the little trees and see the soft light on the coffins. And then another image comes to mind: a house on the outskirts of a small north German town. Fruit trees in neat rows outside the windows. I see a living room and a rug that has been rolled back, and middle-aged couples dancing the foxtrot to a popular song on the bare wooden boards.

It is in this living room that I sat with the family before the funeral. Before a eulogy, I meet with the relatives to gather information and thoughts on the deceased. In Karlin and Hermann's case, I spoke to their adult children. Sitting at their parents' dining table, I noted birthdays, wedding anniversaries and death dates; I wrote the words 'family farm, asparagus and pigs' and that the couple had transformed the farm into a tree nursery. I wrote that this had become their life's work. That their father preferred mealy apples and their mother crunchy ones. That they moved into adjoining rooms in a care

home two weeks before they died, but were reunited only one week later. Karlin and Hermann had shared a bedroom for sixty-three years. They died within a few days of one another.

As the sunlight fell across the coffins in the chapel, I told their story, describing how they had lived for their nursery, how hard work and a sense of duty had governed the course of their lives just as the seasons governed the flourishing of the trees, and how they had followed the same daily routine for decades: rising at dawn, serving lunch for their employees at midday, and at the end of the day, enjoying their sandwiches in front of the television. And I recalled how on Friday evenings they would drop everything and dance with friends in their living room to the music of the singer James Last, until – in my mind, at least – the stars twinkled above the fields.

I can still see this image today, when I'm at the market, buying apples. It still warms my heart. Karlin's and Hermann's story was one of my first as a

celebrant, and perhaps that is why I was so moved by it. It showed me that we are often more than we appear to be. That we all have surprising and contradictory sides to us, and that it is death that sometimes reveals these idiosyncrasies. Experiencing a loss can make us take a break from the frantic pace of everyday life and take a closer look at what is around us. Then, sometimes, we discover what makes a person unique. It may be revealed more in the details than in grand gestures – details that are frequently overlooked in our daily lives. This was one of the first things I realised as a celebrant: how unique and precious we are in our ordinariness.

Often, when I first meet a grieving son or daughter, they will say, ‘I’m really not sure what to say about my mother.’ We’ll talk about her death first, and then about her life. When her children start to tell me about their mother – sometimes concisely, sometimes in detail, sometimes fast and sometimes slowly,

sometimes leaving gaps, because they don't know when, for example, she began her professional training or met their father; when the thread of thoughts and words slowly begins to spin and the outside world falls away; when family members talk over one another, laughing and crying: it's an intense moment. I see their faces come to life. Something begins to shine in their eyes. Often, I can sense their relief at having told these stories. It's a relief that stems from being able to tell them in all their detail, but equally it's because the story of their loved-one is also their own.

There are apparently scientific studies proving that our body temperature increases when we actively remember things. I am not a scientist. Everything I write here is based on my personal experience. But I like the thought that stopping to recall the past warms us from within, making our hearts beat faster and allowing us to feel once more emotions often buried by grief.

When a daughter describes how her mother had to flee across a frozen sea at the age of six, or how their family home was destroyed by a flood and her mother looked after the children and the business on top of cleaning the house; how she cared for her grandchildren after her daughter's marriage broke down and later, despite suffering from cancer, helped in her children's shop ... when a daughter tells me things that are known in the family but haven't been considered in their entirety before, and she suddenly becomes aware of their significance, I'll see her lean back at the end of our meeting, astonished at the densely scribbled pages in my notepad, and say, 'I never thought there was so much to say about my mother.' Or: 'My mother actually accomplished quite a lot in life.'

There are two fundamental events in our lives: birth and death. While newborns introduce themselves with a fanfare of crying, a dying person bids farewell in profound silence. Even if there are

doctors or family members bustling around when the end comes, if machines are beeping or voices raised, many relatives experience the moment of death – at least, this is how they describe it – as though it were happening in slow motion, or as though time stood still. And in the minutes or hours after death, something of this stillness remains, like a silent echo in the room: a stillness that many of us no longer heed, nor wish to.

