

# LEARNING TO GRIEVE

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It is the smell of the tube that returns me immediately and viscerally to 1980s London and my twenty-something self. It is a smell like no other I have ever encountered, and nothing at all like the smell of trains (under or over ground) in Australia. It is gritty, sweet, acrid and warm all at once. The air in this Heathrow tube station is specific to London, unlike the airport, which is anonymous, and could be any large airport.

At Hounslow West the train emerges from the tunnel and into the white-skyed light of spring. I am catching the train to visit my grandmother and looking at the backs of terraced houses, all the lives we didn't live. And then, near Osterley, it is the trees: particular shades of green – pale but warm shades unlike the grey-blue of Australian natives. The shape of leaves, the way they are tethered, seems completely strange and completely familiar, as though the images were dormant inside me until called forth by this view. I feel my inner child-self quietly observing, waiting, perhaps, to be noticed. I hardly know what I am feeling. It doesn't quite feel like sadness but more like an echo of a pre-verbal feeling self.

It is raining by the time I walk, a bag in each hand, a map in my pocket, from Russell Square station to collect my key and find my flat. As I open the door to 33 Tavistock Square, I recognise the damp smell of old communal buildings. The walk to the third floor with the marked walls, the generic camel-brown carpet with indistinct but human stains, even the particular twist and narrowing of the stairs as you reach the top – these are like the bedsits I had in Earls Court and Belsize Park in the 1980s. Inside the flat is spacious, much larger than I need, with a view over Tavistock Square Gardens. I even have my own bathroom.

My first bedsit was in a converted house on Earls Court Road, the place so many Australians start when they arrive in London. It was a thin room and smelt of mould or, if I opened the window, carbon-monoxide. It was important to keep the plug in the basin otherwise dirty water would bubble up the plug hole. My Australian friend Jenny called my room 'the corridor'. It was so narrow that if two people were in the room, one had to sit on the bed to create space for the second person to move around. She took a photo of me in my bedsit wearing a blue velvet pinafore dress and said it would make a great cover for a novel by Iris Murdoch. Occasionally, she or another Australian friend would be out of cash or locked out of the youth hostel, and I would sneak them in and let them sleep on the floor for a night or two. They found it quaint that I had to put fifty pence into a meter box to get power and were amused that the 'shower' was actually a plastic tube with two rubber ends, one of which I shoved onto the bath tap while the other was held over my head as I crouched in the bath. I shared a toilet and bath with seven strangers; they remained strangers even though I lived there for over a year.

My twenties – the years of Thatcher, the Rushdie Affair, CND, the miner's strike, the Brixton riots, the IRA, the bombing of Libya, anti-apartheid marches. London was a darker place then, a place divided by class and race and place of origin. At the time, I didn't think of this as gloomy; Thatcher's Britain was what I knew. I was engaged in peace and anti-apartheid events, in the National Union of Journalists, in the race debates within *Spare Rib*, in feminist thought and action, and in literature, reading every contemporary female writer I could find. I was sometimes unhappy, sometimes lonely, always stimulated.

Things I had forgotten:

- How not to make eye contact on a crowded train.
- The dirt under your finger nails after a day in London.
- All the people who smoke on the street.
- The way some English men walk –a slightly delicate canter.
- How it is to walk past four centuries of architecture in five minutes.

Every morning, I leave the flat alert and energetic, slipping into the still air of Tavistock Square West. I cross the quiet street and walk through the Gardens in order to nod at Virginia Woolf, or sometimes at Gandhi. Today I see a squirrel hopping across the grass. The shape of its movement is something I recognise within. It is like an undulating wave, always the same curve, but this doesn't describe it because it is fast as well as smooth. I am losing my words for everyday things. Brenda Miller says, 'The body knows a language the mind never wholly masters' (2002: 8).

