

A Manual to Grief in a Pandemic

Everything I Can't Say Aloud About the Cat Cookie Jar

- I. It is not at all my taste.
 - i. It belongs more in the back of a Goodwill than on the second shelf of our kitchen¹.
 - a. With all the red discount stickers marking its nonsalable state.
- II. The only thing Grandma would hate more than a ceramic tabby cat cookie jar would be a ceramic *orange* tabby cat cookie jar.
 - i. She was indifferent to cats on a good day.
 - a. Even people who barely knew her knew that her strongest personal philosophy was the superiority of dogs².
 - ii. She also hated the color orange.
 - a. Maybe even more than she despised cat people and their snobbiness.
- III. Just because Grandma bought Mom that cat cookie jar certainly doesn't mean she wanted it to be her final resting place.
- IV. It's an especially ugly (and slightly inappropriate) urn.
 - i. Not, however, as inappropriate as the filing cabinet.
 - a. A morbid fact I only discovered when I secretly searched for her ashes for a few hours to no avail.
 1. It dawned on me that my dad, the man who used a folding board for his t-shirts, would only put her in a few places.
 - ii. There was a wooden filing cabinet in the garage- the prime suspect.

- a. Filed under “E” for Elaine, I found a small plastic box with a warning label for human remains.
- V. Stuffing Grandpa’s ashes inside the cookie jar only made it worse.
- VI. I had no better solution or alternative.
 - i. I know they’d say “Well, what do you suggest, Elaina?”
 - a. I would say nothing, just shrug my shoulders in quiet regret for bringing it up at all.
 - ii. Can’t I just know their decision was a bad one without knowing a good one?
- VII. Even after Mom and Dad specifically told me not to, I still looked at the ashes inside.
 - i. The ashes were stored in plastic bags, like the ones carnivals used for goldfish.
 - ii. Instead of a new pet, it was just a bunch of gray sand.
 - a. More like the stuff you put at the bottom of the fish tank instead of the fish.
 - iii. And so I definitely couldn’t tell them that when I looked, I saw one of Grandma’s fake golden teeth amongst all the gray bits.
- VIII. It was supposed to be a temporary solution.
 - i. Just like how the pandemic was supposed to be temporary.
- IX. No one is going to eat cookies from there again.

SARS-CoV-2

- I. Number of U.S. COVID-19 Deaths in 2021: 386,000+
 - i. Number of Deaths in My Family in 2021: 5
 - ii. Number of Deceased Family Members that Died of COVID-19 in 2021: 1

II. There were no funerals.

i. No memorial services

ii. No “in-lieu-of-flowers”

a. Not for my Uncle Luke

1. Paternal

2. COVID-19?

A. No

b. Not for my Grandma Elaine³

1. Paternal

2. COVID-19?

A. No

c. Not for my Uncle Axel

1. Maternal

2. COVID-19?

A. No

d. Not for my Great-Uncle James

1. Maternal

2. COVID-19?

A. Yes

e. Not for my Grandpa Stan⁴

1. Paternal

2. COVID-19?

A. No

iii. You get the picture.

The phone rings...

I. February 8th, 2021, early morning around 8 AM.

i. My tennis partner is calling, asking if I'm coming for the weekly match.

a. I played every Tuesday morning with three moms from the country club.

b. My tennis partner from high school had gone to Mississippi; her mom invited me to play with her instead every week since August 2020.

c. In between sets, they'd complain about their husbands budgeting them, but having no problem buying endless rounds on guy's night.

ii. Ten minutes earlier, my dad had pulled me out of the bathroom as I was brushing my hair.

a. He sat me on the white couch.

1. The one we were never allowed to sit on to ensure it kept its color.

b. And he told me that my Uncle Luke was dead.

1. He was my dad's oldest brother

2. It was, at the time, a suspected suicide.

A. It has now been ruled an accidental death by acute alcohol intoxication.

c. He was the father of three children.

1. Two already adults and the other in high school.

d. At the time of writing this, his ashes remain in a New York City mortuary.

