



IN MEMORIAM ISSUE

HUMOR FOR THE DEPARTED

Writing jokes turns out to be
one way to keep grief away

STORY BY KATHY FLANN
ILLUSTRATION BY MARELLA ALBANESE

GRIEF HAD ALWAYS BEEN THERE FOR ME, A BLOOD RELATION.

It visited often, nourished by a steady diet of tragedies. One of my earliest memories, when I was 3, is visiting a favorite aunt in the hospital after she shot herself in the head and somehow survived. She came to live with us for a while as she adapted to her paralysis. Much later, when I was 15, my brother died in a car accident, hurled through the windshield. Grief was forever finding reasons to stay. There was the dissolution of my parents' marriage, the people they dated who came and went, the homes and pets left behind during the 12 times I moved before the end of high school.

Although Grief and I were close in our way, I struggled to understand this associate with complicated moods. Sometimes Grief was more angry than sad — in a scary way — and I escaped by throwing myself into something, like listening to records or dating the wrong boy. Grief had an amazing ability to suck all the air out of the room, and my brain would shut down. I didn't get my homework assignments finished. I even missed whole days of school — mentally, at least, if not physically. Living with Grief's volatility made me jumpy, causing me to drop and break dishes. But then again, the clumsiness could have been simple fatigue; Grief liked to carry on all night, making a terrible racket and keeping me awake.

Grief insinuated itself across generations of my family. It had lived in my dad's childhood home long before it lived in mine. My dad's father, my grandfather, had his own sad backstory. He had been in and out of jail for bootlegging, and his money problems led him to burn down his car-repair garage for the insurance money. A sympathetic local sheriff tipped him off that the authorities were onto him, so my grandfather gathered his

family and prepared to flee their home in Redwood Falls, Minn. My dad, then 10 years old, had minutes to decide what was important enough to save. He rushed to the pigeons he had hand-raised from eggs to fluffy chicks to imprinted pets, shooing them into the darkness from the coop he'd built, knowing they'd likely die.

That story always haunted me. "That's so sad!" I'd wail. But my dad laughed when he told it, a wry expression on his face. If there was a fine line between tragedy and absurdity, my dad drew it where he pleased. When life dealt blows — like when his aging mom got cancer or his aging dad drove his car through an office building — he made remarks that would have seemed brittle from anyone who lacked his softness. "Oh well," he'd say, making eye contact that I'd feel in my chest. "We'll all be dead in 100 years, anyway." These conversations happened in private, maybe in his two-seater sports car on the way to a museum or when he walked alongside me, teaching me to ride a bike. In these moments it was like we were in cahoots and Grief was the odd one out.

Dad's approach provided a polite but firm excuse to discourage Grief from crashing at our place all the time. *Oh shoot*, he seemed to be telling Grief. *We're busy tonight. Humor has dropped by for dinner.*

Throughout my life, whenever I got the emotional wind knocked out of me, my dad was the person I called. One day I phoned him at his house in Florida from another country, and he listened as I expressed shock and hurt that my ex had gotten engaged to my best friend. I hadn't even known they had each

other's phone numbers. I vented about how my ex had stopped talking to me for months when we lived together, until I asked if he wanted to break up, and then he just grunted, "Yes." And when I'd finally started to recover from that loss, my friend had ghosted me. Now I knew why! I had lost two best friends, in a sense.

My dad listened to every word. When I was done, he said, "Well, look at it this way: If they ever break up with each other, they'll be the last to know." And suddenly I was laughing. Maybe Grief was outside the door just then, bony knuckles poised to knock but ultimately too flummoxed to follow through.

One time, on a sightseeing bus in Manhattan, I watched my dad lean very intentionally into the background of some strangers' photo, grinning like a deranged maniac. He normally hated having his picture taken, and he never smiled. I said, "Dad! What are you doing?" His eyes glinted with mischief, and he said, "I've been doing this for years! I'm pretty good at it!" I said, "What?" He laughed. "I like to imagine them seeing me there later." If people's desire to snap photos was motivated by sentiment, my dad was motivated to disrupt it.