The other side of the Gardens is busy, taxis, buses, bikes, all rush past me. This contrast between the calm of the gardens in Bloomsbury and the busy streets is confusing, as if I must switch personas as I shift territory. After a few days, I find myself remembering the way to walk along busy streets. There is a particular speed and tilt that my body adopts and when I do this, I am no longer troubled by crowds. In the evenings, I notice that my walk is slightly faster and somehow more wary – I am aware of the other people on the streets and, if someone walks just behind me for some time, I shift my pace and end up behind them or elsewhere on the pavement. At first, I'm not even aware I am doing this; it is instinct, or memory perhaps from those days when I was young and alone in a less safe London.

I am twenty-one again and light-footed.

I am remembering some of the geography of this city, even though so many things have changed. Walking across Waterloo Bridge, I see the Houses of Parliament behind the London Eye and the steel rods of the Golden Jubilee Bridge. The Houses of Parliament are so clean, like a toy version of themselves, not the dark and gloomy spectacle I remember. And the modern white lines of the new footbridge and the Eye look as if a child had hung a bicycle wheel in the sky. It is as though I have just woken up after a sleep of twenty-five years.

My 'local' is the Bloomsbury Coffee House, a little basement cafe that serves tattie scones, *pain au chocolat* and granola for breakfast. It is down a tiny set of steps on a dull street between Tavistock Dental (whiter teeth from fifty-two pounds) and Hotel Roma, which, from the outside, looks about as far from Rome as you could get. At the Bloomsbury Coffee House, you get a wooden spoon with a number on it as your table number and the sugar is in Lyle Golden Syrup tins. Flowers are placed in jars with rope wrapped around the top and the lamps are made of stacked tea cups.

Today, there is a group of tour guides here, talking about how they deal with unexpected dramas and delays on their tours of London. One of them fills time with Mr Bean impressions. Another uses facts about hotels – she reports that the Royal National Hotel (just around the corner) is the largest hotel in

the UK and eighty-third largest in the world. Biggest is not always best, she says, and having walked past it, I can understand that. Judging from their accents the group includes a French woman, a British man (he of Mr Bean), a South African and an Australian. Before they leave, they check for essentials – their tour notes, a pen, chewing gum.

Now there is no one to listen to, I stare upwards and see the people above walking on the street. I can only see their torsos, no heads, nor lower legs, and so there is something intriguing about them. I notice jackets, hands in pockets, bags and briefcases. I notice dawdlers, marchers, and athletic walkers running late for meetings. It seems an extraordinary feat when two bodies walk past together hand in hand without heads and feet. This is the view of the traveller – the everyday is no longer mundane.

Things I didn't expect:

- Hundreds of ordinary Londoners riding push bikes to and from work, wearing work clothes – what I think of as unprofessional bike riders, unlike our lycra-clad professionals in Australia.
- So many French-speaking people in Bloomsbury.
- The good looks of the young cafe staff.
- All these patisseries.

Of all the gardens in Bloomsbury, Gordon Square Gardens is my favourite. The beds have a slight cottage garden chaos that I love and the trees are large and thick enough to make it feel very private. And, of course, there is the romantic allure of the Bloomsbury set living in houses around the Square including Virginia and Vanessa Stephen in 46 and Lytton Strachey in 51. The Bloomsbury glamour, it seems, never wears off.

My first job was in a Law Bookshop in Chancery Lane. This is where I met Carol, who took it upon herself to show me what London has to offer a young woman with little money but an appreciation of art and literature. Carol was in love with Brian Patten, or perhaps it was Roger McGough, because she talked about them both and I guessed her declared fondness for Patten might have been a ruse. She was a poetry groupie and introduced me to the Liverpool poets, Wendy Cope and performance poetry. We memorised a McGough poem about meat, taking alternate lines each. This, I suppose, was just in case we should ever have the opportunity to recite it to him. Of course, I understood; we were all in love with poets in those days.