I don't want to repeat what's so often claimed: that even dying and mourning were better in the old days. In the days when Grandma would be laid out at home, and family, neighbours and friends could come to say goodbye in familiar surroundings. When leaving-taking was still a shared experience, whereas today it's a lonely affair that we are left to deal with by ourselves. In the course of my work I have met many families who have stayed with their loved-one after death, sometimes for half an hour, sometimes for a whole day, sitting on the edge of hospital gurneys or

gathering round sickbeds at home, lighting candles, playing their loved-one's favourite music or stroking their hand. While they leave their commitments and everyday concerns at the door, if they don't enjoy those last silent hours, then at least they appreciate them later. Or at least that's how they recall it: how good it was to spend that time with their departed. How being with them, whether alone or with other relatives, continued to resonate long afterwards.

My mother died at night, in the palliative care unit of a rural hospital. The following day she was laid out in a small white room, the 'Room of Silence'. I arrived in the morning, rushing in from the big city to be with my father, who sat slumped at the edge of her bed. As I entered the room, my feelings threatened to overwhelm me. The sight of my mother seemed to make the pain even worse, as though something was tearing inside me. For my father, on the other hand, the hours he spent at the bedside of his late wife were

painful but necessary. He would have preferred to stay with her, with the woman who had accompanied him for more than fifty years. She was still within his reach at that moment, yet at the same time she had slipped away.

As the wind rustled in the poplars outside, the silence in the room became too loud for me. Perhaps because I had never experienced any silence so final. Until then, my brushes with death had been few. An experienced journalist who had travelled through a terror state and flown to the end of the world in a British military aircraft, I froze in the hospital corridor, numbed at the sight of my dead mother. It was as if I was standing on the edge of an abyss, an experience that was humbling and frightening, and one that took me back to the cartoons of my childhood, where a trapdoor would suddenly open in front of Scooby Doo and he would fall through, tumbling helplessly through the darkness.

Losing a person you love for the first time is a turning point. Afterwards, nothing is ever the same. That sounds gloomy, and gloomy is often how it feels. Yet the experience of loss can also open up possibilities. It did for me. Or rather, it proved to be a profound lesson. Perhaps the most important one in my life so far.

Much of what I have learned by stumbling across that threshold into life as a grieving daughter is based on my own experience. Other lessons I have drawn from the deceased and their loved-ones, people I have spent time with during the course of my work as a funeral celebrant. Each of these encounters has moved me, and from every conversation I have taken something valuable for which I am still grateful today.

In this book, I would like to share some of the lessons I learned on this journey. About what it means to be mortal. About embracing our impermanence. About how we can live with death.

You might recognise yourself in my
experiences. You might discover something useful.
You might prefer to put this book aside right now.

Death is always individual. Listening to the silence
following a loss, you might hear something. You
might discover something about the departed. About
yourself. About life itself.

But let us rewind for a moment. It all began with a
hamster by the name of George.

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Part I

Confronting Death

A Hamster Named George

or

My First Encounter with Death

I consider it an ironic twist of fate that I, of all people, work as a funeral celebrant. During my childhood death didn't exist, at least not in our house in London. It didn't exist in our home until George arrived. George died under mysterious circumstances shortly after his arrival, shortly after biting my father's thumb. My parents had let us children talk them into getting a pet, a supposedly uncomplicated hamster. The wheel in its cage squeaked night and day, until one morning there was an unaccustomed silence. The wheel was no longer turning. We didn't bury George ceremonially in the garden, the way parents do for their children's pets

today. My mother didn't take the opportunity to have 'the talk' with us about death.

Years later, when my English grandmother died, I didn't go to the funeral. It would never have occurred to me to ask my parents if I could join them. My father was born in London in 1932. In our household, we lived by the unspoken Victorian rule that children should be 'seen and not heard'. Perhaps it was their experiences as children during the war that meant my parents didn't want us having to face a sombre topic like death, or the bitter realisation that nothing in life is constant and that love always means loss. Perhaps they didn't want a fresh reminder of the wartime losses they had experienced, directly or indirectly, my mother in Hamburg and my father in London.

