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WHEN THINGS GO MISSING

Reflections on two seasons of loss.

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Over a lifetime, we will lose some two hundred thousand items apiece, plus money, relationships, elections, loved ones. Illustration by Bianca Bagnarelli

A couple of years ago, I spent the summer in Portland, Oregon, losing things. I normally live on the East Coast, but that year, unable to face another sweltering August, I decided to temporarily decamp to the West. This turned out to be strangely easy. I'd lived in Portland for a while after college, and some acquaintances there needed a house sitter. Another friend was away for the summer and happy to loan me her pickup truck. Someone on Craigslist sold me a bike for next to nothing. In very short order, and with very little effort, everything fell into place.

And then, mystifyingly, everything fell out of place. My first day in town, I left the keys to the truck on the counter of a coffee shop. The next day, I left the keys to the house in the front door. A few days after that, warming up in the midday sun at an outdoor café, I took off the long-sleeved shirt I'd been wearing, only to leave it hanging over the back of the chair when I headed

home. When I returned to claim it, I discovered that I'd left my wallet behind as well. Prior to that summer, I should note, I had lost a wallet exactly once in my adult life: at gunpoint. Yet later that afternoon I stopped by a sporting-goods store to buy a lock for my new bike and left my wallet sitting next to the cash register.

I got the wallet back, but the next day I lost the bike lock. I'd just arrived home and removed it from its packaging when my phone rang; I stepped away to take the call, and when I returned, some time later, the lock had vanished. This was annoying, because I was planning to bike downtown that evening, to attend an event at Powell's, Portland's famous bookstore. Eventually, having spent an absurd amount of time looking for the lock and failing to find it, I gave up and drove the truck downtown instead. I parked, went to the event, hung around talking for a while afterward, browsed the bookshelves, walked outside into a lovely summer evening, and could not find the truck anywhere.

This was a serious feat, a real bar-raising of thing-losing, not only because in general it is difficult to lose a truck but also because the truck in question was enormous. The friend to whom it belonged once worked as an ambulance driver; oversized vehicles do not faze her. It had tires that came up to my midriff, an extended cab, and a bed big enough to haul cetaceans. Yet I'd somehow managed to misplace it in downtown Portland—a city, incidentally, that I know as well as any other on the planet. For the next forty-five minutes, as a cool blue night gradually lowered itself over downtown, I walked around looking for the truck, first on the street where I was sure I'd parked, then on the nearest cross streets, and then in a grid whose scale grew ever larger and more ludicrous.

Finally, I returned to the street where I'd started and noticed a small sign: "NO PARKING ANYTIME." Oh, shit. Feeling like the world's biggest idiot, and wondering how much it was going to cost to extricate a truck the size of Nevada from a tow lot, I called the Portland Police Department. The man who answered was wonderfully affable. "No, Ma'am," he veritably sang into the phone, "no pickup trucks from downtown this evening. Must be your lucky day!" Officer, you have no idea. Channelling the kind of advice one is often given as a child, I returned to the bookstore, calmed myself down with a cup of tea, collected my thoughts amid the latest literary debuts, and then, to the best of my ability, retraced the entire course of my evening, in the hope that doing so would knock loose some memory of how I got there. It did not. Back outside on the streets of Portland, I spun around as uselessly as a dowsing rod.

Seventy-five minutes later, I found the truck, in a perfectly legal parking space, on a block so unrelated to any reasonable route from my house to the bookstore that I seriously wondered if I'd driven there in some kind of fugue state. I climbed in, headed home, and, for reasons I'll explain in a moment, decided that I needed to call my sister as soon as I walked in the door. But I did not. I could not. My cell phone was back at Powell's, on a shelf with all the other New Arrivals.

My sister is a cognitive scientist at M.I.T., more conversant than most people in the mental processes involved in tracking and misplacing objects. That is not, however, why I wanted to talk to her about my newly acquired propensity for losing things. I wanted to talk to her because, true to the stereotype of the absent-minded professor, she is the most scatterbrained person I've ever met.