1. Not in an urn.

2. Not even in a cookie jar.
- iii. I still went to the tennis match.
 - a. I lost every game.
- II. Two days later, it's February 10th.
 - i. It's just after dinner, we're gathered at the dining table.
 - ii. Grandma Lynette is calling my mom.
 - iii. My Uncle Axel has died.
 - a. He was found in his father's hunting cabin after going missing.
 - b. He committed suicide.
 1. No "suspected" necessary.
 - c. He had a twenty-year-old son.
- III. It's mid-morning on June 16th, 2021.
 - i. My Grandma Elaine is calling my dad for his birthday.
 - ii. He's in the shower and misses the call.
 - iii. She leaves a message at the tone, singing happy birthday and tells him how much she loves him⁵.
 - iv. His birthday is July 16th.
- IV. It's July 12th in early morning
 - i. I wake up to the sound of the phone call.
 - ii. It's my dad calling my mom to tell her that my Grandma Elaine had died just thirty minutes before.
 - iii. I was scheduled for work only a few hours later.
 - a. I went, staring at the wall of the boutique, my whole shift.

- b. From the children's section, three separate customers bought a book titled *Grandma Loves You*.
 - c. I fantasized kicking the wall.
 - iv. Four days later, I told Dad that Grandma was able to wish him a happy 53rd birthday.
- V. It's the day after Grandma's death.
 - i. It's the hospice nurse calling.
 - ii. My mentally-impaired and wheelchair-bound Grandpa Stan collects all the spare change in her room.
 - a. He puts single dollar bills and loose pennies in the front pocket of the Rein Spooner button-up that he wears every day.
 - 1. He thought that her death meant no one would take care of him and he would have to pay for his care out-of-pocket.
 - 2. No one had the heart to tell him that Grandma Elaine hadn't taken care of him for over a decade.
 - A. His stroke in 2009 marked the beginning of my dad's responsibility of taking care of them both, both financially and physically.
- VI. It's the first morning of 2022.
 - i. I walk inside to see my mom crying into the phone.
 - ii. My Grandpa Stan had died earlier at the breakfast table.
- VII. Every other phone call became a condolence call or a just-checking-in call.
 - i. Either the other line would choke up.

- ii. Or tell me how their death was a good thing because they were finally at peace.

VIII. I stopped picking up the phone.

In the Days Following Hanging Up...

I. Dad slides his sunglasses over his eyes, even when inside.

- i. I was secretly glad that I didn't have to see his tears.

- ii. I didn't know what I could say without making things worse.

II. I wear my grandma's wedding ring every day, even to bed when I remove all my other rings.

- i. I always thought it was the ugliest ring known to man. It looked more like costume jewelry from the 80s than a symbol of commitment.

- ii. I realized it was engraved on the inside to say "Baby, Baby" and then their wedding date "6/1/1961".

III. Dad takes no bereavement days.

- i. He didn't tell most co-workers that he'd known for over twenty years at the fire station.

- ii. His best friend from elementary school, whom I call Uncle Steve, is still unaware of their deaths.

- a. Dad says it's because Uncle Steve lives in the desert and doesn't get good cell reception.

- b. I know of two occasions when they have spoken on the phone since the deaths occurred.

IV. I try to remember everything my grandma said to me in the last few times I visited her.

- i. This was comforting until I remembered that the only reason I was allowed to see her or my grandpa was because they were in hospice.
- ii. COVID-19 restrictions and social distancing become a lot more lax when you're already dying.
- iii. The last time I saw my grandma alive, she fell asleep before I could tell her that I loved her or say goodbye.

V. It took one day to clear my grandma's hospice room.

- i. My great-aunt, mom, and I sorted through everything
- ii. I mostly just laid in her hospital bed while they sorted her belongings into piles of "give" or "keep".
- iii. My mom insisted that I take her hand-knitted sweater from Peru, Johnny Was green pants with large orange letters spelling "Angel" on the back (don't ask), and a tank top I later cropped.
 - a. Among other things, I got all her pairs of tortoiseshell glasses.
 - 1. They were smudged and covered in her fingerprints
 - A. I haven't cleaned them.
- iv. The baby elephant painting that my great-aunt made for her was put in the "give" pile⁶.
 - a. She said she wanted it to brighten another elderly person's room in hospice.
- v. I searched everywhere, even tearing through the already-organized "give" and "keep" piles for her Lululemon sweatpants.

a. I had saved up my summer tips at Jamba Juice to buy them for her Christmas gift.

b. She wore them as often as possible, especially to chemo.

c. I couldn't find them.

