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A Fugue About Grief

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The following autoethnography reveals the author's personal struggle when informed about a suicide. The resulting emotional turmoil causes her to shift forward, backward, and sideways through memories of death during a summer beach outing with her daughter. The narrative demonstrates how she copes with her inner anguish while striving to preserve a happy union. She reveals the painful irony of living simultaneously in a culture of happiness and culture of grief. In doing so, her narrative implicates the stories that encourage parents to suppress emotions from their children. In the end, autoethnography becomes an epiphany that heals her from the tragedy as she gains a deeper understanding about the personal and cultural influences shaping her desire for pedagogical thoughtfulness.

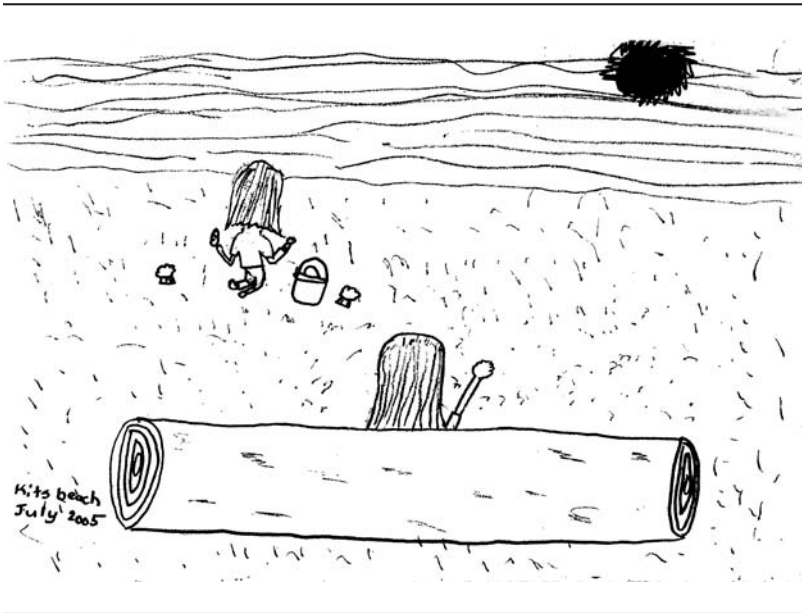
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A phone call changes my day, changes my life. Everything said in a slow murmur becomes a blur. I try to escape. Force myself to forget. But self-inflicted death is not easy to accept. I close my eyes, shake my head. Leftover scraps of her unheard symphony. I hold my tears. My throat tightens. She was important—more than a massage therapist. Memories leaven the bitterness. She listened. Cared. Supported. Taught. And moved me to compassion for others. But her suicide plunges me into a dark space. Her voice stifled as a rope strangles her.

You lived a painful life
A shameful past
Tried to walk forward
A shadow that lasts

Twisting my head, I refocus the events of the day. A bird flies above. There are boats in the ocean. I look for my daughter, nine years old. A few feet away, collecting shells. We saddle a summer's day. Eat, play, read, laugh. All of this is mine. I see it, smell it, tend it, taste it. The mystery and beauty of the place inspires me. A small section of the beach where we grow together. Day after day, her waltzes swirl me.

Figure 1
Sketching by Amber, 9 years old



I'll collect shiny shells, she says, bring you cute, little ones. Skipping and laughing, she piles them into her bucket. Suddenly, I hear Strauss on a radio. I try to get up but am bound by a breeze. I feel a tornado and drop my phone. There is tightness in my chest. A dizzy spell. The landscape speeds up and down like a roller coaster. Everything is black and white. The knapsack, towels, bag of food, suntan lotion. The sound of her laughter fails to penetrate. I suspend myself by strings around her body. I am mired in a swamp of mud, a hurricane of anxiety. I hold my breath to suppress tears. Close my eyes for a second. While I sit, paralyzed, I connect my life by thin threads of death.

I recall my father's death. He taught me to play cribbage when I was nine years old. A game of odds where chances to win increase when you play with the right cards at the right time. But he also said the purpose of life was to make a difference. These aphorisms encompassed my father's philosophy of life. Although medication prolonged him, his heart gave out. He was not strong enough to survive his last illness. So worn out at 69

years. On his last day, he confided in me that he was tired, sick, and would not live much longer. He was right. Absolutely. That same night, he died.