When we did talk about the war, it was mainly in the form of positive anecdotes: my mother told us how she and her brother were given sweets by the neighbours while waiting with their mother in the bunker during an air-raid. My father proudly

informed us that when the air-raid sirens went off during his paper round, he would lie on his belly in the street instead of seeking shelter in an unfamiliar building, and would apparently read the newspaper until the attack was over.

After the war, as they were getting to know one another in London, my parents were probably too caught up in the life-affirming swinging sixties to think about the devastation of the years before. In the seventies, they were too busy building up their business to reflect on the stagnation and destruction of wartime. Whatever their reasons, for many years death barely impinged on my everyday life. Then everything changed.

Fast-forward to 2011, and I am reminded of something my English grandmother used to say: *You wait ages for a bus – and then two come along at the same time!* My grandmother belonged to London's working-class. She would always travel by double-

decker bus, often with the obligatory shopping bag and headscarf, over hair that she always put in curlers overnight.

At the age of thirty-six, I had avoided any emotional confrontation with death, until it suddenly crashed into my life twice within three months – not chugging over the hill like a long-awaited double-decker but with the impact of a meteor. First, my mother died. Then, three months later, my father. At the time, I considered myself to be reasonably experienced. As a journalist, I had interviewed artists and politicians, prisoners and the homeless. I thought I knew a thing or two about the world and about life, but after my parents died I realised I knew nothing when it came to death and dying. Despite having travelled the world as a reporter, I had managed to avoid an essential spot on the human map. A spot so barren and lonely that it feels as if you have been abandoned on the moon: the world of grief.

Am I going mad? The thought kept running through my mind in the months after my parents died. At times I felt as though I must be; as if I had fallen down the rabbit hole in *Alice in Wonderland*. When you are grieving, you are not of this world. Instead, you find yourself between worlds: physically present but mentally adrift, like a balloon once tethered and now floating above a grim, stormy landscape. In those first months, I found there were two versions of myself: one that took part in everyday life, that worked, went shopping, and laughed with my child. And one that had curled up into a ball inside, longing for quiet and darkness. One who thought many times about what it would be like to be relieved of all the pain of this world.

Blurred Images

or

The Moments That Remain

Today, I am a little wiser when it comes to grief. At least I hope so. I know, for example, that grief affects everyone differently, and despite long-held beliefs to the contrary, there are no fixed or limited stages.

I know now how a person's surroundings can affect the duration and severity of their grief: that a safety net of family and friends can help considerably following a loss, if not to alleviate the intensity of the person's sorrow then at least to make it bearable. I have found that even as a veteran of grief, you can be hit just as hard by a second loss as by the first. At the same time, I find it comforting to know that this time, you might understand better why you are lying

awake at night, or why you feel like you no longer know yourself.

I also understand now that the chance to express your loss, thoughts, fears and experiences surrounding the death of a loved-one can help to momentarily ease your grief. To talk about and through the pain. If, during the funeral ceremony, you hear an echo of what you told the celebrant – if you feel seen and heard in your grief – this too, can provide some much-needed support on the lonely path to saying goodbye. And it doesn't have to be a professional speaker giving the eulogy or leading the ceremony. It can be a minister, a friend, or a member of the family.

My parents both requested a Christian funeral, and it was my task to tell the minister about them. When I went to see him after my mother died, I felt like I was going for a job interview. What questions would he ask? The minister was a friendly, reserved man with a firm handshake, and he seemed genuinely interested in my mother's life. I told him about her

career and the important stages of her life. In my memory however, the conversation remained superficial and afterwards I felt strangely empty. On the train journey home, it struck me I might have left out something important, but I couldn't think of what that might be.

