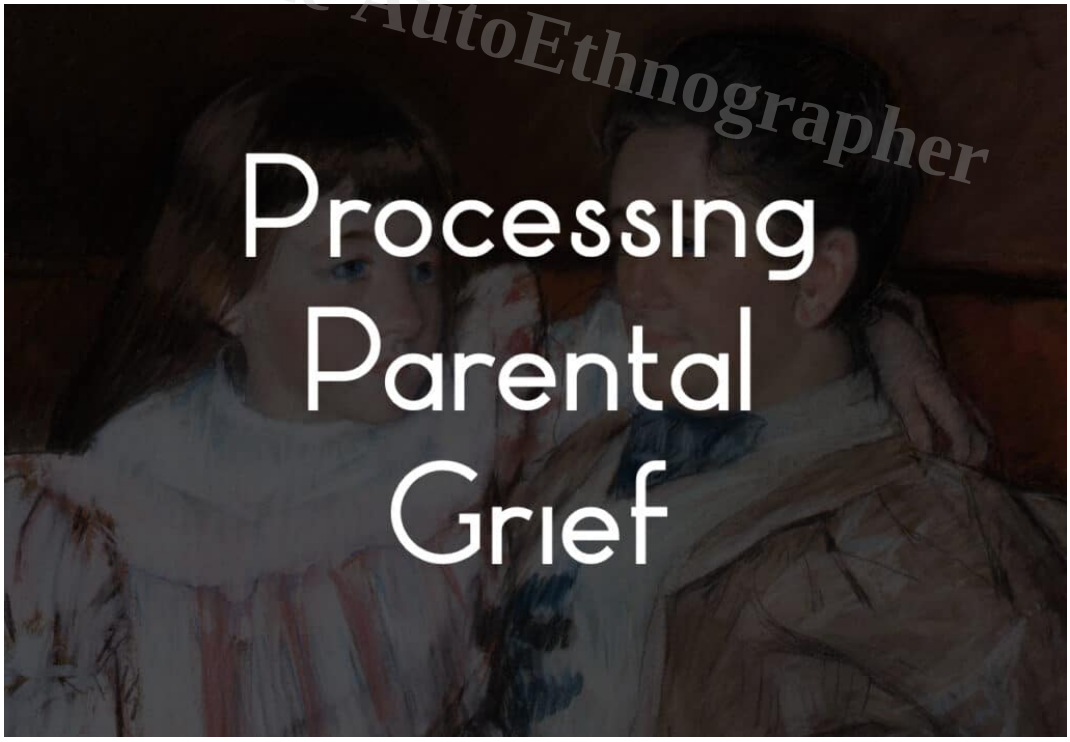
Processing Parental Grief: The Joy of the Surprise Letter

Description

The AutoEthnographer



Processing Parental Grief: The Joy of the Surprise Letter

Authorâ??s Memo

In this autoethnographic vignette about parental grief, I channel a moment I had alone with my mother. One day, she had what I didnâ??t realize at the time was a seizure. I was by myself with her as a child and I remember being so scared because I didnâ??t know what to do or how I could help her. So, I called a family member and we called the ambulance to come pick her up. I remember seeing my mom get loaded into the ambulance and being so scared and worried. Sadly, Iâ??ve spent a lot of time participating in hospital and waiting room culture.

My mother and I were very close and we spent a lot of time together, mostly shopping. We were close just like Calliandra, the storyâ??s protagonist, and her mother were. Cancer keeps coming up throughout these vignettes as I remember telling people that was how my mother died. My family created a culture of secrecy. They didnâ??t want my brother and I to reveal the true sickness she had as a means of protecting us.

In this second of my Processing Parental Grief series, my daydream comes true for Calliandra. She receives a letter from her mother weeks after her death. I drew on my experiences as a postal carrier to craft the certified letter portion. Iâ??ve also always daydreamed that my mother will have a letter mailed

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I also explain how snuggling under her motherâ??s favorite blanket comforted Calliandra while she was mourning the death of her mother. For a long time I too received comfort from my motherâ??s old belongings. Her clothes all smelled like her perfume which helped comfort me, especially right after her death.

Towards the end of my motherâ??s life, her doctorâ??s appointments increased to multiple times a week. Calliandraâ??s father is the one who broke the news of their motherâ??s death to Calliandra and her brother just like my father was the one who told my brother and I that our mother died.