7 MORE DWARFS



ANTSY



FRUMPY



CRUNCHY



SKEEZY



BOOZY



JAYZY



EMOJY

SCHWARZ



There is a runner-up: my father. My family members, otherwise a fairly similar bunch, are curiously divided down the middle in this respect. On the spectrum of obsessively orderly to sublimely unconcerned with the everyday physical world, my father and my sister are—actually, they are nowhere. They can't even *find* the spectrum. My mother and I, meanwhile, are busy organizing it by size and color. I will never forget watching my mother try to adjust an ever so slightly askew picture frame—at the Cleveland Museum of Art. My father, by contrast, once spent an entire vacation wearing mismatched shoes, because he'd packed no others and discovered the mistake only when airport security asked him to remove them. My sister's best T.S.A. trick, meanwhile, involved borrowing her partner's laptop, then accidentally leaving it at an Alaska Airlines gate one week after 9/11, thereby almost shutting down the Oakland airport.

That's why I called her when I started uncharacteristically misplacing stuff myself. For one thing, I thought she might commiserate. For another, I thought she might help; given her extensive experience with losing things, I figured she must have developed a compensatory capacity for finding them. Once I recovered my phone and reached her, however, both hopes vanished as completely as the bike lock. My sister was gratifyingly astonished that I'd never lost my wallet before, but, as someone who typically has to reconstruct the entire contents of her own several times a year, she was not exactly sympathetic. "Call me," she said, "when they know your name at the D.M.V."

Nor did my sister have any good advice on how to find missing objects—although, in fairness, such advice is itself difficult to find. Plenty of parents, self-help gurus, and psychics will offer to assist you in finding lost stuff, but most of their suggestions are either obvious (calm down, clean up), suspect (the "eighteen-inch rule," whereby the majority of missing items are supposedly lurking less than two feet from where you first thought they would be), or New Agey. ("Picture a silvery cord reaching from your chest all the way out to your lost object.") Advice on how to find missing things also abounds online, but as a rule it is useful only in proportion to the strangeness of whatever you've lost. Thus, the Internet is middling on your lost credit card or Kindle, but edifying on your lost Roomba (look inside upholstered furniture), your lost marijuana (your high self probably hid it in a fit of paranoia; try your sock drawer), your lost drone (you'll need a specially designed G.P.S.), or your lost bitcoins (good luck with that). The same basic dynamic applies to the countless Web sites devoted to recovering lost pets, which are largely useless when it comes to your missing Lab mix but surprisingly helpful when it comes to your missing ball python. Such Web sites can also be counted on for excellent anecdotes, like the one about the cat that vanished in Nottinghamshire, England, and was found, fourteen months later, in a pet-food warehouse, twice its original size.

Perhaps the best thing that can be said about lost entities and the Internet is that it has made many of them considerably easier to find: out-of-print books, elementary-school classmates, decades-old damning quotes by politicians. More generally, modern technology can sometimes help us find misplaced objects, as you know if you've ever had your girlfriend call your lost cell phone, or used that little button on your keys to make your Toyota Camry honk at you. Lately, we've seen a boom in technologies specifically designed to compensate for our tendency to lose stuff: Apple's Find My iPhone, for instance, and the proliferation of Bluetooth-enabled tracking devices that you can attach to everyday objects in order to summon them from the ether, like the Accio spell in the "Harry Potter" books.

These tricks, while helpful, have their limitations. Your phone needs to be on and non-dead; your car needs to be within range; you need to have the foresight to stick a tracking device onto the particular thing you're going to lose before you've lost it. Moreover, as anyone who's ever owned a remote control can tell you, new technologies themselves are often infuriatingly unfindable, a problem made worse by the trend toward ever smaller gadgets. It is difficult to lose an Apple IIe, easier to lose a laptop, a snap to lose a cell phone, and nearly impossible *not* to lose a flash drive. Then, there is the issue of passwords, which are to computers what socks are to washing machines. The only thing in the real or the digital world harder to keep track of than a password is the information required to retrieve it, which is why it is possible, as a grown adult, to find yourself caring about your first-grade teacher's pet iguana's maiden name.

