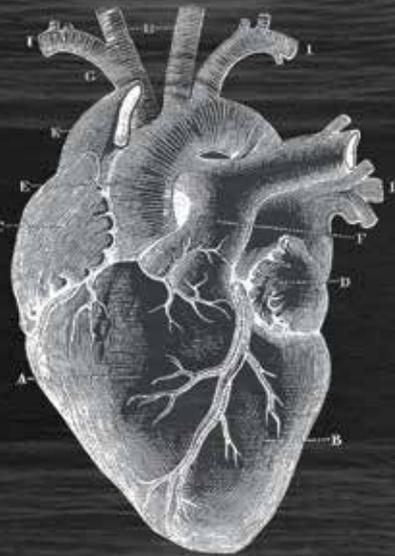


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WORLD CUP WOES / DEB BALL REVIVAL / INSIDE VILLAWOOD / CHICKEN OR THE EGG? / UNDERSTANDING GRIEF



Megan, her brother Gareth, and her dad Barry



Hannah and mum Janien

Time Heals



HANNAH EDENSOR CONFRONTS THE LOSS OF A PARENT.

IT WAS 4:40AM WHEN MY MUM DIED. I was holding her hand while she lay still in the hospital bed. Her breath was ragged, like she was swallowing knives. She hadn't opened her eyes in 17 hours.

I woke up my step-dad and sister, and we took our turns saying goodbye. I wish now that I had stayed longer, stood with her lifeless body a few minutes more, just to tell her how much I loved her. But we'd done that already, in the days prior, when we could still see feeling in her eyes. That morning, at 4:40am, would be the last time I ever saw my mother, and it's a memory that will linger, unwelcome, forever.

People say it gets easier with time. I'm not one of those people, because grief isn't some cookie-cutter condition that people experience equally. It's as individual as a birthmark. We long to understand how grief works, and why we experience it differently. Is it rational to hate the world one day, feel lifeless the next, and smile occasionally through teary eyes?

Even when you have three people from different families, all experiencing the loss of a parent, there are few similarities. No one will ever know how you feel, and that can be the scariest thing of all.

Megan's dad died in September, four months before my mum. She was 20 years old. He suffered from acute myeloid leukaemia. The day he was diagnosed was the last day where he didn't wake in a hospital bed. I watched Megan and her family suffer for months in the lead up to his death, not knowing that my family would soon be experiencing something similar.

"I was there everyday, twice a day, during the time that he was sick," Megan explained to me one day. "It all happened so quickly, I was just trying to keep my head above water."

Megan has been my best friend since we were 15. We have one of those indestructible bonds that we built, brick after brick, throughout our parents' illnesses. From my mother's diagnosis in 2010, to each losing a parent, there hasn't been a single thing we haven't shared.

It's one of the most poignant aspects of our friendship. To bond over the death of a parent is the most heartbreaking thing of all.

Jake* lost his mum when he was 10 years old. She died from ovarian cancer, just like my mum, but at 10, it meant something entirely different to him than it does to me at 22. He tried to read about it, but couldn't fully understand the consequences of the illness that took his mother. It came as a shock to him, but when he thinks about the difficulty of explaining to a child that their mother was dying, he doesn't hold anyone to blame.

"I only really think about it when I'm asked, or if I'm wondering how different life would be

if events went otherwise." Jake and I have never really talked about our mums before, but when you hear the sound of sorrow in another person's voice that comes from a similar place as yours, it can be overwhelming.

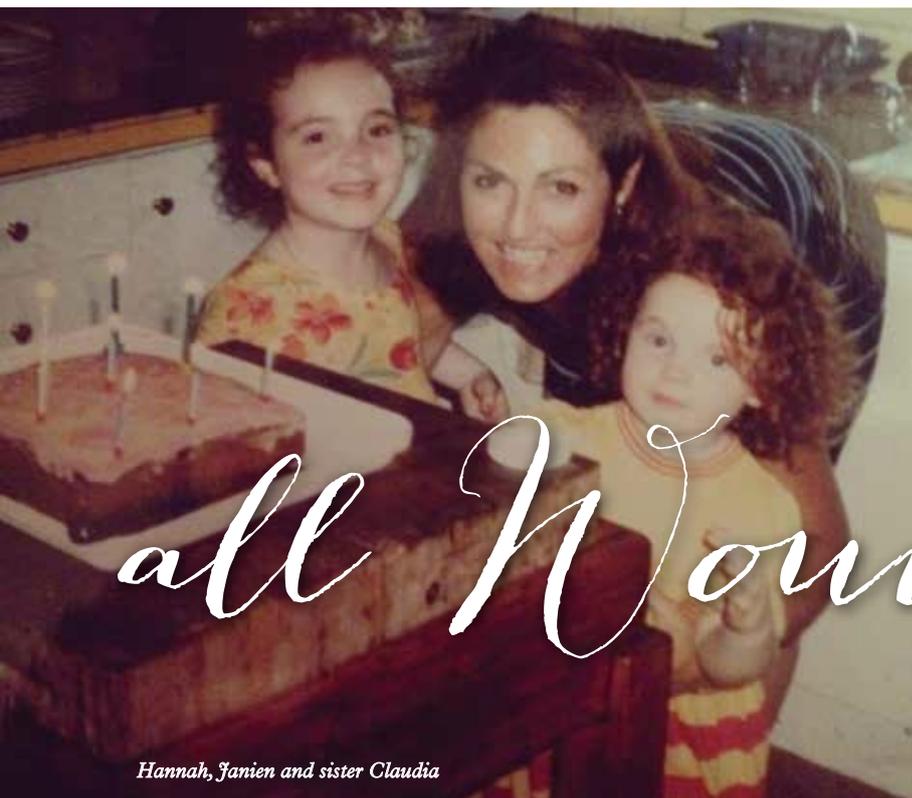
"I wouldn't describe it as hard. Describing it as hard implies there is something you can do to change or work at to make it better. It seems better to describe it as an event that you either choose to grow with or let it destroy you."