Years later, after countless interviews with bereaved relatives, I realise what it was: I didn't tell the minister about my mother's muddy knees after she'd been weeding her beloved flowerbed. I didn't tell him how, when I was a teenager, she drove through a snowstorm and along icy country roads to pick me up after a night at a disco. I didn't tell him how much she loved to swim in the lake in the autumn, while other people hurried past in their coats. And I didn't tell him about her neck, which I loved to cuddle up to as a child because her skin was so soft and warm and smelled so good. And how, when she fell sick, her neck didn't smell as sweet as before.

When the minister gave his address at the funeral, it felt as though we were separated not by a lectern but by a gulf. Was he really talking about the person I had loved, with whom I had spoken, laughed or bickered every day? Was he speaking about the person lying in the coffin in front of me? Everything seemed unreal at that moment, as though I were at the wrong funeral. It wasn't the minister's fault that I didn't recognise my mother in his words. He was working with the information I had given him. Only, back then, I didn't realise which memories would be especially meaningful for me later. Which details I would remember and want to remember after the initial shock of loss, when you feel numbed inside. In the fog of early grief, I had clung to the facts of her career and the milestones in her life. For some, these details may be important and sufficient for a eulogy. But I missed the crucial images that distinguished my mother, which would become just as important to me as the milestones.

Perhaps it's like a photo album: often, the funniest, most honest and most authentic images are at the back. The photographs taken on the fringes of more official occasions like holidays, award ceremonies or fiftieth birthday celebrations. The pictures that weren't posed. The ones you deliberately didn't put in the album, because they were blurred or grainy. The ones that often go unnoticed but you still can't throw away, because looking at them moves something inside you. The ones that are so full of life.

There is the picture of a mother with a blob of cream on her cheek, baking a birthday cake. One of some teenagers dancing at a party, their eyes red from the flash, pulling all sorts of weird moves. Or one of a father wearing a bloodied butcher's smock, bending over his young daughter on her bicycle. This image has remained especially vivid in my memory. I can still recall the man's daughter telling me when we met before the funeral how her father would always make

time for her when she wanted to practice riding her bike in the yard, even after a twelve-hour shift at the butcher's.

Or perhaps it's like a film, when they show the outtakes after the final credits: at the end of someone's life, it's often the less-than-perfect moments that linger in our memories. Those moments which reveal our unpolished, human side. In my case, it took the death of my parents to make me realise how precious these imperfect moments are. At first we might not regard them as important, but later they can bring us so much warmth.

What Remains – Stamina and Resilience

Anna died in a home, in the spring. She was frail, but had suffered no serious illness until her death. She simply fell asleep in her armchair at noon, in her room with a view over a cherry tree, and never woke up. Nature – fields and forests – was something she took pleasure in all her life. That joy went back to her childhood.

Anna was born in 1925 and grew up in Zossen, in Brandenburg in eastern Germany. Her parents were farm workers for the same landowner, her father a labourer and her mother working in the fields. Anna had two beloved sisters. At lunchtime she would bring her father his meals out in the field. She remembered these moments until the end of her life: the canal, the

yellow kingcups, the grasses and the scent of the meadows.

Her father died of cancer when he was only thirty-seven. Anna, herself just fourteen at the time, had no choice but to work. It was 1939. She was sent to Berlin in the middle of the war. There she found a job as a maid. More than that: she was lucky enough to be welcomed by the family she worked for, remaining on friendly terms with them for many years.

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During our meeting, Anna's grown-up children told me how important it had been to their mother to provide them with a comfortable home. How well she baked, and how she could always conjure up the most delicious sauces. Yet they told me, too, how she would serve them the turnips they hated, knowing

full well they didn't like them. And that at times she found it difficult to express her love. They recalled how their mother enjoyed going for walks in nature. That she started writing poetry in her sixties, reflecting on the past in her poems, which revealed her sensitivity and love of life – but also a sense of melancholy, of mourning for times that would never return. Anna held on to her childhood memories to the end of her life. She kept them alive in her poems, which she read to her family even at the age of ninety. In conversation, however, she found it difficult to show her feelings. She couldn't always express her gratitude for the support she received from her family in old age. But in a poem she read to the family towards the end of her life, she wrote:

'Rejoice every day of your life. The years hasten by as though in a tempest, like a rose in bloom that smells sweet in the morning yet by evening has withered. I

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have had bread, and I have been given roses – how happy I was to hold both in my hands.’