Passwords, passports, umbrellas, scarves, earrings, earbuds, musical instruments, W-2s, that letter you meant to answer, the permission slip for your daughter's field trip, the can of paint you scrupulously set aside three years ago for the touch-up job you knew you'd someday need: the range of things we lose and the readiness with which we do so are staggering. Data from one insurance-company survey suggest that the average person misplaces up to nine objects a day, which means that, by the time we

turn sixty, we will have lost up to two hundred thousand things. (These figures seem preposterous until you reflect on all those times you holler up the stairs to ask your partner if she's seen your jacket, or on how often you search the couch cushions for the pen you were just using, or on that daily almost-out-the-door flurry when you can't find your kid's lunchbox or your car keys.) Granted, you'll get many of those items back, but you'll never get back the time you wasted looking for them. In the course of your life, you'll spend roughly six solid months looking for missing objects; here in the United States, that translates to, collectively, some fifty-four million hours spent searching a *day*. And there's the associated loss of money: in the U.S. in 2011, thirty billion dollars on misplaced cell phones alone.



"You'll get three meals a day, but they will all be continental breakfast."



Broadly speaking, there are two explanations for why we lose all this stuff—one scientific, the other psychoanalytic, both unsatisfying. According to the scientific account, losing things represents a failure of recollection or a failure of attention: either we can't retrieve a memory (of where we set down our wallet, say) or we didn't encode one in the first place. According to the psychoanalytic account, conversely, losing things represents a *success*—a deliberate sabotage of our rational mind by our subliminal desires. In "The Psychopathology of Everyday Life," Freud describes "the unconscious dexterity with which an object is mislaid on

account of hidden but powerful motives,” including “the low estimation in which the lost object is held, or a secret antipathy towards it or towards the person that it came from.” Freud’s colleague and contemporary Abraham Arden Brill put the matter more succinctly: “We never lose what we highly value.”

As explanations go, the scientific one is persuasive but uninteresting. It sheds no light on how it feels to lose something, and provides only the most abstract and impractical notion of how not to do so. (Focus! And, while you’re at it, rejigger your genes or circumstances to improve your memory.) The psychological account, by contrast, is interesting, entertaining, and theoretically helpful (Freud pointed out “the remarkable sureness shown in finding the object again once the motive for its being mislaid had expired”) but, alas, untrue. The most charitable thing to be said about it is that it wildly overestimates our species: absent subconscious motives, apparently, we would never lose anything at all.

That is patently false—but, like many psychological claims, impossible to actually falsify. Maybe the doting mother who lost her toddler at the mall was secretly fed up with the demands of motherhood. Maybe my sister loses her wallet so often owing to a deep-seated discomfort with capitalism. Maybe the guy who left his “Hamilton” tickets in the taxi was a Jeffersonian at heart. Freud would stand by such propositions, and no doubt some losses really are occasioned by subconscious emotion, or at least can be convincingly explained that way after the fact. But experience tells us that such cases are unusual, if they exist at all. The better explanation, most of the time, is simply that life is complicated and minds are limited. We lose things because we are flawed; because we are human; because we have things to lose.

Of all the lost objects in literature, one of my favorites appears—or, rather, disappears—in Patti Smith’s 2015 memoir, “M Train.” Although that book is ultimately concerned with far more serious losses, Smith pauses midway through to describe the experience of losing a beloved black coat that a friend gave her, off his own back, on her fifty-seventh birthday. The coat wasn’t much to look at—moth-eaten, coming apart at the seams, itself optimized for losing things by the gaping holes in each pocket—but, Smith writes, “Every time I put it on I felt like myself.” Then came a particularly harsh winter, which required a warmer jacket, and by the time the air turned mild again the coat was nowhere to be seen.

When we lose something, our first reaction, naturally enough, is to want to know where it is. But behind that question about location lurks a question about causality: What happened to it? What agent or force made it disappear? Such questions matter because they can help direct our search. You will act differently if you think you left your coat in a taxi or believe you boxed it up and put it in the basement. Just as important, the answers can provide us with that much coveted condition known as closure. It is good to get your keys back, better still to understand how they wound up in your neighbor’s recycling bin.

