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James Mumford

A diary of divorce

I'm grieving for my marriage

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I'm living in the interstices between smokes. I fill the gaps ruminating, on the unretrievable past and the foreclosed future. I can't concentrate enough for any one of my thousands of books to be a distraction. I wake up and count the hours until I'll be tired enough to go back to sleep (or, on the weekends, until *Match of the Day*). My wife is gone. She's gone for ever.

Sometimes I hear the voices of reassurance. Be grateful for the time you had with her. I'm idealising our marriage. There are other fish in the sea. Thoughts

which seem momentarily plausible. Until, as C.S. Lewis writes in *A Grief Observed*, ‘then comes the sudden jab of red-hot memory and all this “commonsense” vanishes like an ant in the mouth of a furnace.’

The red-hot memory of the way she’d throw her head back when she laughed with abandon. Or smack her lips when savouring Riesling. Now it’s 27-11-2009 and she’s a bright white flash emerging, tentatively, out of the low sun flooding through the rear west doors of the church. Or fast-forward to 19-5-2016 and her eyes narrow as she focuses on the hospital ceiling fan as we await the fruit of her labour.

I lie on my side. In my boxer shorts. My thighs, one on top of the other, stick together. The lethargy. Shall I go to the gym? I need to slim down. But for whom? Shall I shave? For whom?

Last night I woke up shouting her name. Other nights I wake up and can’t remember where I am or why the right-hand side of the bed is vacated.

‘Grief is a cruel kind of education,’ writes Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in *Notes on Grief*. ‘You learn how much grief is about language, the failure of language and the grasping for language.’

That’s accurate. I find myself struggling to communicate my loss in ways that escape cliché, in ways that convince people my pain is unparalleled. There is a monstrous egocentricity in this. Yet, in terms of grief, I am not the first to think I am the first.

Then there’s the regret. Did my belief that love would last forever produce complacency? I think back over our final days, weeks, months together. Did I fail to cherish her as I should have? Did I take her companionship and our marriage for granted? I find myself regretting what was said. And what wasn’t. The conversations we never had, places we never visited, doors we never opened.

I can’t stand living with this pain. But I can’t stand not living with this pain either. ‘For here is the final tormenting, unanswerable question,’ writes Julian Barnes: ‘What is “success” in mourning? Does it lie in remembering or in forgetting? A staying still or a moving on?’ The thought of this anguish being diminished by my moving on: would that not be a betrayal?

Oh, and I have to see her again on Tuesday when I pick up the children.

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WRITTEN BY

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James Mumford is a London-based writer and fellow at the University of Virginia's Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture. His most recent book, *Vexed: Ethics Beyond Political Tribes*, is out with Bloomsbury Continuum.



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