

The Stuffed Frog

Some memories fade with time. Others are simply waiting for the right door to open.



KP STOLLER

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I went out to buy organic sourdough bread rounds as I do once a week.

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That is how this story begins.

Nothing profound. Nothing mystical. Nothing remotely suggestive that within a few minutes I would be sitting behind the wheel of my car sobbing as though several decades had suddenly disappeared.

I had found these sourdough rounds I particularly liked and managed to buy three of them. I would eat one and put two in the freezer.

A successful expedition.

On the way there, however, I happened to glance down a side street in my Bozeman neighborhood.

At an intersection was a memorial.

Flowers.

Stuffed animals.

The kind of spontaneous roadside shrine that tells you what happened without needing a sign.

Someone had died there.

I don't know who.

I don't know what happened.

But there was something about the stuffed animals.

And suddenly I wasn't driving through Bozeman anymore.

I was sitting in a car outside a funeral home in Santa Fe, New Mexico.

And my son Galen was dead.

The Frog

I couldn't go inside.

Other people could. I couldn't.

I sat alone in the car and sobbed.

There are moments in life for which language becomes almost insulting. We reach for words like *devastated* or *heartbroken*, but those are words designed for experiences that remain somewhere within the ordinary range of human suffering.

There was nothing ordinary about burying my sixteen-year-old son.

Galen had a stuffed frog that he always kept beside his bed.

Before the cremation, I gave the frog to my mother.

I asked her to make sure it was placed with him.

That detail came back to me today with astonishing force.

Not the funeral arrangements.

Not conversations with people.

Not what anyone was wearing.

The frog.

Make sure he has his frog.

Even now, writing those words is difficult.

Because I know exactly what the father sitting in that car was trying to do.

There was nothing left for me to fix.

Nothing left for me to protect him from.

Nothing left for me to provide.

But there was still this one tiny thing I could do.

My boy always slept with that frog beside his bed.

So his father wanted him to have it with him.

Decades Disappeared

I have lived an enormous amount of life since that day.

I have practiced medicine. Written books. Treated patients. Fought battles. Loved people. Lost people. Played music. Had extraordinary experiences. Made mistakes. Learned things. Changed my mind about things I once thought I understood.

I became an older man.

But apparently somewhere inside that older man is still the father sitting in that car.

Because one glance at some flowers and stuffed animals beside an intersection brought him back instantly.

Not as a thought.

Not as a story.

As an experience.

I started sobbing.

And what struck me afterward was how little permission the memory required.

It didn't knock.

It didn't ask whether this was a convenient time.

It didn't inquire whether I had sufficiently "processed" my grief.

It simply arrived.

Like a freight train.

Pun very much not intended.

Maybe This Isn't What "Unresolved" Looks Like

We have developed a peculiar vocabulary around grief.

Closure.

Moving on.

Processing.

Healing.

Acceptance.

As though grief were a project and, if we work diligently enough, eventually someone stamps **COMPLETED** across the file.

I'm no longer convinced that's how the deepest losses work.

Contemporary bereavement psychology has actually moved away from the older idea that successful mourning necessarily requires emotionally detaching from the person who died. There is now an entire literature around what researchers call **continuing bonds**—the ways our relationship with someone can remain part of our inner lives long after that person's physical death. ([APA Dictionary](#))

That makes much more sense to me.

Because what exactly would it mean for me to have “gotten over” Galen?

He was my son. My only son.

I don't want to get over him.

I don't spend my days incapacitated by his death. Far from it. I have built an entire life on the other side of that catastrophe.

But building a life after someone dies isn't the same thing as building a life in which they never existed.

And perhaps that is what surprised me today.

The tears weren't evidence that I hadn't moved forward.

They were evidence that Galen had come forward with me.

Some Pain Doesn't Need Fixing

Recently I've been writing about old memories that unexpectedly return.

Some of them seem to benefit from examination.

There are old betrayals, mistakes, misunderstandings and injuries that can change when we look at them with the consciousness we have decades later.

Sometimes an old wound really does contain an unfinished lesson.

But I don't think today's memory does.

There is nothing for me to reinterpret.

Nothing I misunderstood.

Nothing requiring forgiveness.

Nothing to solve.

My son died.

I loved him.

It broke my heart.

And there was a stuffed frog beside his bed.

That's the whole story.

Perhaps we make a mistake when we assume that every recurrence of grief represents unfinished psychological business.

Sometimes pain returns because **love remains**.

The fact that something can still make us cry doesn't necessarily mean it still has power over us.

It may simply mean it still matters.

Someone Else's Memorial

I keep thinking about those flowers and stuffed animals at the intersection.

I don't know whose memorial it was.

Somewhere there may be another family whose world was divided into *before* and *after* at precisely that spot.

People drive past it every day.

Most probably glance at the flowers and continue driving.

Today I did too.

Except for a few moments, I carried whoever died there with me.

Because their stuffed animals reminded me of another stuffed animal.

A frog.

And another death.

And another family.

And a father sitting outside a funeral home who could not bring himself to walk through the door.

That father was me.

He still is.

But he is not all of me.

That's the part I think we sometimes misunderstand about grief.

You don't leave the person you lost behind in order to move forward.

You somehow learn to carry them without carrying the catastrophe every minute of every day.

Most days, the weight is almost imperceptible.

And then one afternoon you glance down a side street.

Three Loaves of Bread

Eventually, I continued on my way.

I bought my sourdough.

Three rounds.

I put two in the freezer.

Life can be almost offensively ordinary that way.

Your heart can travel backward decades while you're running an errand, and twenty minutes later you're standing in your kitchen figuring out which loaf to freeze.

But maybe that isn't offensive at all.

Maybe that's what surviving actually looks like.

The extraordinary and the ordinary occupying the same afternoon.

Death and bread.

A sixteen-year-old boy and a seventy-one-year-old father.

A funeral home decades ago and an intersection today.

And somewhere connecting all of it—

a stuffed frog.

And I know why.

It was one final thing I could still do for my son.

Make sure he has his frog.

Today, for reasons I could never have anticipated when I left the house to buy bread, I remembered.

And I cried.

Not because I have failed to move on.

Not because the intervening years didn't matter.

Not because grief has somehow reclaimed me.

I cried because for one unexpected moment, the distance between then and now disappeared.

And I was his father again.

Except, of course, that isn't quite right.

I never stopped being his father.

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