But questions about causality can also lead to trouble, because, in essence, they ask us to assign blame. Being human, we’re often reluctant to assign it to ourselves—and when it comes to missing possessions it is always possible (and occasionally true) that someone else caused them to disappear. This is how a problem with an object turns into a problem with a person. You swear you left the bill sitting on the table for your wife to mail; your wife swears with equal vehemence that it was never there; soon enough, you have also both lost your tempers.

Another possibility, considerably less likely but equally self-sparing, is that your missing object engineered its own vanishing, alone or in conjunction with other occult forces. Beloved possessions like her black coat, Patti Smith suggests, are sometimes “drawn into that half-dimensional place where things just disappear.” Such explanations are more common than you might think. Given

enough time spent searching for something that was *just there*, even the most scientifically inclined person on the planet will start positing various highly improbable culprits: wormholes, aliens, goblins, ether.

That is an impressive act of outsourcing, given that nine times out of ten we are to blame for losing whatever it is that we can't find. In the micro-drama of loss, in other words, we are nearly always both villain and victim. That goes some way toward explaining why people often say that losing things drives them crazy. At best, our failure to locate something that we ourselves last handled suggests that our memory is shot; at worst, it calls into question the very nature and continuity of selfhood. (If you've ever lost something that you deliberately stashed away for safekeeping, you know that the resulting frustration stems not just from a failure of memory but from a failure of inference. As one astute Internet commentator asked, "Why is it so hard to think like myself?") Part of what makes loss such a surprisingly complicated phenomenon, then, is that it is inextricable from the extremely complicated phenomenon of human cognition.

This entanglement becomes more fraught as we grow older. Beyond a certain age, every act of losing gets subjected to an extra layer of scrutiny, in case what you have actually lost is your mind. Most such acts don't indicate pathology, of course, but real mental decline does manifest partly as an uptick in lost things. Dementia patients are prone to misplacing their belongings, and people with early-stage Alzheimer's often can't find objects because they have put them in unlikely locations; the eyeglasses end up in the oven, the dentures in the coffee can. Such losses sadden us because they presage larger ones—of autonomy, of intellectual capacity, ultimately of life itself.

No wonder losing things, even trivial things, can be so upsetting. Regardless of what goes missing, loss puts *us* in our place; it confronts us with lack of order and loss of control and the fleeting nature of existence. When Patti Smith gives up on finding her black coat, she imagines that, together with all of the world's other missing objects, it has gone to dwell in a place her husband liked to call the Valley of Lost Things. The shadow that is missing from that phrase darkens her memoir; in the course of it, Smith also describes losing her best friend, her brother, her mother, and that husband (at age forty-five, to heart failure).

On the face of it, such losses fit in poorly with lesser ones. It is one thing to lose a wedding ring, something else entirely to lose a spouse. This is the distinction Elizabeth Bishop illuminates, by pretending to elide it, in her villanelle "One Art," perhaps the most famous reckoning with loss in all of literature. "The art of losing isn't hard to master," she writes in the opening line; the trick is to begin with trivial losses, like door keys, and practice until you can handle those which are tragic. No one could take this suggestion

seriously, and we aren't meant to do so. Through its content as well as its form, the poem ultimately concedes that all other losses pale beside the loss of a loved one.

Moreover, although Bishop doesn't make this point explicitly, death differs from other losses not only in degree but in kind. With objects, loss implies the possibility of recovery; in theory, at least, nearly every missing possession can be restored to its owner. That's why the defining emotion of losing things isn't frustration or panic or sadness but, paradoxically, hope. With people, by contrast, loss is not a transitional state but a terminal one. Outside of an afterlife, for those who believe in one, it leaves us with nothing to hope for and nothing to do. Death is loss without the possibility of being found.