It's probably the most heartrending and intelligent thing I've ever heard Jake say. We joke about a lot of things, and in my mind, mothers were always off limits. I've never felt entirely comfortable talking to people who suffered before I did. They know where I'm coming from – they've already been here – and I feel like the last thing they want is to relive it through the eyes of someone else.

I was overseas when I got a phone call telling me to come home. I've never felt more sick, sleepless or hopeless in my whole, entire life. I flew for 32 hours to get back to my mum's bedside, where I watched her scream, cry and fight just to look at our faces for a few more days.

I'll never forget the day she asked my sister and me for permission to go. She held our hands and whispered, "I just can't do it anymore. I've had enough."

All I could do was wipe away my tears and, through blurry vision, take in her beautiful face, knowing that saying yes was all she needed. She died three days later.



Hannah, Janien and sister Claudia



Megan and Barry

all Wounds

A friend of both Megan and I once told us that she was in awe of the fact we could still get out of bed each morning. I still don't know how to respond. Some days are hard, and it takes a lot of stumbling and strength to drag myself out of the house. Other days, I just forget. I push every sad thought that lives inside of me to the perimeters of my mind, and just get on with the day. Then sometimes, out of nowhere, I'll smile for no reason, and walk a little taller than the day before. Most days are a step forward, and even though I'll have days that send me spiralling backwards, I feel as though each day is getting easier.

"I think about him every second of every day," Megan told me. "But the hardest thing is accepting that this is the way he was taken."

Grief can only really be explained by analogy. It is neither precise nor discrete. It is coming home to a once lively house and finding it empty. It's watching flowers wilt on the mantelpiece, and it's feeling like you've got a heavy sack of potatoes pressing down on your chest. It is also many other things.

I remember my mum fondly as someone who was vibrant, ambitious and adventurous. She used to dance to every song on the radio, laugh at the Specsavers ads on TV, and eat little crumbs of food she found lying around the house. She would talk about wanting grandchildren, and encourage me to travel, then cry and beg me to stay with her instead.

Then cancer wracked her body. It was indiscriminate. Her cells, her spirit and her vitality fell victim in equal measure.

"Cancer is a shit way to die and I don't like to accept that people die." I'm asking Jake if he holds any resentment, but at 22 he's wise beyond my years.

"You don't really have a choice, so if you accept it or not, it [death] will still happen."

Jake tells me it gets easier with time. He's more than a decade ahead of me in grieving time, but I can't help wondering how you grieve at the age of 10. He explains that he didn't fully comprehend the situation, and it makes me question if it takes a few years to sink in, that maybe the grieving starts later when you finally understand.

"I'm not sure if I could say it gets easier with time." I'm asking Megan the same question. "Maybe you just become stronger, or maybe you just get used to the fact that that person is gone."

I ask myself some of the same questions, but I feel that at three months, I'm not the right person to ask. I still feel resentment, I still feel like there's a clichéd ache in my bones, and I still cry when I see anything that mentions Mother's Day on TV.

Megan tells me that perhaps the strongest people are given the biggest battles, and that we suffer like this because no one else can. Jake tells me that despite what people may say, the only thing for grief is time.

For me, time has made things harder and I still have to stop myself from dialling Mum's number because I've forgotten she's not here.

The world can dish out some shitty deals, we just have to find a way to keep moving forward.

In the end, I think we all grieve in our own unique and heart-wrenching ways and there's no right or wrong way to go about it.

We can't judge because someone is devastated by a break-up, while you're battling through the death of a parent, despite often thinking it might be smaller by comparison. Even when it feels like no one understands, we can't always pretend that everything is OK.

Admitting to grief is hard, understanding it is even harder. But when all you've got is that five-letter word, and a small sliver of hope poking out from behind the clouds, all you can do is close your eyes and know that someday it won't hurt so badly. **O**

**Name has been changed.*

TO BOND OVER THE DEATH OF A PARENT IS THE MOST HEARTBREAKING THING OF ALL.