

# AN ARTICLE FROM THE TABLET ON BEREAVEMENT FOR THIS MONTH OF NOVEMBER – AND SOME OTHER REFLECTIONS ON GRIEF

In the third of our series exploring different aspects of family life, The Tablet's arts editor reflects on the vastness of the mystery of her little sister's death / By JOANNA MOORHEAD

## Clare is still somewhere

**I**MAGINE A LARGE pane of glass: it's smooth and wide and, most importantly, intact. And then it smashes, into a thousand pieces; the kind of smash that would happen if it were dropped from a height on to a concrete floor.

When people ask what it's like to have grown up in a family where a child died, this is the nearest analogy I can offer. The glass shattered for my family more than half a century ago, but sometimes I come across a sharp shard down the side of my chair. It slices into me with ease: I am back on that day in 1972 when my sister Clare, aged three-and-three-quarters, died. She was the youngest of the four children in our family, and I – aged nearly 10 – was the eldest. There is no hierarchy of awfulness when it comes to the loss of a child, but the loss of the baby of the family, the child everyone tries to look after and protect, seemed somehow the most unthinkable disaster of all. And we had no warning, no

time to prepare: one moment Clare was the sweet-natured, sunny little girl she had always been, skipping along a pavement; the next, she was lying fatally injured on the road.

On the day she died, I remember being absolutely certain that I – that we, our entire family – never could and never would be happy again. I remember thinking: we'll never laugh, we'll never smile any more. The joy had been sucked out of our home so comprehensively, it seemed impossible that it could ever return.

I was wrong, of course, but I was right to know that nothing would ever be the same again, for any of us. We were a thousand smithereens, strewn across a huge area. In the early times we simply couldn't reach one another. It's extraordinary, thinking back, that my parents, desperately grieving themselves, were expected somehow to go on trying to look after their other children. And yet that gave them the only thing worth living for: that they still had three children. We were still a family, but everything was wrong: we were the wrong number of people, and we were all desperately lonely. Or at least, I'm assuming everyone else was lonely; all I know is how lonely it was for me.

Back in the 1970s there was no grief counselling, no psychology appointments, no outside help of any kind. When she was in the ground, with a tombstone bearing her name, Clare Frances, given for her birth date of St Francis of Assisi's feast day on 4 October, we were supposed all just to go back to how we'd been, minus her. I've no idea how things would have been if we'd had some support; I only know how things worked out without it. And how we moved forward was by simply papering the whole thing over, by ignoring it, by never talking about it, by never saying her name. It wasn't anyone's fault, and I'm not even sure it was a bad idea, because the truth is that the pain, the loss, the appallingness of what had happened were so bad that opening them up was like driving ourselves to a giant chasm we couldn't traverse, every single day. The only way we could even begin to keep going was to lock it inside us.

**NO ONE KNOWS** how to behave around a family that's lost a child, including those within the family itself. It's an obvious thing to say, but at every level this goes against the grain: we rail, in the deepest part of ourselves, against the loss of a human being who had so recently come into the world, and who had such a long life ahead. That's what Seamus Heaney is talking about in the poem where he describes a family tragedy uncannily like my own. Heaney's brother Christopher was four when he was

run over and killed; Heaney was slightly older than me, 13, and had to be brought home from boarding school. In the porch, he "met my father crying – he had always taken funerals in his stride", and felt embarrassed when old men stood up to shake his hand. The poem is understated, spare – even in its title, "Mid-Term Break". I understand why, because there's a kind of guilt that comes with imposing a grief this huge on anyone else: I remember that similar day in my own family, and being beside my father as he called our parish priest, to explain what had happened. His words, which I've never forgotten, were: "I'm so sorry to have to tell you that Clare, our youngest daughter, died today." He said it in a way that made me realise he was genuinely sad for Fr Lee, the recipient of this information. *So sorry to have to tell you*; the unbearable, unbelievable sadness was his and ours, but it was such an enormous sadness that he felt sorry to be infecting another human being with it. I still feel that: because even at a distance of 51 years, this is a tragic story. If Clare were alive today, she would be 55 – still a relatively young woman, barely halfway through the lifespan she might have had.

Dealing with Clare's death, and working out what part of me it occupies and why, has been one of the big tasks of my life. For many, many years I left the experience in a locked box inside myself, but as time went on it seemed to become heavier, not lighter – harder to lug around, more difficult to explain to anyone that this was a big part of who I am, and yet it was something I never mentioned. I think it's fair to say there's not much I can't or don't talk about, but for decades I never mentioned Clare. Many years later, I met up with a friend from the boarding school to which I was sent in 1973, a year after it happened, and she told me she never had any idea, despite our close relationship across several years, sleeping side by side in our dormitory, that I had ever had a sister who died.

