

Obituary, Perhaps

Miranda Overett

We always said that we would celebrate when he died, my mum and I — though I was never sure quite how. Perhaps there would be bright paper hats and pineapple and cheese on sticks, or cocktails and wine, or hot chocolate by the pint.

We might make a picnic, take it to the top of a cliff and look out at the view — lounge, unguarded, without ever touching the edge. Walk freely, breathe at our own speed, and stop to notice the details; the mushroom cap colours, the precise fingertips of the wind.

Or perhaps we would fly to the Caribbean to be without him on the beach. Sweep ourselves out into the shimmering street and cast joyful nets around the passers by — bring boomboxes, sound systems, megaphones, opera singers and brass bands, sing loud and happy, throw our arms around the world and invite everyone in.

Perhaps.

Still, it's the first rule of party planning; never start anything until you know the date. So we waited a long time with our fantasies, our small, wistful guilt; made surreptitious searches for his name, crossed our fingers during flu season. The two of us, bound tight by knowing what it means for him to be alive, spent months — then years — heavy with hoping and wishing that we did not have to hope. Burying our anticipation in polite company and whispering to it at night.

Which is why it was such a shock, that it was such a shock when he died.

People die at the most ordinary times, I've found. Not actually just as you're poised to make some great leap — no buzzing of the phone while you slip into someone else's arms, no weeping in your wedding dress or at the airport gate — suddenly bloodless and shocked between your sandals and your wide-brimmed hat. Because death does not snuggle into our schedules — it prefers to leave the parties unplanned.

He died on a Tuesday, just after I got home from the supermarket. Our dog — still a puppy — had eaten something mysterious, and I was rubbing away congealing vomit stains with a wet wipe while she leaped happily around my ankles. I wasn't thinking of party poppers or the Puerto Rican sun or full stops or open doors, just hoping none of it got on my hands, and kicking myself for forgetting to buy washing up liquid.

I would like to say that I felt some shift in the air, some change tugging at my bones, but perhaps I am not so finely attuned, or perhaps his ripples did not reach that far. All I know is that I didn't find out until a few days later.

Hey Rosie, how's the puppy?? Just wanted to say that I saw about your dad in the paper and I'm so sorry for your loss. Thinking of you — let me know if there's anything I can do xx

I did not expect Emma-Louise Barnham to be the one to deliver the news. I'd always imagined a sad, severe police officer on the phone or at the doorstep, hat in hand. Instead, there was Emma. And then there was the obituary.

George Simmons, 68, of Lowestoft, passed away on November 24th from sudden cardiac arrest. He is survived by his daughter Rose.

A retired gardener and football fan, George will be especially remembered by the community at Lowestoft Town FC.

It seemed strange, somehow, that the writer — some young, dispassionate journalist in their home office, bored with getting obit-duty yet again — was not celebrating — we had waited so long for this! If this was how I was going to find out, I wanted clipart. I wanted exclamation marks. I wanted *George Simmons finally died. Thank fuck!*

Instead, apparently, he would be missed, and missed by a whole community no less, and they had printed my name alongside his — they had dragged us back together after all my skin-tearing, muscle-ripping efforts to pull us apart. White hot and lost and nauseous I might have clinched a few of our battles, but he had won the war.

A retired gardener. A football fan.

Where was the truth in that?

With the benefit of distance, I suppose there was some. I remember him out in the garden, kneeling on the soft, green pad to protect his knees, earth on his pale blue jeans and his checked shirt. I remember him shouting at the football, teaching me to play goalie in the living room, kicking balloons towards my reaching hands, telling me to keep my eye on the ball.

I remember small moments of my father. But more, I remember George — the gathering clouds behind his eyes, the expression which dropped down dark on heavy days and spoke to something primal in me that said, *run*. I remember all the bulk and shadow of him making

walls where there should have been open spaces, the sickly, rotting weight of his resentments. I remember the hand holding me down, rough and strong against my small bones, and his disdain at my young weakness; his anger that I was not strong enough, not clever enough, not angry enough to hate along with him. More than anything else, I remember him laughing while I begged him to stop.

Where was that? Where was George Simmons, who terrified his young daughter and hit his loving partner, died today. They had not spoken in 15 years.

Where was Rosie Laurent's father, and ex-partner of Joanne Laurent, who wished them ill and made them afraid, passed away on Tuesday. The women he leaves behind no longer have to look over their shoulders in case he has discovered a new way to find them.

And where was George Simmons, who took their love and twisted it until it broke, will be missed by neither.

On the phone with my mother, sharing the happy news, the joy felt odd in my mouth — all its bubbles gone flat. Funny how the last thing I had expected to feel was grief, but my emptiness was something like it.

My father is dead. It's over. He is not coming back.

In the end, I didn't feel much like planning a party. I felt like climbing back under the covers of the last 68 years — going back and editing a bit of code, diverting the butterfly on the first day he became that man, blowing away the clouds before they burst.

After the emptiness, I half expected sadness to follow — like a cold after a sore throat — but it never came. I fed the dog, I met my deadlines, I did not attend the funeral. Though the next time I saw my mum, we took hands and touched foreheads. A small act of prayer, of thanks for what we had lost. A moment to remember that we made it out alive.

A small post-script, a confession.

This story is true, but only some of it has happened yet. The rest of it will come, perhaps, but so far, we haven't reached the end. Me and my mum, we're still holding hands and looking over our shoulders and thinking about drinking cocktails on the beach — and he's still out there, half a stormy eye on us, his hands still rough and strong and waiting.

We talk about the day he dies with a strange, fierce joy — with our hackles raised and our armour up, with something like guilt and something like desperation and something like

pride. She checks the death notices in the local paper, I search for them online — and my heart skips when the phone rings from somewhere that might be a police station or a hospital, when Emma-Louise messages me out of the blue to ask about the dog, to tell me how her daughter's doing, to chat about nothing like my father.

It's a strange fantasy, to dream of celebration and disappointment and regret — not one to be smiled at or indulged, not one to confide in even the closest of friends or strangers in the street, because who would understand? Who would say, it is ok to know you will be glad when he is dead?

What I'm really dreaming of, though, is an ending. I know that when he dies, I will mourn what might have been, but now, in the middle of our waiting, with the party decorations still in the box and the wine uncorked, the sound systems silent, and the strangers passing by unaware, I just want it to be over. I want us to be safe to contemplate our sadness and our joy, to slowly expand back into the spaces he has filled up. I am waiting, and I am hoping, for the shock, for the loss, for the party, for the prayer, for whatever comes after the obituary.

Miranda Overett is a writer of odd experiences — from teaching toddlers in Thailand and dabbling in independent cinema in London, to experimenting with standup comedy in Budapest. Still living in Hungary, she's currently studying for a MA in Creative Writing at the University of Kingston, and her writing has been published by the *Huffington Post*, and in the *Sad Girls Club* literary journal. In 2019, she was one of the winners of the Alzheimer's Society Dementia Poetry Competition, and she received a commendation in the 2018 Crabbe Poetry Competition.