My mother also always got her nails done at the salon. A few months before my mother died, she broke down crying one day saying that she wanted to be there for my graduation and for my wedding. I was nine and couldnâ??t understand why she was saying this, but I hugged her back, and tried to reassure her that she was going to be at my graduation and wedding some day. We saw my motherâ??s body like Calliandra did, and I remember kissing her forehead one last time before they prepared her body for the funeral. I remember her forehead feeling so cold and hard that day. When she was alive, kissing her cheek felt warm and soft.

The Letter

Calliandra and her mother do everything together. They go grocery shopping together, clothes shopping, they get their nails done and have regular spa days together, and just have a really tight knit mother-daughter relationship. They are inseparable. Most of Calliandraâ??s friends donâ??t hang out with or are close to their mothers like she was. What can they say but they have a special bond and

enjoy doing everything together as mother and daughter.

The only thing Calliandra notices that she and her mother donâ??t do a lot together is go to her motherâ??s doctor appointments. Her mother always encourages Calliandra to get ready while she is at her appointments, so when her mother returns they just usually resume their plans for the day together. Although Calliandra has noticed that lately her mother has had a lot more doctor appointments than normal, she hasnâ??t really thought much of it because she and her mother always go to dinner, to the mall, the movie theater, bowling, or something else fun afterwards.

It was the month before Calliandraâ??s senior prom at school and Calliandra and her mother were at the mall getting Calliandraâ??s dress hemmed for the final fitting.

â??Callie, what do you think of these shoes to match your dress?â?• Her mother asked as she showed her daughter a pair of shiny black dress shoes with silver sparkles reflecting off of them.

â??One second Mom. Weâ??re just about done with the fitting,â?• Calliandra said outside of the dressing room.

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Calliandra was working on the finishing touches with the dressmaker when suddenly they both heard a lot of commotion coming from outside of the fitting room. They paused the fitting and opened the curtain to see what was going on when Calliandra noticed her mother was lying on the floor with the shoes she was trying to show Calliandra next to her.

â??Mom?!â?• Calliandra cried out, not caring that she ripped the hemming seam the dressmaker just applied as she rushed over to her motherâ??s side.

â??I donâ??t know what happened,â?• the store associate said. â??She was just standing there and then suddenly she fell to the ground almost like she fainted.â?•

â??Please call an ambulance,â?• Calliandra said. â??Mom?â?• she said, concerned as she pet her motherâ??s forehead. â??We were about to eat lunch after the fitting so maybe she fainted due to low blood sugar?â?• Calliandra was trying to justify that her mother was okay, but her mother wasnâ??t moving and her breathing was very shallow.

Calliandra didnâ??t leave her side while waiting for the ambulance to come. She called her father and brother as the emergency workers came and loaded her mother into the ambulance to tell them what happened and to have them meet at the hospital.

While waiting at the hospital, Calliandra was sitting next to her brother in the waiting room. She noticed her father was talking to a few doctors outside in the hallway and that her father looked worried. Her father came back inside the waiting room and sat down next to Calliandra and her brother.

â??Guys Iâ??m afraid I have some bad news.â?• Her father started.

â??Is Mom okay?â?• Calliandra asked, worried. â??Did she faint because she had low blood sugar? We were just about to eat after my fitting.â?•

Her father started to tear up.

â??No, Callie. Mom didnâ??t faint. She just passed away.â?•

Calliandra and her brother just sat there motionless as their father started crying harder.

â??What?â?• Calliandra asked, as tears started filling up in her eyes. â??We were just shopping together for my Prom dress. What do you mean she just passed away?â?•

Calliandraâ??s father started, â??Sweetie your mom has been sick for quite some time now. She didnâ??t want to tell you guys what was going on, but in the last three months she was getting progressively worse. Thatâ??s why sheâ??s been going to all of these doctor appointments lately.â?•

Calliandra just sat there speechless and in tears. She felt awful because she realized then that she had indeed noticed her mother going to a lot more doctor appointments than normal, but that she never questioned why.

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Her father continued, â??She didnâ??t want to worry you guys and she didnâ??t want to take the excitement away from your Prom, Callie, or your graduation or your brotherâ??s big championship game. She wanted you both to enjoy your childhood and not have to worry that she was really sick. She was a fighter and was trying hard to hang on until after your big childhood events, but the sickness caught up to her. The doctors have been working hard for months to try and help her, but unfortunately there was nothing else they could do. Iâ??m so sorry guys.â?•

Calliandra, her brother, and her father just sat there in the waiting room and cried. They cried for at least an hour until the doctor approached them.