I remember Anna’s story to this day. It seemed emblematic of the fate of so many people who grew up during the Second World War. People who had to run through burning cities with children in their arms, desperate to get to safety. Or who were sent to the front as teenagers and returned from battle as men. People forced to flee after the war, leaving everything they knew behind, only to be treated like strangers in their own homeland. As a celebrant, I have heard many of these stories, and each has moved me in its own way. After listening to them, I have often wondered how those people later coped with their lives.

Before I started working as a celebrant, I thought of the war mostly as a matter for the history books.

Something internalised in fragments: a collection of facts, figures and events. Although I was always interested in history, it only really came to life for me through my work as a celebrant. Now, I experience the history of this country through its people and their life stories. While they contain their fair share of disruptions and blows of fate, there are also new beginnings, improvisation and moments of joy. Stories of stamina, resilience and hope.

These stories aren't always about war. I hear about people who have endured all sorts of trials and tribulations. People who kept going despite life-changing challenges and got back to their feet after being knocked down hard. These people have given me courage. They have shown me that often, mountains that seem at first impossible to scale are actually just hills, and can be mastered. They helped me understand that sometimes you have to pass through the eye of the storm in order to emerge on the other side. It is the obstacles we encounter and

our ability to endure or overcome them that define us as human beings.

Perhaps you are thinking of a difficult period in your own life. Of how you did not believe you would ever re-emerge from the darkness, but you did. When we think back to these periods, we realise that in challenging moments we often have the strength we need to keep going. For a long time, the loss of my parents felt like a terrible rupture in my life. It felt unfair that they had died before other parents. And yet, they had both been over seventy. They had lived, loved and experienced many things. Working as a celebrant proved to be a wake-up call. It showed me the real meaning of unfairness, and set me straight about when we're entitled to complain about injustice in this world. When I met two teenagers whose father had died of cancer in his early fifties. When I spoke to a woman who had lost the love of her life just as they were about to build a life together.

It seems paradoxical that we're constantly confronted with tales of suffering and loss in the news, and yet in our everyday lives we never seem to be prepared for the fact that we will one day lose a person we love. It took me a long time to accept suffering less as a disruption and more as a part of life, a variation in its soundtrack. Until I learned to see loss and pain for what they are: elements of life. Until it became easier for me to accept fate instead of railing against it and wallowing in my own suffering.

I don't want to sugar-coat suffering. I've never been fond of sayings like, 'What doesn't kill you makes you stronger.' Because what doesn't kill us sometimes almost does. And what almost kills us can leave deep cracks and scars. Scars that don't always heal well, and shape us forever.

The author Julian Barnes, writing after the death of his beloved wife, compared re-emerging from grief to a gull dragging itself out of an oil-slick:

Eventually it learns to fly again, but with oil still sticking to its feathers.

It's this will to survive that has often impressed me when writing about those that have left us: this and their frequently underestimated ability to accept fate and make the best of life despite lingering scars. Dealing with death and with my own painful losses has made me aware of how tough we human beings are. How resilient we can be. How strong we are – often much stronger than we think.

What Do You Mean, “Power Speaker?”

or

A Job with Responsibility

‘What do you do for a living?’ a mother asks me at kindergarten, as we wait for our children in the cloakroom. ‘I’m a journalist,’ I reply, as I usually do, and then I think for a moment. Strictly speaking, that’s no longer true. Taking a deep breath, I say, ‘But I recently switched careers. These days I work as a funeral celebrant.’

The other mother looks up from the jacket she is shaking out. I see the surprise and uncertainty on her face. Then she says, ‘Wow, that’s interesting.’ It’s the first time I’ve told a stranger about my job, despite having worked as a celebrant for several months. I don’t know why I have been so hesitant to

tell people. Maybe because I wasn't sure how people would react.