I try to make sense of this moment. I take his right hand into mine. It is cold. I caress it, sensing distance. I lay my head on his chest the way I did when I was young. The white stubble on his chin is motionless. His body at rest, yet I embrace it. Gently, I touch his right cheek. There is a flood of water. I kiss him goodbye.

I dream about life in his home. Our kitchen where my mother rolled pastry dough on the counter, washed dishes with a pink-colored dishrag. At times, I went to work with him at his tailoring store. Smiling, he served customers and altered clothes. His casual, not ironic, humor. His merriness and patience. Not a tall man, and chubby by nature. He was bald, but brazen when he bought a toupee. The night I saw it, I laughed uncontrollably.

Mommy, Mommy, she calls. By the log, I crane my neck. I see a patch of grey in the clouds. But the bright sun flows onto the sand to cover my shadow. It is not the whole heaven, just a square, but a place to retreat. I feel a tug on my arm. *Mommy*, she calls. I turn my face, she is half-smiling. I push a strand of hair in place. She gets up and says, *look at me*. For a moment, she raises her arms like wings. I blink to retain my tears. Keep the happiness for her. She deserves a glorious day at the beach. She knows nothing yet about grief. Mechanically, I clap at her frolicking display. Spinning around, she is a whirlpool. But I am in a stew, emotions stirring up.

Everything comes apart. The loss from changes in my life: puberty, adoption, miscarriage, moving, job loss, and fatality. I need to run. Be exhausted, then collapse on grass. Wait for my heartbeat to slow down. I search for melody and harmony in mad music. My heart hammers against a rock. I cannot breathe. I lift my left hand onto my chest. Against the sun, there are droplets of sweat. I hear an aria. My daughter singing in high tones. There is a wind. Sand goes up my nostrils and I sneeze. I force a smile.

Every Wednesday at two, I arrived at her massage office. Always the same routine. A warm welcome with soothing music. I lay on the table, unclothed, waiting to escape life. She entered the room, her salt and pepper hair pulled back in a chignon. A grey sweat jacket of fleece, she shopped at Winners. I listened, let our conversation heal me. I became a little girl again as she comforted me. Her massage forced me to accept new understandings of time. She spoke in hushed tones while she massaged my body. *Certain conversations can only be made with women*, she once said. She saw me clearly, no blinders. She heard me faintly, whispers out of range. She

touched me lightly, slow, tender strokes. For a whole hour, we shared croissants on a mountaintop. High tea at two with Chai tea. But that is over now.

The rise and fall, unexpected turnabout, my insides twisted in knots. I hold in the ineffable. Life spins until it fades forever. Nothing remains. Her act annihilated everything. Obliterated my winter, bombed my spring. The end of her. Dead. Presence and absence in one suffocating breath.

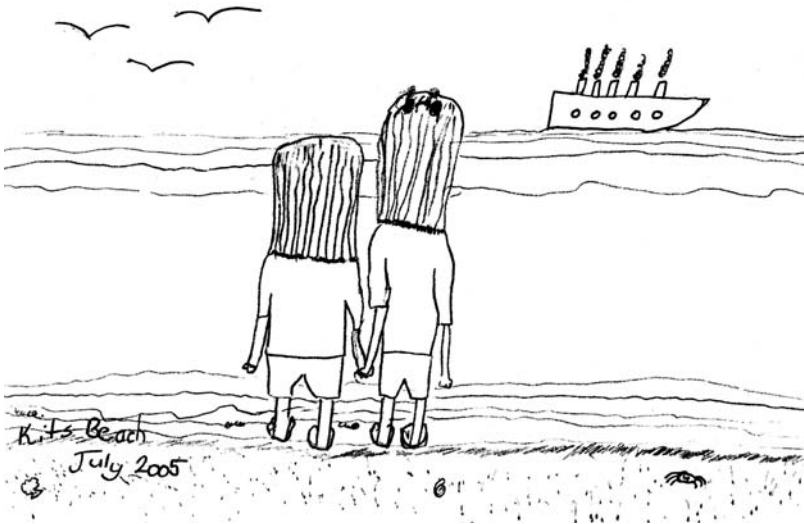
Mommy, Mommy, broken shells are not good, she says. They're half alive. I open my mouth, but there are no words. A dog barks. I see the waves go up and down, and water that does not know how to recede. I imagine it pouring over my body, drenching my hair. Cleanse and rinse to make me free and confident. As a seagull glides above, there is another image.