My father, in addition to being scatterbrained and mismatched and menschy and brilliant, is dead. I lost him, as we say, in the third week of September, just before the autumn equinox. Since then, the days have darkened, and I, too, have been lost: adrift, disoriented, absent. Or perhaps it would be more apt to say that I have been *at a loss*—a strange turn of phrase, as if loss were a place in the physical world, a kind of reverse oasis or Bermuda Triangle where the spirit fails and the compass needle spins.

Like death more generally, my father's was somehow both predictable and shocking. For nearly a decade, his health had been poor, almost impressively so. In addition to suffering from many of the usual complaints of contemporary aging (high blood pressure, high cholesterol, kidney disease, congestive heart failure), he had endured illnesses unusual for any age and era: viral meningitis, West Nile encephalitis, an autoimmune disorder whose identity evaded the best doctors at the Cleveland Clinic. From there, the list spread outward in all directions of physiology and severity. He had fallen and torn a rotator cuff beyond recovery, and obliterated a patellar tendon by missing a step one Fourth of July. His breathing was often labored despite no evident respiratory problem; an errant nerve in his neck sometimes zapped him into temporary near-paralysis. He had terrible dental issues, like the impoverished child he had once been, and terrible gout, like the wealthy old potentate he cheerfully became.

He was, in short, a shambles. And yet, as the E.R. visits added up over the years, I gradually curbed my initial feelings of panic and dread—partly because no one can live in a state of crisis forever but also because, by and large, my father bore his infirmity with insouciance. (“Biopsy Thursday,” he once wrote me about a problem with his carotid artery. “Have no idea when the autopsy will be and may not be informed of it.”) More to the point, against considerable odds, he just kept on being alive. Intellectually, I knew that no one could manage such a serious disease burden forever. Yet the sheer number of times my father had courted death and then recovered had, perversely, made him seem indomitable.

As a result, I was not overly alarmed when my mother called one morning toward the end of the summer to say that my father had been hospitalized with a bout of atrial fibrillation. Nor was I surprised, when my partner and I got to town that night, to learn that his heart rhythm had stabilized. The doctors were keeping him in the hospital chiefly for observation, they told us, and also because his white-bloodcell count was mysteriously high. When my father related the chain of events to us—he had gone to a routine cardiology appointment, only to be shunted straight to the I.C.U.—he was jovial and accurate and eminently himself. He remained in good spirits the following day, although he was extremely garrulous, not in his usual effusive way but slightly manic, slightly off—a consequence, the doctors explained, of toxins building up in his bloodstream from temporary loss of kidney function. If it didn't resolve on its own in a day or two, they planned to give him a round of dialysis to clear it.

That was on a Wednesday. Over the next two days, the garrulousness declined into incoherence; then, on Saturday, my father lapsed into unresponsiveness. Somewhere below his silence lurked six languages, the result of being born in Tel Aviv to parents who had fled pogroms in Poland, relocating at age seven to Germany (an unusual reverse exodus for a family of Jews in 1948, precipitated by limited travel options and violence in what was then still Palestine), and arriving in the United States, on a refugee visa, at the age of twelve. English, French, German, Polish, Yiddish, Hebrew: of these, my father acquired the first one last, and spoke it with Nabokovian fluency and panache. He loved to talk—I mean that he found just putting sentences together tremendously fun, although he also cherished conversation—and he talked his way into, out of, and through everything, including illness. During the years of medical crises, I had seen my father racked and raving with fever. I had seen him in a dozen kinds of pain. I had seen him hallucinating—sometimes while fully aware of it, discussing with us not only the mystery of his visions but also the mystery of cognition. I had seen him cast about in a mind temporarily compromised by illness and catch only strange, dark, pelagic creatures, unknown and fearsome to the rest of us. In all that time, under all those varied conditions, I had never known him to lack for words. But now, for five days, he held his silence. On the sixth, he lurched back into sound, but not into himself; there followed an awful night of struggle and agitation. After that, aside from a few scattered words, some mystifying, some seemingly lucid—“Hi!”; “Machu Picchu”; “I’m dying”—my father never spoke again.