The profession is still rare, although according to the undertakers I have spoken to, demand for secular celebrants has steadily increased in recent decades. So perhaps it's not surprising that many people are still unfamiliar with the concept when I mention it. In German, the word for funeral celebrant is 'Trauerredner', which sounds like the words 'Power-Redner', or 'power speaker'. As a result, when people ask about my profession, I often see a flicker of confusion on their faces and hear the response: "Sorry, did you say 'power speaker?'" Which is not an unreasonable leap, given that Germans often like to incorporate English words into their speech.

As it happens, 'power speaker' wouldn't be the worst description for a role that does demand strength: the strength to empathise with the bereaved without being overwhelmed by their emotions. To

radiate calm during a service, even when you don't feel composed. To absorb the pain of those grieving without being consumed by it. This is something else I have come to understand: that another person's pain is often your own as well. Those who have experienced a serious loss are often reminded of it by their next encounter with death, like an old scar that makes itself felt on cold days.

It is often said that people are afraid to think or speak about death and dying, which is why I was initially hesitant to talk about my work. Over time, however, I have learned that there is no reason to hold back when it comes to my profession. In fact, when I do talk about it, I am usually met with interest and a certain respect, which I don't feel I necessarily merit. People such as doctors, paramedics or nurses, who do battle with death at extreme moments in life – death, illness or birth – deserve far more respect than I do.

I get a wide variety of reactions to my job. Men will often ask, ‘Have you ever seen *Six Feet Under*?’ It is a darkly comic American TV series that has won numerous awards, set in a funeral home. Presumably they are secretly hoping I’ll share an anecdote or two. Women will often ask whether the job is depressing or whether it gets me down. To which I can only reply, ‘Yes, sometimes it does. But at the same time, I’ve never done anything more meaningful in my life.’

Another question I often hear from relatives at the end of a meeting, posed with halting curiosity as I’m putting my notebook back in my bag, is, ‘So how do you become a celebrant?’

Certainly not because I dreamed of working for a funeral home as a child. Back then I wanted to be a paediatrician, which isn’t the best choice if you can’t stand the sight of blood. I have loved writing since childhood and I have always been curious, so I became a journalist. Several years after my parents’

death, I interviewed an employee at a funeral home, who, as he accompanied me to the door, asked whether I had ever considered writing eulogies. Until then I didn't know funeral celebrants existed, as in my experience, eulogies in Britain were mainly given by a minister or by family members or friends.

I couldn't get the idea out of my head. The more I read and thought about it, the more I found myself wondering whether it would be possible to start in the industry as a newcomer. When I did finally enter the world of cemeteries and funeral parlours, I learned that many people employed there had varied professional backgrounds, having worked previously as hoteliers, bankers or legal assistants. Many of them had experienced terrible losses, and had made a conscious decision to engage with death in their everyday lives.

The comedian Jerry Seinfeld apparently once quipped that more people are afraid of public speaking than

they are of dying – which is why at a funeral you are better off in the coffin than at the lectern. For many years, the mere thought of speaking in front of strangers made me break out in a cold sweat. When graduating from high school, I had to undergo an oral exam in which I discussed the evolution of the salamander – why, the teacher asked, were the animals on the island blue? I only got through this ordeal thanks to a sympathetic teacher.

Not long ago, I would have thought you were mad if you had told me I would one day be standing in front of a congregation, grappling with the near-impossible task of finding the right words for a funeral service. It is a task with great responsibility. You can't repeat a wedding speech on the day, but given the current divorce rate, you might get the chance to reattempt it in the future. A eulogy, however, is a one-off. It cannot and will not be repeated. And since a funeral comes at a time when many bereaved families are finding everyday life and

their emotions spiralling out of control, they are all the more preoccupied by the details of the funeral ceremony. This means even the tiniest errors can turn into disasters. If the ribbon on a wreath reads ‘Hinrich’ instead of ‘Heinrich’, the widow will remember the mistake forever. The pressure is on for everyone involved – the funeral director, the organist and the florist – to deliver a ceremony as perfect as possible.