The miscarriage. Blood poured outward. Alone, I screamed. *A laparoscopy,* said the doctor's voice. I opened my eyes and saw lights above. *Count backwards from 99.* A surgeon moved the bright light over me. *Everything will be fine, he said, but you might feel a pinch.* I squeezed my hands tight. A nurse placed her hand onto mine. *Breathe, breathe,* the nurse said. I heard a machine drone. My ears rang from the clatter. Everything was a blur.

Over there, lots of shells, she points. Shaking sand from her feet, she fusses. Gently, she sits beside me. Her hands go around my shoulders. Instantly, I close my eyes. Hide the lump that weighs down my heart. Once, we engraved our initials in the log. In a couple of hours, she attends art camp and my real face will emerge, swollen with tears. For now, I hide my insides. Slip into a space beside her. It takes no 16-piece orchestra to keep her dancing.

Unexpectedly, I stand at my grandmother's burial ground. I called her *Popo*, the term in Cantonese for your mother's mother. As kids, my brother and I jumped around graves, touching them with one foot when nobody was looking. Mom said to not step on tombstones for it brought bad luck. I think of what I was like as a kid in Popo's home, playing, eating, and watching television. She sewed me Barbie clothes and told funny stories about my mother. She never sounded like a cranky old lady who told others what to do. No hidden words, just gentle sayings. I loved her sweetness. Her arms swept in a circular motion to hug me. Her tablecloths were offensively rosy and flowery. One glance at the photos of 13 children and many grandchildren brought peaceful satisfaction. Her favorite chair, covered by an afghan, was centered in front of the television where she watched soap operas all day. She would pat my head and suggest we talk. Talk about nothing and everything. But her memory got worse over the years. Sometimes, she asked the same question over and over. But we roared with

Figure 2
Sketching by Amber, 9 years old



laughter anyway, as she held my hand. *Don't worry*, she would say, *don't let things bother you*.

Slowly, I walk toward her tombstone. Nobody is near. I did not attend her funeral due to unforeseen circumstances. I covered for an ill professor who had abandoned his class for a week. Another day off for students would have been disastrous. I correctly place the flowers to please my mother. Shake off the water. Remove the wrapping paper. Pulling back the grass, I place the flowers in the hole in the ground. She was 97 years old.

Let's collect a hundred shells, she laughs. *Okay*, I say. Someday, I will describe grief to her. But for now, she is too young. She has no experience with death. Besides, I do not understand suicide and could not explain it. No need to change the moment, I suppress the emotions, an ancient and honorable Asian tradition. Hide those feelings, especially my keening heartache. Quickly, I remove my sunglasses and inhale. The sway of waves draws me to her. Lulled by her giddiness, I get up. Two airplanes soar with cannonball sounds. Tippy, mind numb, I straighten my body. I walk over

and embrace her. Her hands around my waist, I laugh with tears. A scene I will play back forever. She creates new harmony. In just a few seconds, I embrace our summer day. We join hands. Stroll along, watching the sea. This quality of time makes me high. There is nothing except us. There need be nothing but us. With little fingers and eyes full of life, she pulls me into her world. Everything can be easy.

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Karen V. Lee is a faculty advisor and cofounder of the Teaching Initiative for Music Educators cohort (TIME), at the Faculty of Education, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, B.C. Her research interests include issues of musician identity, teacher identity, music education, teacher education, and arts-based approaches to qualitative research. She completed her doctoral dissertation as a book of short stories, titled *Riffs of Change: Musicians Becoming Music Educators*, about musicians becoming music educators in classroom contexts. She is a mother, writer, musician, music educator and researcher. Currently, she teaches undergraduate and graduate students at The University of British Columbia. In particular, she has an interest in exploring the use of hand drums in elementary and secondary classrooms.