â??Iâ??m so sorry for your loss,â?• the doctor came in and said. â??Weâ??ve been working hard to help your mother for months. She was a wonderful person and she always talked about how much she loved you guys.â?•

The doctor sort of nodded at Calliandraâ??s father while he was holding both Calliandra and her brother, trying to comfort them. It triggered Calliandraâ??s father to say, â??Guys, I know this is hard, but itâ??s time to say goodbye to Mom. The doctors have to take her to a special room so we can start making funeral arrangements. Iâ??m not going to make you do this, but you can go and see your mother if youâ??d like to say goodbye one last time.â?•

Still not believing this was all actually happening, Calliandra and her brother of course wanted to see their mother one last time. They went into the room and gave their mother one last kiss with their father beside them, said a few words, turned around and left the room with what felt like a huge hole in their hearts.

The funeral came and went and suddenly three weeks went by. It has been an awful three weeks. Calliandra kept going over and over in her mind the day that she and her mother were at the dressmakers and what happened and how suddenly they went from the store to the hospital to planning funeral arrangements, and she still couldnâ??t believe what happened.

Suddenly, the doorbell rang to interrupt Calliandraâ??s thoughts as she was lying on the couch under her motherâ??s favorite blanket. Something she has pretty much been doing every day for the past three weeks. She didnâ??t want to get up, but no one else was home. She managed to peel herself off the couch to answer the door.

It was the mailman.

Calliandra opened the door completely not interested in speaking with another human being at the moment.

â??I have a certified letter here for a Calliandra,â?• the mailman announced.

â??Thatâ??s me,â?• Calliandra said, confused as to who would send her a certified letter.

â??Itâ??s from a Kathleen Meyers.â?•

Calliandraâ??s heart stopped.

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â??Thatâ??s impossible,â?• she muttered. â??Thatâ??s my mother and she justâ??.â?• Calliandra stopped herself as she grabbed the letter to look at it. Sure enough, it was in her motherâ??s handwriting. She quickly signed off for the mailman, closed the door, and ran back to the couch eager to open the letter. She crawled back under her blanket, tears already on their way.

My dearest Calliandra,

Iâ??m so truly sorry that I did not tell you I was sick. I asked your Dad not to tell you or your brother because I didnâ??t want to worry you while you were enjoying your senior year of high school. If youâ??re reading this letter during what should be some of the happiest times of your life, Iâ??m deeply sorry that I couldnâ??t wait to depart this world until after you celebrated your senior milestones. I promise you that I fought as hard as I could to do so.

Iâ??m sure your Dad told you by now, but Iâ??ve been fighting cancer and undergoing treatment for many months now. I tried my best to hide it by wearing more hats and not making my appointments a big deal. Again, I didnâ??t want to worry you or your brother. I hope you both can forgive me. When I realized my time might be getting cut short earlier than I wanted, I wrote this letter to you and one to your brother and asked your dad to mail them via certified mail a few weeks after my death. Please see it as my parting gift to you guys as your mother to try and help you move forward.

Iâ??m so sorry you are now experiencing the death of your mother as youâ??re nearing the end of your high school career and entering into your early adult years. It pains me that I canâ??t be a part of all of that. Iâ??d do anything to be able to stay, but if youâ??re reading this, then sadly it meant it was my time to go.

Calliandra, I want you to know that spending time with you, your brother, and your father was the best part of my life. And although I canâ??t physically be in your lives anymore, I want you to keep going and enjoy your life to the fullest.

I know it might be hard at first, but I want you to be happy. Go to Prom and rock that dress we got you. Throw your graduation hat as high as you can at the ceremony. Travel the world. Eat lots of delicious food. Fall in love. Do whatever makes you happy. Follow your heart and your dreams. I know youâ??re going to miss me. Please know Iâ??ll be there with you for all of those moments in a very special place in your heart.

Donâ??t stop living life because Iâ??m no longer physically here. Iâ??ll always be here in your memories, your mind, and in your heart. I love you more than words can describe. I want you to be happy in your life, just like having you as my daughter made me so happy all of these years.

Love always,
Mom

Calliandra just sat there holding the letter she just read with tears streaming down her face. She read the letter and heard her motherâ??s voice reading it to her. She was still snuggled up under her motherâ??s favorite blanket, her perfume smell still faintly coming off of it. In that moment, although she missed her mother terribly, she knew what her mother was trying to tell her. She knew it would take time. Now knowing that her mother will always be in her memories, mind, and heart suddenly gave Calliandra peace she had been missing since the day her mother died.

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Credits

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