A few months later, I got a job at the feminist publisher Virago Press and learned some basic publishing skills. The following year I moved to Chatto & Windus, wooed by their connection with Hogarth Press, which Chatto bought in 1946. Between 1917, when Virginia and Leonard Woolf founded Hogarth Press, and 1946, they published 525 titles. Their author list included: Katherine Mansfield, T.S. Eliot, Clive Bell, C. Day Lewis, Robert Graves, E.M. Forster, Christopher Isherwood, John Maynard Keynes, William Plomer, Gertrude Stein, H.G. Wells, Vita Sackville-West and of course Leonard and Virginia Woolf. Their cover artists included John Banting, Vanessa Bell, Dora Carrington, Roger Fry and

Duncan Grant. Chatto itself had a glamorous publishing history, with authors such as Richard Aldington, Wilkie Collins, W.S. Gilbert, Aldous Huxley and Mark Twain. I was told that my tiny office in William IV Street, Covent Garden was once the office of C. Day Lewis, who was an editor at Chatto in the 1950s. I had the impression that the heating (or rather lack thereof) and the furniture was unchanged since then. This was the year I discovered how to type in fingerless gloves.

Nothing pleased me more than being sent into the archives to find a copy of an old Hogarth contract, one actually signed by Virginia and Leonard Woolf. Imagine me – a twenty-three year old book-dazed Australian touching a page with Virginia's own signature. I spent hours in the London Library researching obscure writers who could be reprinted for the Chatto classics list. I devoured fiction, letters and diaries by and about the Bloomsbury set in order to complete the footnotes for an illustrated book on Charleston.

I meet fellow academics at the University of London and attend seminars, watching as an outsider the dynamics within and across departments. At one seminar, there is a debate about the unconscious, and all the while, the presenter fiddles with his glasses case, seemingly oblivious to the object lesson he offers. The most famous academic there speaks only occasionally and then quite gently, as if aware that he holds the power of destruction. 'We can read theory as story or as fact,' he suggests. I am on the side of reading everything as story, my own memories included.

I don't feel like a mother in London. After fifteen years, it is the first time I have lived for three weeks without my days being dominated by my son's needs and timetable. But more than this, the part of me that mothers is very silent here in London – I don't feel like someone with a child at home. I feel light, irresponsible, anonymous. There's an amusing irony in this, since my research is on cultural representations of mothering and I'm here to attend a motherhood conference. Perhaps my distance from myself-as-mother will make maternal subjectivity clearer?

I didn't want children when I was in my twenties. I was a feminist and I didn't want a life of looking after others. My passion was literature and I had no interest in any of the 'womanly' arts like cooking, cleaning, sewing, good posture, polite conversation, nursing or child care. (Actually, I still have little interest in these things.) I wasn't going to have five children like my mother. Ironically, in making this distinction between myself and my mother, I was really just showing myself to be more like my mother than I realised. My mother always had a career and, although she looked after a husband and five children – did their cooking and washing and so on - she wasn't interested in womanly pursuits either. She aligned herself with men. Her stories about the past were always about things like the time she talked philosophy with Bertrand Russell (a Bloomsbury connection), or her years at Cambridge, one of the few women to read mathematics at the time. At twenty, I didn't see these things about my mother. It took years before I became aware of the extent to which (feminist though I considered myself) I viewed women of the generation older than me primarily through their identity as mothers, as if that one role superseded other identities.

Things I failed to leave behind:

- The image of *The Uncertainty of the Poet* by de Chirico, now hanging in the Tate Modern, previously in the original Tate building, but mainly a postcard in my mind.
- The smell of mint growing in my grandmother's garden in Harrow.

