

by Shelley Wood

Joining the Grief Club

Observations on a painful initiation

■ Previously unaware of its existence and without actively applying for membership, I've joined the Grief Club. My mother recently died suddenly and in doing so swept me into a gentle and eclectic group I'd never before appreciated.

When friends lost parents in the past, I'm sure I tried to say and do the right things. I failed. I've learned that the hard way, my mum's death propelling me back to friends to say what I neglected to say properly before: I'm sorry. I get it. I wish I'd been there for you more.

I'm lucky, I know. I had a bond with my mother that my friends envied, as did hers. We travelled the world, we could talk about anything, we laughed until our sides were splitting. And she died quickly, despite fighting cancers on two fronts, her family at her bedside. What more could I want, other than to watch her grow old, get to know her grandchildren, squeeze in a final trip to Tuscany?

I've struggled mostly with her gone-ness. She was here, she was painting her house, she was planning a bang-up lunch during the Davis Cup tennis. And then she was, abruptly, no more. All of her wit and energy and wisdom simply deleted.

Into the void swept the condolences. Shock and sadness from my mum's friends, but also their stories and memories that sent me tumbling into a muddle of laughter and tears. My mother's generation, most having already buried their parents, knew what to say and do. They called, they tucked long, heartfelt letters into Hallmark cards and delivered them by hand. They offered to help pack up her house.

My peer-group, well, that's where the Grief Club made itself known. Some emailed. A handful called the instant they heard the news and kept calling until I picked up. One cooked me a mac and cheese. Many must have found themselves in that alien section of the stationary store, trying to find a not-too-sappy condolences card so they could let me know they were sad and worried.

But others just messaged me on Facebook, sent a text ("thinking of u"), or worse, astonished me with silence. I can't help but rank these efforts: the gone-out-of-their-ways down to the no-shows. Across the board, those who knew the right words and deeds have been those who, themselves, have already endured this kind of impossible goodbye.

I asked a colleague to explain to others why I'd dropped off conference calls at work. He must have sent a group email because out of the blue came messages from co-workers I hardly know and in one instance, someone I've never met. She'd lost her mother last November, was still reeling from it—a relative newcomer to the Grief Club. I was more touched by her email than I've been by messages from friends I've known for decades.

The kicker was on a flight home from a business trip my first week back. I'm fragile at altitude at the best of times, but anguish hit somewhere over the Atlantic and I came undone. People have told me grief comes in waves: my experience has been that it's more like a spray of bullets.

One of the flight attendants rushed over, asked me what was wrong and it bubbled out of me like lava. She crouched at my seat, her eyes welling up, and told me she'd buried her own mother the year before, age 56. It was the hardest day of my life, she said, and still is. Then she stayed at my side and talked to me. Asked what my mum was like, told me about hers, assured me the nightmares I'm having now will turn into joyful dreams in time. Later in the flight she brought me ice cream.

And now I'm in. A card-carrying member. I wouldn't wish the Grief Club on anyone, but as a friend pointed out, everyone's mother dies; mine just died too early. Whoever's next in my circle, I'll be there. **OL**