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ESSAY

Sweet Grief

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Abstract

Sweet Grief is an autobiographical, experimental and fragmented account of the writer's final months with her father. The narrative is centred around a shared food ritual—eating *millefeuille*—which becomes almost impossible after her father experiences a stroke. The piece is anchored by the human need to swallow. It draws together food, family, memory, grief, love, a global pandemic and the impact of bureaucratic decision-making. This reflection is multi-layered, like the *millefeuille*. Her father's stroke occurred during the COVID pandemic when Western Australia effectively closed its border for 697 days, requiring the author to quarantine, twice. It explores the 'messy' emotions around food when a loved one must learn to swallow again and portrays the way in which food plays a 'sticky' role in familial relationships.

Keywords

Swallow; Millefeuille; Father; COVID-19; Stroke; Messy

It is through crisis that an object of feeling becomes more clear or distinct. Attunements are not always or only happy: we can be attuned in moments of sadness. To be attuned in sadness might still be experienced happily; you might experience a sense of harmony that one wants to persist in the face of what does not persist. In sad moments, when the sadness is shared, we might fear that we will laugh, or speak or act in a way that breaks the precarious solemnity of the attunement. (Ahmed 2014: 223)

What does it mean to swallow? I never had cause to contemplate this basic human activity until my father had a stroke and could no longer swallow. When one has a stroke the body's ability to undertake basic functions is taken away. One must often learn to swallow again. It

can take up to seven days, perhaps longer to relearn how to swallow. One is started on a fine puréed diet first building up to small, chopped food and then hopefully a return to normal food.

The medical name for this phenomenon, *dysphagia*, comes from the Greek—‘difficulty to eat.’ After stroke the ability to swallow is closely monitored as it indicates a return to independence. I did not know that swallowing would become so central to the story of my Dad’s gradual recovery (and his decline).

Swallow.

In late August 2021 my dad suffered a significant stroke. He and my mum had celebrated their 60th wedding anniversary a few days beforehand. We had planned to travel to celebrate with them, but because Western Australia still had closed borders due to COVID-19, we were unable to enter without quarantining. We waited ...

I always thought that if something happened to my dad (I always joked he had nine lives—he had so far survived lung cancer, kidney cancer and multiple skin cancers) the call would come from my mum. On 1 September my brother called. My dad was in ICU. We needed to go to Perth. My brother would travel from Canberra, me from Melbourne.

Swallow.

It took two weeks to get the required paperwork to allow us to enter Western Australia. We needed a letter from the doctor to enter WA, but as Dad was moved from hospital to hospital the doctor kept changing. The Western Australian border control would not allow us entry without a good reason, the doctor had to state that my father was at significant risk of dying. Compassionate grounds had to be proven. We also each had to write compelling and pleading letters to allow us in. Once approval was granted, we would have to quarantine for two weeks, before we could see our father (and mother).

No exemptions would be made.

I was approved first.

My brother was denied.

My husband was denied.

My daughter was denied.

My brother wrote again, and on his third attempt was granted permission to travel. My husband tried another 2 times, but border control would not budge.

I must go alone.

My brother and I quarantined in separate Airbnb’s. We were monitored several times daily by the WA police and the WA health department. We were regularly geo-located—and had to ‘check-in’ within five minutes to prove we were where we said we were.

Ping, text, ping.

I cooked for myself. I took photos each night of my dinner. It became a solace to think about my nightly meal and the photo. I chose colourful plates and cutlery each night to cheer me up. I felt grateful to be in the same city as my parents, but was lonely and desolate, worried, and angry about the State’s total control of my movements. PING. [Ahmed \(2014: 210\)](#) speaks of these messy feelings—bewilderment, surprise,

caution. I knew I had to follow the rules but being alone in the city where I had grown up, without my family, waiting to be released to see my parents and my brother, left me feeling simultaneously at home and not at home. *Unheimlich*.

Swallow.

Mum gave me an update each day about dad's progress. After three weeks in hospital—three different hospitals—he was able to swallow, he progressed through very basic and bland foods that were puréed, then small cubed food, then larger cubes. But it was unclear if he would ever return to a normal diet (and if he would be able to feed himself). His pleasure in food taken from him. Each step was a milestone, but the food was so unappetising, and he missed my mother's cooking.