On Sundays, I often caught the tube to Northwick Park and walked to my grandmother's house, cradling fondant fancies under my arm. She was always pleased to see me, as she had been in my childhood, too, when our family lived in the UK. 'Hellooo!' she'd say, stretching out the word, beaming, then turning creakily for the long trek to the kitchen so that I could make tea to go with the cakes. 'Tell me your news,' she'd say, and I would talk about work and then relay any news I had by post from my mother, her daughter, in Australia. She often talked about the past, the days when she was in her twenties, my age then, the days of amateur Gilbert and Sullivan operettas, her admirers, as she called them, learning shorthand, her sisters, how she shocked her parents by taking up smoking and reading the radical papers ... 'I'll just have my one cigarette for the day,' she'd say as she lit up, something she never did in front of me when I was a child, but allowed herself once I was too old to be corrupted. 'A little bit of what you fancy, never did anyone any harm,' was a phrase she made her own. Grandma was a great supporter of both the royal family and Thatcher. 'They know what they're doing.' She didn't question things or judge people or take a cynical view of the world. This was all part of her great charm – this and the fact that she loved me. I never told her I was a member of CND, hated everything Thatcher stood for and read feminist literature. Each week, it was hard to leave her, the dusk walk to the train station and the ride into darkness like a foreshadowing of her death.

The streets around Northwick Park station seem so changed. There are Pakistani delis, Halal butchers, and several off-licences. I don't remember the walk to Grandma's house until I reach the laneway beside it. Blackberries, cowslips, horse chestnut trees – I recognise them all. I find myself almost expecting to be able to visit Grandma. I am on the street outside her house now. It remains quiet and suburban. The front of the house has changed little, but now it is The Lodge, a residential nursing home. Grandma's house was one quarter of a two-storey house, but now it seems to be one house and therefore large enough to be an aged care facility. I know it will have changed inside, but I want to see it anyhow. I knock on the door and wait. Suddenly, I find myself shaking and tearful. As a nurse opens the door, I realise that this is probably not a good idea.

'My name's Rachel,' I say, 'my grandmother died here.' I meant to say lived here. In fact she did die here one night in her sleep. 'I wanted to see...' I can't say more because I'm crying now.

'Oh, I'm sorry,' says the nurse, gesturing me in. 'What was her name?'

I say Grandma's name, but I'm too choked up to say more.

'I don't remember her,' she says, 'Come in. When did she pass on?'

'In 1988,' I reply. The nurse looks startled, as well she might. 'I'm from Australia,' I say, as if to explain how it has taken me twenty-five years to get here. The nurse is looking over her shoulder now, hoping that one of her colleagues might come along. She suggests a cup of tea. They probably offer tea quite often here, just as Grandma did. Eventually, I get a grip on myself and explain that this house was once my grandmother's and that I just want to see it again but don't want to intrude. The nurse takes me into a central room where five very old people sit in chairs. I think this was Grandma's lounge and the wall to the dining room has been removed to make it bigger. Then I am shown the garden, which is a little more recognisable. It is peaceful, with a lawn and some large trees. I can hear birdsong. I think Grandma would have been pleased to have her house turned into a nursing home. I've finally stopped crying and can thank the nurse for showing me around. Again, she offers tea. However, I have returned to my middle-aged self now and I can reassure her that I'm fine.

It's always places from the past that make me weep, as if they were flat packed furniture laid inside my body. This makes sense: without the body, there would be no other spaces. It is through our bodies that we understand time and place.

Walking back to Tavistock Square at lunch time, I come across a peace rally. It is International Conscientious Objectors Day and a group of 200 people are gathered around the Conscientious Objectors Memorial in Tavistock Square Gardens. The speakers include a Quaker Witness, a peace activist whose grandfather was a conscientious objector in the First World War, a German peace activist, and a conscientious objector from the Second World War. White carnations are laid at the memorial to represent conscientious objectors, and the names of all the British objectors from the First World War are read out. It is mainly older people present, and I find myself staring at their faces. Every person here has a face of real interest; the cracks and folds of skin, the soft eyes, the fly-away hair seeming to show lives of courage, warmth and passion. These very people were probably at the same CND rallies as me more than two decades ago.

