

Dear Grief,

I have learned you are really just love, all the love I want to give and cannot. All the unspent love that gathers up in the corners of my eyes, the lump in my throat and in the hollow part of my chest.

Today marks two months and 16 days since I lost my first love and the day you also entered my life. It began with so much foolish hope that he would return from the hospital like all the other times and ended with disappointment.

Through my blur of tears, I remember seeing him finally look peaceful. There were no more laboured breaths, no more swollen stomach, no voice muffled behind the oxygen mask. But there was a small smile, he was home.

That night you nagged at me, telling me the more you move on, the more you are leaving him behind, the more you move on, the more your memories will fade. They will be replaced with new ones. Do not move on.

On the day of the funeral, I could not attend because I had to self-isolate. So, I sat alone in the room and told myself the story.

A long time ago in a small village in Bangladesh, there lived a young boy called Hanif Ali who loved to ride his stallion, Mon'bahadur (Braveheart). At the age of seven, he lost his father - the breadwinner of his family. At the tender age of 14, he was offered the opportunity of a lifetime, to come to England. He did not speak a word of English, yet he worked tirelessly day and night providing for his mother and family. He faced many challenges, racism, homesickness, he was just a little boy who missed his mother.

I recited the story repeatedly and let you unleash the eternity of pain. A long time ago in a small village in Bangladesh, there lived young boy called Hanif Ali who loved to ride his stallion...

Ten days later, his wife joined him. She had no underlying medical condition, she was young (only in her mid-60s). She took the grave next to him. It was as if that place was reserved for her. She was put in an induced coma and she never knew her love was gone. It was as though her heart felt it and she knew she did not want to live without him.

In those ten days, my grief had already started to reshape me. I learnt that time should not be taken for granted, we need to treat every day like our last and in doing so we start appreciating every day for what it is.

Life has no guarantee so why did I expect her to live for years to come?

Grief drew me to become anxious, to be too cautious and to hold my loved ones so close to my heart. I started having nightmares of losing more people I loved. I started becoming clingy. I could not be away from my mum from more than ten minutes at a time.

You took over my life, I could not get on with my day, without feeling tightness in my chest. Without having to gulp for air as I tried to swallow back the tears. I became an emotional wreck. Never in my life had I been this weak.

I still remember the day that I let you drown me. Shove me under the deep waters, I refused to move. Lungs gasping for air, throat burning as I rolled around in pain. I felt like I was having a heart attack as if I was going to die. But all I did was roll around waiting for it to pass.

I remember my mum worried calling 111, 999. No one could get here fast enough. I could see her pacing up and down. I told her to calm down and take a breath but I refused to take my own advice. I laid on the bed until the ambulance arrived.

My health got worse and worse by the day, I started thinking about all of the times I was ill and they were there. They used to make sure I was treated like a princess. My love used to make me my favourite food and she would always pray for me to get better. What was I going to do without her prayers? Who is going to care about me as deeply as they did?

Why is it that all the good people have to go?

You drove me to a dark place, I was always scared to be alone with my thoughts. I never trusted myself. Scared that I would drown again. I was hospitalised, my mother worried I would leave her, that I would die young. Why did you bring me so much pain? Why couldn't you just go away?

I used the time to reflect and spend time with my mum, focus on something other than my thoughts. When I left, I knew I wanted to take charge, no more sitting in the passenger seat. I wanted to honour their memory, I wanted to teach others what they taught me.

Nanu (grandmother) you devoted your life to your husband, to your religion and your family. You always helped and wanted nothing in return, your kindness went a long way. All the neighbours talk about how they miss you and your gold tooth smile. All of your friends miss you at the mosque. They all called and cried. They miss you. Dr Anna Livingstone called, she said she cannot believe you are gone. The Nanu (grandmother) who lives downstairs misses your walks, she misses her best friend and forever thinks of you as her sister, she is looking out for your children and grandchildren now.

Nanu I want you to know that I miss you and I did what you told me to do. I shrouded your body. You always asked me, 'Are you sure you can do it?' Truth be told I never knew if I would be strong enough. I always thought I would be in my 20s if not 30s when you die but I was only 16 and I did. I am so proud of myself. I knew how much it meant to you that I did and I did not realise how much it would mean to me. You looked so beautiful, even in death, you were beaming and your hands were still so soft. Your face so calm, ageless. I knew that you were gone to a good place.

Nana (grandad), you always had a way of making everyone feel special. You were just, you were so caring for animals you treated them as friends, as equals. You gave so much to your family so they can have the best life possible. You are what a man should be. I wish I could see you one more time, just for five more minutes, to give you one more kiss. But I take comfort that I will see you in Jannah (heaven) Inshallah (God willing). We will be the ones racing our horses through the fields, free of this world of hardship.

Nanu and Nana you have given me so much. I know now that you were both too good for this world, that it was your time to go. When I become a doctor Inshallah (God willing), I am going to treat my patients with the same kindness you taught me and with the same welcoming warmth, you made strangers feel. I know you are with me every step of the way and Nanu, if I make it, I know your duas (prayers) got me to that day. Love you, until we meet again.

Grief is like a stranger who shows up on one stormy night begging you to let him in. The longer you make him wait, the angrier he gets. He wrecks your house and damages your most precious thing. He throws a tantrum, ripping at your curtains, spilling coffee on the carpet. The only way to stop is to give in. He wants you to accept him, he wants you to listen and whether you like it or not, Grief is here to stay.

I know that grief is not something that I can escape, I know some days you will drown me and other days you will walk with me side by side. There is still a lot I am learning about you but there is one thing I know for certain. I do not want you to ever leave me because I never want to ever forget them.

Time of death:

Hanif Ali (22.12.2020)

Kasamala Bibi (1.1.2021)