Even so, for a while longer, he endured—I mean his him-ness, his Isaac-ness, that inexplicable, assertive bit of self in each of us. A few days before his death, having ignored every request made of him by a constant stream of medical professionals (“Mr. Schulz, can you wiggle your toes?” “Mr. Schulz, can you squeeze my hand?”), my father chose to respond to one final command: Mr. Schulz, we learned, could still stick out his tongue. His last voluntary movement, which he retained almost until the end, was the ability to kiss my mother. Whenever she leaned in close to brush his lips, he puckered up and returned the same brief, adoring gesture that I had seen all my days. In front of my sister and me, at least, it was my parents’ hello and goodbye, their “Sweet dreams” and “I’m only teasing,” their “I’m sorry” and “You’re beautiful” and “I love you”—the basic punctuation mark of their common language, the sign and seal of fifty years of happiness.

One night, while that essence still persisted, we gathered around, my father’s loved ones, and filled his silence with talk. I had always regarded my family as close, so it was startling to realize how much closer we could get, how near we drew around his dying flame. The room we were in was a cube of white, lit up like the aisle of a grocery store, yet in my memory that night is as dark and vibrant as a Rembrandt painting. We talked only of love; there was nothing else to say. My father, mute but alert, looked from one face to the next as we spoke, eyes shining with tears. I had always dreaded seeing him cry, and rarely did, but for once I was

grateful. It told me what I needed to know: for what may have been the last time in his life, and perhaps the most important, he understood.

All this makes dying sound meaningful and sweet—and it is true that, if you are lucky, there is a seam of sweetness and meaning to be found within it, a vein of silver in a dark cave a thousand feet underground. Still, the cave is a cave. We had by then spent two vertiginous, elongated, atemporal weeks in the I.C.U. At no point during that time did we have a diagnosis, still less a prognosis. At every point, we were besieged with new possibilities, new tests, new doctors, new hopes, new fears. Every night, we arrived home exhausted, many hours past dark, and talked through what had happened, as if doing so might guide us through the following day. Then we'd wake up and resume the routine of the parking garage and the elevator and the twenty-four-hour Au Bon Pain, only to discover that, beyond those, there was no routine at all, nothing to help us prepare or plan. It was like trying to dress every morning for the weather in a nation we'd never heard of.

Eventually, we decided that my father would not recover, and so, instead of continuing to try to stave off death, we unbarred the door and began to wait. To my surprise, I found it comforting to be with him during that time, to sit by his side and hold his hand and watch his chest rise and fall with a familiar little ruffle of snore. It was not, as they say, unbearably sad; on the contrary, it was bearably sad—a tranquil, contemplative, lapping kind of sorrow. I thought, as it turns out mistakenly, that what I was doing during those days was making my peace with his death. I have learned since then that even one's unresponsive and dying father is, in some extremely salient way, still alive. And then, very early one morning, he was not.

What I remember best from those next hours is watching my mother cradle the top of my father's head in her hand. A wife holding her dead husband, without trepidation, without denial, without any possibility of being cared for in return, just for the chance to be tender toward him one last time: it was the purest act of love I've ever seen. She looked bereft, beautiful, unimaginably calm. He did not yet look dead. He looked like my father. I could not stop picturing the way he used to push his glasses up onto his forehead to read. It struck me, right before everything else struck me much harder, that I should set them by his bed in case he needed them.

So began my second, darker season of losing things. Three weeks after my father died, so did another family member, of cancer. Three weeks after that, my home-town baseball team lost the World Series—an outcome that wouldn't have affected me much if my father hadn't been such an ardent fan. One week later, Hillary Clinton, together with sixty-six million voters, lost the Presidential election.

Like a dysfunctional form of love, which to some extent it is, grief has no boundaries; seldom this fall could I distinguish my distress over these later losses from my sadness about my father. I had maintained my composure during his memorial service, even while delivering the eulogy. But when, at the second funeral, the son of the deceased stood up to speak, I wept. Afterward, I couldn't shake the sense that another shoe was about to drop—that at any moment I would learn that someone else close to me had died. The morning after the election, I cried again, missing my refugee father, missing the future I had thought would unfold. In its place, other kinds of losses suddenly seemed imminent: of civil rights, personal safety, financial security, the foundational American values of respect for dissent and difference, the institutions and protections of democracy.