Dad loved mum's cooking, he especially loved her sponge with strawberry jam and cream. He had a sweet tooth, which he exercised daily, in moderation. Over the years it changed from Milk Arrowroot biscuits with cheese, to jam or honey spread over bread slathered with cream for dessert. A sweet biscuit, Nice, or any number of slices cooked by my mother, Hedgehog Slice, Caramel Slice, Muffin Slice (because he didn't like round muffins!), matchsticks with cream, scones with jam and cream and mum's sponge (Supski 2013; 2014). He loved iced coffee with ice cream and cream.

Dad also believed that most cooking mishaps could be solved with more cream.

Swallow.

My brother and I finished two weeks of quarantine and arrived at Mum's within half an hour of each other. I brought bags of fruit, veggies, bread, cereal that I had been unable to finish in quarantine. My brother brought extra Coke, Cheezels and Barbecue Shapes! All food my dad was unable to eat.

Swallow.

In recent years when I would return to visit my parents in Perth, I would buy Dad *millefeuille*—French vanilla slice—from my favourite bakery. It was a ritual. I would bring home the *millefeuille* in a cake box and set it on the white lace covered table and bring him a plate and a knife. When it was afternoon teatime I would watch him slowly cut a piece of *millefeuille* and devour it, hands covered in cream and an icing sugar moustache. With a cheeky grin he would announce, 'not bad.' Then he would wipe his hands and pack the *millefeuille* up and place it in the fridge, saving the rest for dessert or morning tea the next day. It was an enjoyment lingered upon and savoured ...

Swallow.

My brother and I had not spent so much time together with our parents for over thirty years. He had left for a military life when he was 20, I was 16. Even though we had seen each other it was always in the company of our new families, the ones we had created ourselves. Over the years we had not spent so much time together—distance and busy lives. So this was also new, our mother took comfort in our company and dad ... well we are not sure what dad thought ... His stroke had caused significant delirium. On the day of our quarantine release (four weeks after his stroke) we learned that Dad would not return home to be with our mum, her husband of 60 years. He would need to remain in permanent care.

We found him a care home close by to our mum, aptly called 'The Ark'. Mum could be at The Ark in ten minutes—door to door—by car. We visited him every day and watched as he got stronger, regained his ability to walk and to feed himself. Being able to feed himself indicated independence. It meant that he could go to the dining room and eat with others. This was comforting to our mother and to our Dad. He had a friend at The Ark whom he had known for more than thirty years; his friend was 102 years old. (His

friend is still alive, currently 104 years old.) He sat next to his friend for meals, and they talked about shared times.

We visited Dad every day for several hours. Often, he would sleep while we sat with him. My mother and brother would also nap. I kept vigil ... I'm not sure for what.

On one of these sleepy afternoons Dad took out his top denture; it was giving him trouble. He then fell asleep with it in his hand. As he slept it slipped from his hand and was lost in the bedsheets. My brother had to retrieve it and put it back into his mouth. My father was indignant that my brother was helping to put his teeth back in. It was, as [Ahmed \(2014: 223\)](#) suggests, a moment of attunement, a 'shared sadness experienced happily.' It was tender, funny and poignant—also absurd.

Swallow.

During this time, grief-stricken for the loss of the father I knew, I thought the *millefeuille* ritual was over. But over weeks visiting him in hospital and then at The Ark, I watched as Dad slowly regained his ability to swallow.

And I bought him his last *millefeuille*.

It was bittersweet. Although he was able to swallow and eat normally again, he was not able to digest such rich and sweet foods. My mother and I decided to take him half of the *millefeuille* over two days. I watched him eat the *millefeuille* and waited for the pleasure of the cream and custard and pastry and icing sugar to appear on his face ...

It didn't.

He ate the *millefeuille*, but our shared ritual was lost. His long-term delirium and vascular dementia had impaired his memory. I was grateful that we had one last *millefeuille* together but knew we would not do it again.

Swallow.