The same goes for the celebrant, too, who is supposed to speak with dignity but not be too stilted: ‘Please don’t be too formal!’ is something I often hear from the bereaved. It’s also important to make sure your choice of words doesn’t aggravate any conflicts between relatives, and that you address the mourners in such a way that no one feels neglected – sometimes a delicate balance when dealing with adult children. There can be no mixing up of wedding dates, no forgetting of job titles and certainly no mispronouncing of the Finnish name of

the deceased's eighth great-grandson. As a non-native speaker, it is equally important to avoid any grammatical errors.

The pressure to deliver a successful eulogy that speaks to everybody in the room – correct, informative, empathetic, dignified, individual and authentic – is high.

Heavy Tears

or

An Attempt to Make Sense of Things

So why do I do this? Why do I seek out the suffering of others? When I am preparing for a eulogy and my breath catches as I notice the deceased's date of birth – 1985! When my heart sinks as I am asked to write a eulogy for an elderly lady whom I remember clearly, because I gave the eulogy for her husband only a year before. Or when I'm in the cemetery afterwards, saying goodbye to the proud, tall gentleman who kept his composure for his wife throughout the ceremony, and a single, fat tear rolls down his cheek.

Perhaps it's a desire to transform the pain of my loss into something useful, even positive, that motivates me. To do something meaningful with the

skills I acquired as a journalist, now that I have become aware of my own mortality.

Perhaps it's an attempt to make sense of my loss, which at the time seemed merely senseless. An attempt to understand death, dying and everything connected to it. To comprehend grief and what it did to me: why I felt as if I had aged years within a few weeks and at times as if I was losing my mind. Perhaps it's an attempt to work out what can bring us strength and peace at times of sorrow. How I – or we – can learn to live with grief. As is so often the case, it's the small, unconscious steps that lead to the biggest leaps in life. At least in my experience, since becoming a funeral celebrant was certainly not part of my plans. Yet perhaps the question isn't so much why I chose this path, but more why I have stuck to it.

Maybe an answer can be found in experiences like these:

It's summer and I'm in a village chapel, giving a eulogy for a woman who died of cancer in her early fifties. There are small bouquets of lavender on all the pews. The coffin is strewn with lavender as well, because each year, the woman and her partner used to drive down to the South of France in their Volkswagen Bus. In the chapel, I talk about how they had picnics in the lavender fields. How they played together in a band. During the ceremony, we play French chansons by Édith Piaf and Jacques Brel. And we hear the deceased herself, the recording of a song she sings accompanied by her band. As her clear, warm voice mingles with the scent of lavender, as she sings of the sea and of longing, I see her friends and family sobbing in the pews before me. Tears shine on their cheeks, and yet their eyes are alight. They are crying with pain. And they are crying with happiness. The room is filled with sorrow and joy at the same time – like nothing I have ever experienced before. For the first time in my life, I see people able to show joy even in their grief.

One autumn day, a small funeral procession gathers around an urn in a woodland cemetery. A flock of wild geese shoot like black arrows across the white sky above. The grave is directly underneath an oak tree. As the funeral director lowers the urn into the grave, an acorn falls in after it, landing on the urn in the hole with a solid *clunk*. For a moment, nature has captured everyone's attention. Like clouds parting for a fleeting moment, their faces briefly lighten.

On another day, I speak at a ceremony for a woman who, at the age of ninety-four, once spontaneously abandoned her walking frame on the pavement to try out a stranger's scooter. It's not exactly a giggle that ripples through the chapel, but like a soap bubble bursting, the tension in the room is momentarily released. The memories of the last months fade away: the falls, the weeks in hospital that followed. In these minutes, the woman is present once again, as the

cheery, humorous and lively person her friends and family knew her to be.

Experiences like these make me realise that grief does not consist merely of sadness. That grief isn't made up of one single emotion but can entail many different feelings, including joy. That when mourning or when dying, you are allowed to smile or laugh. That humour can help get us through those dark hours. And that it is often the people we have lost who lead by example, who show us how to face the gravity of life with a certain lightness, even to the point of death.