For weeks, I slogged on like this, through waves of actual and anticipatory grief. I couldn't stop conjuring catastrophes, political and otherwise. I felt a rising fear whenever my mother didn't answer her phone, hated to see my sister board an airplane, could barely let my partner get in a car. "So many things seem filled with the intent to be lost," Elizabeth Bishop wrote, and, as much as my specific sadness, it was just that—the sheer quantity and inevitability of further suffering—that undid me.

Meanwhile, I had lost, along with everything else, all motivation; day after day, I did as close as humanly possible to nothing. In part, this was because I dreaded getting farther away from the time when my father was still alive. But it was also because, after all the obvious tasks of mourning were completed—the service over, the bureaucratic side of death dispatched, the clothing donated, the thank-you cards written—I had no idea what else to do. Although I had spent a decade worrying about losing my father, I had never once thought about what would come next. Like a heart, my imagination had always stopped at the moment of death.

Now, obliged to carry onward through time, I realized I didn't know how. I found some consolation in poetry, but otherwise, for the first time in my life, I did not care to read. Nor could I bring myself to write, not least because any piece I produced would be the first my father wouldn't see. I stretched out for as long as I could the small acts that felt easy and right (calling my mother and my sister, curling up with my partner, playing with the cats), but these alone could not occupy the days. Not since the age of eight, when I was still learning to master boredom, had life struck me so much as simply a problem of what to do.

It was during this time that I began to go out looking for my father. Some days, I merely said to myself that I wanted to get out of the house; other days, I set about searching for him as deliberately as one would go look for a missing glove. Because I find peace and clarity in nature, I did this searching outdoors, sometimes while walking, sometimes while out on a run. I did not expect, of course, that along the way I would encounter my father again in his physical form. To the extent that I thought about it at all, I thought that through sheer motion I might be able to create a tunnel of emptiness, in myself or in the world, that would fill up with a sense of his presence—his voice, his humor, his warmth, the perfect familiarity of our relationship.

I have subsequently learned, from the academic literature on grief, that this "searching behavior," as it is called, is common among the bereaved. The psychologist John Bowlby, a contemporary of Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, regarded the second stage of grief, after numbness, as "yearning and searching." But I had never knowingly engaged in it before, because, in my experience, my dead had always come looking for *me*. After other people I'd loved had died, I had often felt them near me, sometimes heard their voices, and even, on a few exceedingly strange occasions, been jolted into the uncanny conviction that I had encountered them again in some altered but unmistakable form. (This, too, turns out to be common among the grieving. "I never thought Michiko would

come back / after she died,” the poet Jack Gilbert wrote of his wife in “Alone.” “It is strange that she has returned / as somebody’s dalmatian.”)

These experiences, to be clear, do not comport with my understanding of death. I don’t believe that our loved ones can commune with us from beyond the grave, any more than I believe that spouses occasionally reincarnate as Dalmatians. But grief makes reckless cosmologists of us all, and I had thought it possible, in an impossible kind of way, that if I went out looking I might find myself in my father’s company again.

The first time, I turned around after five minutes; I have seldom tried anything that felt so futile. After he lost his wife, C. S. Lewis, who had likewise previously felt the dead to be near at hand, looked up at the night sky and, to his dismay, knew that he would never find her anywhere. “Is anything more certain,” he wrote, in “A Grief Observed,” “than that in all those vast times and spaces, if I were allowed to search them, I should nowhere find her face, her voice, her touch?” Between his late wife and himself, he felt only “the locked door, the iron curtain, the vacuum, absolute zero.”