1. Dad said she must have been wearing them when she died.

2. The morticians either cremated her with them or discarded them.

VI. It took one hour to clear my grandpa's hospice room.

i. My dad and younger brother were there for that.

ii. Amongst all his button-ups, they found a full chef's coat.

iii. My grandpa only attended one cooking class at Long Beach Community College⁷.

Coping Strategies

I. I haven't seen my seventeen-year-old brother cry.

i. I assume he cries in his room

a. He's always in there with the door shut.

ii. When asked, he admitted to feeling guilty over his lack of tears.

a. He said it still didn't feel like they were really dead.

b. I told him about denial being the first stage of grief

1. His only response was that he "didn't think they were secretly still alive or anything."

II. I started attending therapy again.

i. I went during early high school because of anxiety.

ii. Now, I go because of anxiety *and* grief.

- iii. It's online, just like my first year of college was.
- iv. When I'm in Santa Barbara for school, I attend in my boyfriend's car whenever it's parked on the streets.
 - a. It's the only place I can go for privacy.
 - 1. Even if I have to walk a few blocks to get there.
- v. Dad says he's happy that therapy helps me.
- vi. I'm the only person in my family who goes.

III. In July, a German Shepard got dropped off at Dad's fire station.

- i. She was only a few months old but weighed over fifty pounds⁸.
- ii. My dad sent a picture of her to the family group chat, named after our own German Shepard, Redd.
 - a. My brother and I instantly begged for him to take her home.
 - b. Mom felt pressure, seeing our joy.
 - 1. Backed into a corner, she agreed.
- iii. Dad took her home.
 - a. I saw him genuinely happy for the first time in months.
 - b. She followed his every step.
 - c. More spiritual family members declared she was a gift from Grandma and her love of dogs.
- iv. We named her Stella Blue.
 - a. Grandma Elaine's favorite song was "Blue Suede Shoes" by Elvis.
- v. In December, Stella ran outside in the rain.
 - a. She knocked over Mom, shattering her right arm⁹.

- b. I stood barefoot in the rain for thirty minutes, waiting for the ambulance as she screamed.
 - c. My boyfriend silently watched the whole thing, holding an umbrella over her.
 - 1. We couldn't get her off the asphalt until the medics arrived.
- vi. Mom and Grandma Lynette proposed rehoming Stella.
 - a. Dad vetoed it.
- vii. Everyone stopped saying Stella was a gift from Grandma Elaine.

Current State of Affairs

- I. Mom takes care of Stella with her recovering arm.
 - i. A surgeon for the LA Dodgers pitchers says she might have to get her arm shortened.
 - ii. She'd much prefer a cat.
- II. My younger brother is graduating high school in May.
 - i. He is committed to his dream school: Cal Poly SLO.
 - ii. He will be attending prom in a few weeks with his girlfriend.
 - a. She will be wearing the prom dress that I bought, but never got to wear.
- III. Dad gets quiet when his parents or his brother, Luke, are brought up.

i. Even if we're reminiscing on a good memory, his usually open, talkative mouth forms a straight line.

ii. He tries to nod along and laugh at the funnier memories.

a. Emphasis on "tries".

IV. I would never tell anyone that sometimes I climb onto the marble counter with bare feet to reach the cookie jar and whisper "I love you" to the ashes inside, no matter how absurdly stupid I feel each time¹⁰.

1



² [Grandma's Voicemail On Dogs \(9/9/19\).m4a](#)

3



4



⁵[Grandma's Birthday Voicemail to Dad \(6/16/21\).m4a](#)

6



7



8





¹⁰ [Grandma and Grandpa's Birthday Voicemail \(5/31/16\).m4a](#)

(This is the first voicemail on my phone)