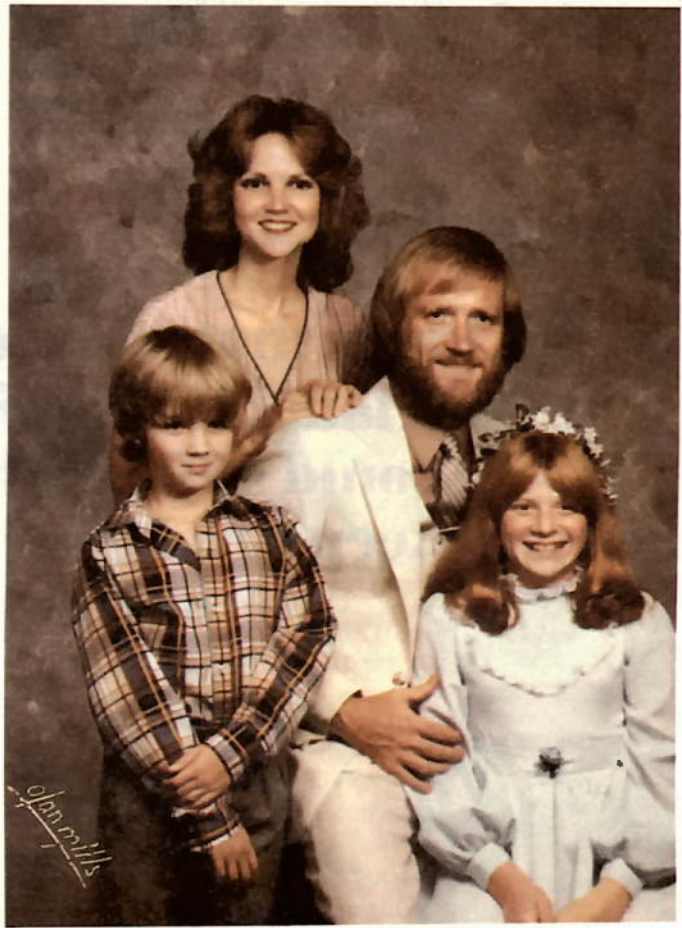
Indirectness was the family safety mechanism. My dad never told me I was funny. He did tell my stepmom, his second wife. He told her I had a funny way of looking at things, which, if true, I got from him. This ultimately means he was complimenting himself. He'd taught me that earnest discussions about feelings tended to get Grief all worked up, and then it would interrupt everything, derailing conversations — and who needed that on an ordinary Wednesday night or whatever? A laugh was a way to take a deep breath.

I knew that Dad enjoyed my humor most of all — though he never said so — when I entertained my two younger sisters. They were born after my brother died, so they never knew him or the loss of him. In those years, Grief had become a peculiar relation from the old country, one who kept apart and spoke another language. There were years of pillow forts, flashlight games, charades in the back seat of the car. We told hundreds of ghost stories that somehow all ended, not with sadness or horror, but with the ghost eating a peanut butter sandwich. The squeals of laughter didn't let Grief get a word in edgewise, not even to me or to Dad — so it began to spend most of its time rattling around in the attic with the mementos. When I played with my sisters, Dad usually sat nearby, arms folded across his chest, a tiny upturn at the corners of his mouth, just visible behind his Viking beard.

At the beginning of the pandemic, Dad — who had been undergoing treatments for a recently diagnosed cancer — fell in his garage in Florida and hit his head on the concrete. Because of the mystery illness sweeping the community, no one could visit him in the hospital, and staff were stretched thin. The phones at the nurse's station rang and rang. Days went by. I would call over and over from my home in Maryland, for hours each day. No answer. No answer. No answer.

I did manage to speak to him a few times, but he seemed weak and disoriented. I thought it was the concussion. "You won't believe," he said. "I can't get out of this airport. I have a plane to catch." He laughed. It must have been unpleasant to believe he'd been trapped in an airport all this time, not knowing why he couldn't easily reach his family or even why he felt so lousy. Still, he laughed each time we spoke.

Finally, a doctor called, and I handed the phone to my husband, a physician, so that the two of them could speak the language of anatomy and numbers. My husband hung up and



said, "We have to go." We put our son and our dog in the car, and we raced south for 12 hours on an eerily desolate Interstate 95. The cancer had spread in his body, just like the virus was spreading across the country.

When we got there, my family hired a private ambulance to bring him home. Once he was settled into his bed, everyone piled around — his wife, daughters, sons-in-law, grandchildren and all the family dogs. He requested his favorite treats: root beer and lemon pudding. Then he said he'd like to sleep a little. Everyone filed out, buzzing that we'd gotten him home, chattering excitedly. So many people were in the hospital right now without any loved ones. He was home! But out of the dark bedroom, his voice boomed, "When are you *leaving*? I'm trying to sleep." We laughed, maybe most of all because his voice was so strong, his annoyance so ordinary.

Most of us went to my sister's house, to rest up so we could sit with him the next day. He died a few hours later. He always told us that dying in his sleep would be his idea of winning the lottery. We took it as a half-joke, and we'd say, "Oh, Dad." But he

An undated photo of the author's family.