Thus do I feel about my father. “Lost” is precisely the right description for how I have experienced him since his death. I search for him constantly but can’t find him anywhere. I try to sense some intimation of his presence and feel nothing. I listen for his voice but haven’t heard it since those final times he used it in the hospital. Grieving him is like holding one of those homemade tin-can telephones with no tin can on the other end of the string. His absence is total; where there was him, there is nothing.

This was perhaps the most striking thing about my father’s death and all that followed: how relevant the idea of loss felt, how it seemed at once so capacious and so accurate. And in fact, to my surprise, it *was* accurate. Until I looked it up, I’d assumed that, unless we were talking about phone chargers or car keys or cake recipes, we were using the word “lost” figuratively, even euphemistically—that we say “I lost my father” to soften the blow of death.

But that turns out not to be true. The verb “to lose” has its taproot sunk in sorrow; it is related to the “lorn” in forlorn. It comes from an Old English word meaning to perish, which comes from a still more ancient word meaning to separate or cut apart. The modern sense of misplacing an object appeared later, in the thirteenth century; a hundred years after that, “to lose” acquired the meaning of failing to win. In the sixteenth century, we began to lose our minds; in the seventeenth century, our hearts. The circle

of what we can lose, in other words, began with our own lives and one another and has been steadily expanding ever since. In consequence, loss today is a supremely awkward category, bulging with everything from mittens to life savings to loved ones, forcing into relationship all kinds of wildly dissimilar experiences.

And yet, if anything, our problem is not that we put too many things into the category of loss but that we leave too many out. One night, during those weeks when I could find solace only in poetry, my partner read “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” aloud to me. In it, Walt Whitman leans against the railing of a ship, exalting in all he sees. So expansive is his vision that it includes not just the piers and sails and reeling gulls but everyone else who makes the crossing: all those who stood at the railing watching before his birth, all those watching around him now, and all those who will be there watching after his death—which, in the poem, he doesn’t so much foresee as, through a wild, craning omniscience, look back on. “Just as you feel when you look on the river and sky, so I felt,” he admonishes, kindly.

And, just like that, my sense of loss suddenly revealed itself as terribly narrow. What I miss about my father, as much as anything, is life as it looked filtered through him, held up and considered against his inner lights. Yet the most important thing that vanished when he died is wholly unavailable to me: life as it looked *to* him, life as we all live it, from the inside out. All my memories can’t add up to a single moment of what it was like to be my father, and all my loss pales beside his own. Like Whitman, his love of life had been exuberant, exhaustive; he must have hated, truly hated, to leave it behind—not just his family, whom he adored, but all of it, sea to shining sea.

It is breathtaking, the extinguishing of consciousness. Yet that loss, too—our own ultimate unbeing—is dwarfed by the grander scheme. When we are experiencing it, loss often feels like an anomaly, a disruption in the usual order of things. In fact, though, it *is* the usual order of things. Entropy, mortality, extinction: the entire plan of the universe consists of losing, and life amounts to a reverse savings account in which we are eventually robbed of everything. Our dreams and plans and jobs and knees and backs and memories, the childhood friend, the husband of fifty years, the father of forever, the keys to the house, the keys to the car, the keys to the kingdom, the kingdom itself: sooner or later, all of it drifts into the Valley of Lost Things.

There’s precious little solace for this, and zero redress; we will lose everything we love in the end. But why should that matter so much? By definition, we do not live in the end: we live all along the way. The smitten lovers who marvel every day at the miracle of having met each other are right; it is *finding* that is astonishing. You meet a stranger passing through your town and know within days you will marry her. You lose your job at fifty-five and shock yourself by finding a new calling ten years later. You have a thought and find the words. You face a crisis and find your courage.

All of this is made more precious, not less, by its impermanence. No matter what goes missing, the wallet or the father, the lessons are the same. Disappearance reminds us to notice, transience to cherish, fragility to defend. Loss is a kind of external conscience, urging us to make better use of our finite days. As Whitman knew, our brief crossing is best spent attending to all that we see: honoring what we find noble, denouncing what we cannot abide, recognizing that we are inseparably connected to all of it, including what is not yet upon us, including what is already gone. We are here to keep watch, not to keep. ♦

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