When we bury experiences within ourselves – whether for grief, or for shame, or for incomprehension – we bury part of ourselves as well. Sometimes that's the only way to proceed. But there's always a longing to be whole: we want to acknowledge that part of ourselves that we've managed to hide (sometimes, even from ourselves). I was in my early forties when I found the space, and the time, and the will, to unpack the box that was Clare's loss – the box that was such a big part of me, but which I'd ignored for so long. It was tough – much more painful, much more demanding and much further-reaching than I'd imagined. It wasn't over in just one episode, either: in fact

*"We bereaved are not alone. We belong to the largest company in all the world – the company of those who have known suffering."*

—Helen Keller

*"We do not 'get over' a death. We learn to carry the grief and integrate the loss in our lives. In our hearts, we carry those who have died. We grieve and we love. We remember."*

—Nathalie Himmelrich



it will never be over, and there are always a few things lurking at the bottom of that box. But I've now spent a lot of time under its lid: I've unpacked it alone, and I've unpacked it with therapists. It's been a hugely life-enhancing experience, and I see that as one more thing I have to be grateful for – especially to Clare, whose short life this is all about.

**MY MOTHER BELIEVES** Clare is our guardian angel, which is a lovely idea. For me, it's a bit different. I feel Clare is part of myself, just as she's a part of all of those she left behind – even the people she never met because they were still to come, like my youngest brother, born 14 months after her death, and my own four daughters (the eldest of whom is named after her – Roseanna Clare). I feel, too, that my life is about living Clare's life as my own: even the greyest, drabest, most ordinary day is a day to celebrate, because I'm lucky enough to be here, to be alive. I feel her spirit, and that's an important part of my own belief system: believing in my heart that Clare is still somewhere means that, rather than reducing my sense that there's another realm, I'm convinced of it. The loss of Clare emphasises, for me, the vastness of the mystery that lies between this world and another world; the mystery that is perhaps many different worlds, overlaid, some seen, many unseen.

I have learned, too, how far a child's death stretches, how far it ripples out into the com-

PHOTO: COURTESY OF JOANNA MOORHEAD



Joanna Moorhead's sister Clare, summer 1972

munity, and how long it plays out down the years. Decades after it happened, I have had conversations with people who remembered her funeral, or who could remember exactly how they felt when they heard about it. I look for opportunities to remember her. A few months ago, on a trip to Assisi, I realised that

this was a journey Clare – named for the two most important inhabitants of this town – would undoubtedly have made. So I felt it was a pilgrimage for her, as well as for myself; I went looking especially for Clare, the co-worker of Francis, who has probably, like so many women of history, never quite been given her due; and I felt my own Clare close.

And then, of course, there's the "Sliding Doors" moment. How would my family be different, if Clare hadn't crossed that particular road, at that particular moment? Our future turned on such a random event; it was a tragedy that could so easily not have happened. There is no making sense of it, no justice to it, no rationale that allows for it: that's what I learned, aged not quite 10. On the morning of the day it happened, I woke up like every other nine-year-old, and like every child should: safe and sure and stable in a world I thought couldn't be changed. By the time I went to bed I knew the fundamental truth about the world: that nothing is, or ever can be, safe. That everything we know and love can be swept away, in the blink of an eye, with no warning or reason. Like Heaney's, my whole life has been coloured and impacted by a sibling's loss; as with him, death for me feels never far away. In the words of another of his poems about Christopher's death, "The Blackbird of Glanmore": "I've a bird's eye view of myself/ A shadow on raked gravel/ In front of my house of life".

*"The reality is that you will grieve forever. You will not 'get over' the loss of a loved one; you'll learn to live with it. You will heal and you will rebuild yourself around the loss you have suffered. You will be whole again, but you will never be the same.*

*Nor should you be the same nor would you want to."*

*— David Kessler and Elisabeth Kübler-Ross*

*"Only people who are capable of loving strongly can also suffer great sorrow, but this same necessity of loving serves to counteract their grief and heals them."*

*—Leo Tolstoy*

*"Give sorrow words; the grief that does not speak knits up the o-er wrought heart and bids it break."*

*—William Shakespeare*

*"Grief is like the ocean; it comes on waves ebbing and flowing. Sometimes the water is calm, and sometimes it is overwhelming.*

*All we can do is learn to swim."*

*—Vicki Harrison*

*"Grief, I've learned, is really love. It's all the love you want to give but cannot give. The more you loved someone, the more you grieve. All of that unspent love gathers up in the corners of your eyes and in that part of your chest that gets an empty and hollow feeling. The happiness of love turns to sadness when unspent. Grief is just love with no place to go."* —Jamie Anderson