Dad improved considerably and was mostly settled into The Ark. Although he was still bewildered about why Mum didn't live with him. My brother returned to Canberra, and I tearfully returned to Melbourne in mid-November 2021. We FaceTimed with them, Mum learned new skills and a new way of life, and Dad seemed stable. We hoped to return when the WA government promised to open the border in February 2022.

Swallow.

In late January 2022 I received a call from my mother to say that we had to come, my father had deteriorated. His doctor advised that he was too frail and would not be able to manage treatment in hospital. He would be made comfortable, and we would wait ...

Again, we applied to enter Western Australia.

Unlike the rest of Australia which had opened its borders in January 2022, WA was yet to remove its border control. The state government reneged on its promise to open the border; they would wait longer to avoid an outbreak but did not announce a date for re-opening.

Entry was granted.

This time my husband was allowed to enter as well. We arrived on 1 February. We were quarantined in a 5-star hotel/prison. We were ‘contaminated.’

My brother, who had arrived a day earlier than us and was quarantined in a different hotel/prison, applied to the WA health department for special access to visit and to say a final goodbye to our father and support our mother.

Have you done a PCR test?

You have to wait until the following day after your arrival to do the PCR test.

You have to have a letter from your father’s care home agreeing to your visit.

You have to wear PPE when you visit.

You can’t visit with your brother.

You must visit separately.

Can I do my PCR test expeditiously?

Please ...

I have flown 2700kms.

I am now only 14 kms from my father.

Silence

from the health department

from the hotel medical team

My father died a few minutes after midnight on 2 February.

There was no chance to say goodbye. My mother sat by his bedside for the long hours of the night hoping that my brother or I might be allowed to visit in the morning and comfort her.

Denied.

Thank you for your emails. Firstly, I am very sorry to learn of your father’s passing and I wish extend (sic) my sincere condolences to you and your family for your loss.

Each day, the Hotel Directions Team is doing everything possible to facilitate timely and, above all, safe visits to external locations for guests in Hotel Quarantine. At present, there exists are (sic) a number of extremely time-sensitive visitation requests pertaining to patients with prognoses measured in mere hours. It is with significant regret that I inform you that your request for visitation today is unable to be operationally supported due to logistical challenges across the wider quarantine system.

Regards

[Tom]

THIS. Our request was also time sensitive. A fact that eluded [Tom]. THIS—is what I can't forgive.

You must remain in quarantine for a further 13 days.

Ping, text, ping.

Meals delivered 3 times a day. Don't open the door for 5 minutes after it is delivered (to avoid contamination). Varied menus, following public health recommendations, 5 and 2.

Swallow.

Now it was me who found it hard to swallow.

Due to political pressure the WA government changed its policy, permanently canceled hotel quarantine, and released everyone. We had served 8 days of hotel quarantine/prison. It was a cruel irony.

Again, I arrived at my mother's door with bags of groceries. Food unable to be eaten, but not to be wasted.

The final months of my dad's life were bittersweet. He regained his ability to swallow, he was always a determined man. He was sanguine and accepting. He missed my mum's cooking. He did enjoy the arrival of the morning and afternoon tea trolley, with a selection of biscuits and often a chocolate. He ate the *millefeuille*.

I loved him.

Messiness is a good starting point for thinking with feeling; feelings are messy such that even if we regularly talk about having feelings, as if they are mine, they also often come at us, surprise us, leaving us cautious and bewildered. When experiences (human or otherwise) are messy, making distinctions that are clear can mean losing our capacity for description. ([Ahmed 2014: 210](#))

Ahmed's sticky emotions loom large for me. Grief, sorrow, love, enjoyment, laughter, gratitude, anger. They are all present and multilayered (like the *millefeuille*—each bite a mixture of soft, crispy, gooey, sweet and tangy). The emotional messiness of expressing my love and admiration (and sometimes fear) of/for my father—abundant, squished and overflowing on the edges. Subtle and rich. Brittle and mellow. Firm and gentle. Refined and messy. Sticky. All this, and the certainty of his love.

My dad was all of these things and more. He had a sweet tooth; and this is my sweet grief.



Mum and Dad enjoying ice cream (and a beer), Fremantle Boat Harbour. April 2021; © Sian Supski

Acknowledgements

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