Sometimes, I have a glimpse of who I could have been if I had stayed here. It happened at Birkbeck College and it happens again at this peace ceremony, an experience of recognition that is really only projection.

This is how foolish I have become.

Places from the past I don't revisit:

- The three different bedsits I lived in during the 1980s.
- My grandparents' graves.
- My then-lover's flat in North London.
- My childhood home in the Midlands.

My strange detachment from my mothering self waivers at the Foundling Museum. It is hard not to be moved by the stories of children left by mothers unable to care for them. The small objects or tokens the mothers left with the children are so touching: a child's ring, an embroidered red paper heart, a coin on a string, a button, a piece of cloth, a cross, a hairpin, a copper circle with the engraved words, 'this is a token'. The simplest is half a hazelnut shell. How little that mother had if this was the only object she could leave with her child. I imagine her keeping the other half of the shell herself, hoping that one day she would return to collect her child and the two halves would be re-united.

As I'm looking around the Museum, one of the eighteenth century clocks chimes eleven times. A few minutes later, there is the sound of another clock, and after that, several more. It is uncanny, now, to be in a place where time is analogue. It highlights how precise our sense of time is now – my mobile phone tells me it is 11.03 – but in my childhood, we, too, had a grandfather clock that ran slow and had to be wound up and the hands advanced a little each Sunday. I enjoy the sense of being out of time that comes with visiting museums like this, walking up the stairs into the past and sitting in one of the red armchairs in the Handel Room, surrounded by his letters and sheet music and listening to one of his Cantatas.

There is a small corner in the Museum with an exhibition of words printed onto coloured cards and stuck on the wall. Just this year, children at Great Ormond Hospital were asked to write a message of hope for their future, using the idea of tokens.

*I want to go to Disneyland.*

*I wish I had a cat.*

*To go home.*

*I want to eat.*

*I wish I had a BMX.*

*Be discharged.*

*See my Nan.*

*To be free.*

*Get better.*

*To climb a tree.*

*Home.*

Of all the messages, though, the saddest is simply: *Tuck me in.* This is the most tragic story of all; that a child's hope for the future is that she might finally be tucked into bed by someone who loves her. It seems to me that this phrase, tuck me in, encodes in it everything about mothering that matters. Although my son is fourteen and too old for me to physically tuck him into bed, in fact I do this metaphorically and emotionally all the time. I make the world safe for him and give him a sense of home. At some point, we learn to do this for ourselves – or we hope we do. Maybe this is what I learned in my years in London.

Two days before I'm due to leave London, grief hits me. It is so sudden and intense that at first I think I'm becoming ill. Although I'm not quite ready to return home, I'm also looking forward to being with my son again, so it is not grief over leaving London – or at least not precisely that. Perhaps this sadness is a revisiting of other earlier losses, a kind of archaic echo? '[I]n the end, the work of memory is the work of loneliness', says Andre Aciman (2000: np). I walk around Gordon Square Gardens one more time with tears clouding my vision and my legs invisibly weighted.

My 'errands in time' (as Aciman puts it) are finished now. I won't return to my childhood home, 260 kilometres north. I yearn to, but I don't go. I recognise my choices in Aciman's description about not going to all the cherished places of the past so that I can still long for them and have a reason to return once more. Already, I am imagining my next visit to London: how I will stay in Bloomsbury once again, how my visit then will remind me of my visit now – my time as not-mother doing mothering research and my rediscovery of lightness.

Aciman suggests that the ‘real site of nostalgia’ is not the place we have lost, nor the place we never really had in the first instance, but rather, the ‘text that must record that loss’. He says, ‘the act of recording loss is the ultimate homecoming’ (Aciman 2000: np). This is something I could never have grasped at twenty. It is something that grows upon you as you get older and you realise that the project of life has much to do with acquainting yourself with loss. That what we learn is how to grieve.

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