I knew that some events were so bad that laughter was impossible. But if I could still laugh, maybe I could keep Grief confined to its room, or at least off my lap.

meant it. The date of his death was April Fools' Day. He would have loved that. He would have said, "I really played the long game."

We stayed in Florida a few weeks, making arrangements, waiting for Grief. Because of the pandemic, the funeral was just the family, which would also have been the way he wanted it. We kept laughing and said, "This would be his fantasy introvert funeral." The whole situation, especially with covid lockdowns as a backdrop, seemed too strange at times to be real life. But it *was* real life, and I was sure that Grief was coming. First I thought it would come to the funeral. Then I thought it would be waiting for me when I got back to my own house. Then I thought surely it would catch up with me when I was alone in the quiet, after my husband went back to work and my son to school. But the relief that Dad didn't die alone in the hospital seemed to keep Grief at bay. My heart was not heavy; it was light and spritzy as a snow globe. Probably Grief had just been waiting for a lower fare. It was probably on a Spirit Airlines flight right now. *Ha! Spirit Airlines!*

Before he died, I'd been able to tell Dad that I'd signed a contract to write a new book, something different from the literary fiction I'd been writing for a long time. It was a project that began one night when I was trying to write a story but couldn't because the zombie show my husband was watching was so loud. The zombies screamed and screamed. They were getting slaughtered! *Gosh*, I finally thought. *Someone should help them. They are really bad at this.*

I quickly composed a short guide that I called "How to Survive a Human Attack: A Zombie's Guide to Filling the Emptiness and Moving Forward." The piece was published, and I found myself writing advice for other movie monsters: mummies, cyborgs, nuclear mutants, and on and on. I wrote a book proposal, and it was picked up by a publisher. The concept was something I knew my dad would have enjoyed: to laugh at or with the world's most iconic monsters, entities supposed to keep us up at night.

I threw myself into the new book, pursuing humor in a way that I hadn't since college, when I dabbled in open-mic stand-up comedy. Whereas my fiction had always been slow, laborious, substantive — taking years sometimes to compose — the words now clacked from my fingertips at a speed that barely kept pace with my brain.

And my brain wasn't satisfied with just the new book, either. After the book work was done, I would sit down to turn to my "real work," a novel-in-progress I'd been trying to write forever or a memoir about my years of travels. But short humor pieces would come out instead. They would pop into my head and I couldn't stop them. They had titles like, "I Was Social Distancing Before It Went Mainstream, and Its Early Stuff Was Better." I would lose whole days, barely remembering what happened. I didn't want this, but then again maybe I did. In any case, what I wanted seemed immaterial.

Sometimes the humor would taper off, and I'd think, *Okay, good. That's done.* I could finally, finally get back to my real work. But then another wave would come. After a while, I noticed these



waves were parallel to larger events — like when the covid numbers would go up or a horrible incident of violence would take place in the United States or abroad. I composed a letter of apology to my future self for introducing our toddler to “Whoomp! (There It Is)” by Tag Team. I wrote a list of the middle-aged viewer’s thoughts upon completing eight *Fast & Furious* movies on an elliptical. I started writing Twitter jokes, even though I’d never had much interest in social media before. The next thing I knew, I’d launched a *second* Twitter account for my very important “poems” comprising headlines from *Nextdoor Digest*.

But then I began to wonder if Grief had actually been there all along. *It’s coming from inside the house!* In fact, it had been here this whole time, a skeleton rocking in a chair in the attic, wearing a wig and an old lady’s clothes. It was the only explanation for my new relationship with Humor, which apparently had been working overtime to keep Grief away.

I knew that some events were so bad that laughter was impossible. But if I could still laugh, maybe I could keep Grief confined to its room, or at least off my lap.

When my book “How to Survive a Human Attack” came out, it got some great press. I was awed that it might have resonated for readers at a time when they, too, needed a laugh. Still, I didn’t have my favorite jokester to read any of it. It was dawning on me that since I didn’t have my dad to call, the jokes were as close to him as I could get.

When my sister posted a tribute to Dad, she mentioned the special relationship they had, the look he would shoot her across a crowded room when he made a joke, the way they’d catch each other’s eye. And I thought, *Wait. No. That’s my look. He looked at me like that!* And I suddenly understood that all three of his daughters probably secretly believed we were his favorite because of that look. He would have adored that misunderstanding, not least because it was as true as it was false.

Now, when I’m writing humor, it’s as if I’m transported to a comedy club, in front of a microphone and in the spotlight, and he is nestled in the audience. I can imagine that tiny smile at the corners of his mouth, and I can hear his soft chuckle right beyond the brightness of this mortal stage. 🍷

Kathy Flann is the author of four books, and her jokes have been featured in BuzzFeed. She lives in Baltimore.

The author and her father.