GRIEF

Joseph Heiland

IMAGE: Joan Ly

Joseph Heiland is a writer from Upstate New York. His fiction has appeared in *Lumina Journal* and *Eastern Iowa Review*. He received an MFA from Sarah Lawrence College and currently lives on the road with his wife, a traveling physical therapist.

She leafed through his accounts: Instagram, YouTube, Reddit, Gmail. He was ordinary. On his feed were basketball players and models. The last post he ever made was an awkward photo dump on their anniversary. She couldn't help but swipe through pictures of herself—eating pizza, slumped at the finish of a marathon. She looked happy. She *was* happy. She deleted thousands of spam emails from his inbox.

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She chewed her lip and clicked to view his search history. Random shit. Questions for work. *Biggest city in the world population 2020.* An actress they'd seen in a movie trailer. She released a breath. No double-life on a kink page. He had worked and wondered like everyone else. His home screen was a jagged mountain.

An eyeglass icon at the bottom informed her that forty-three websites had mined his data that week, the week of his death. She wrapped herself in a blanket. She poured tea and stuck a plate of lasagna in the microwave. He was everywhere: books, yoga mat. His headphones were charging by the TV. She nibbled her pasta and skimmed every YouTube comment he ever made.

Wednesday, November 21, 2018: *Can't wait for these teams to duke it out in the playoffs.*

Friday, September 27, 2019: *Cannot BELIEVE Oda continues to surprise this late in the story.*

It was embarrassing. She scrolled through a photo album from college and wept into her elbow and walked outside and struggled through six push-ups. Then his mom called.

"I was just thinking of my little boy," she said. "My baby. Were you thinking about him, too?"

"Yes."

She grabbed his phone off the counter. Fingerprints were smudged on the glass. Not for the first time, she accepted that he wasn't the cleanest man in the world. There was dust in the charging port, and either boogers or dried guac on the volume button. She fished under the sink for a Clorox wipe, gave it a scrub, and plugged it into the outlet by the couch. She lay back, typed his passcode. He had a goofy habit of neglecting to save contacts, so half his conversations were with numbers and area codes.

HEY This is Panda II Restaurant Your food is ready for Pickup.

The last message went out maybe an hour before he died. *Honestly, no issue.* Sent to a coworker.

Two of her good friends showed up with joints, and they smoked on the patio. Cool, quiet day. They discussed politics and seltzer water. No one had seen the latest episode of a show. She felt tears welling and accepted their hugs and hand-holding and sobbed noiselessly while one friend touched her back and the other bolted inside for a tissue.

Later, she brushed her teeth and rubbed cream under her eyes. Her neck was blotchy. One of the lightbulbs on the mirror tuckered out, and she searched and found a replacement bulb folded in newspaper in a gallon bag in the pantry. She tried to reason why he would store it there. She pictured him wandering the apartment, anxious. He would have said, *I'm putting the spare lightbulb in the pantry, in case I forget*, and she would have answered, *Sure*, although obviously she wouldn't remember, why was he always entrusting her with memory? Even now.

She plopped in bed. She spooned his pillow. Voice, scent, skin texture. She watched a video of him wrestling the neighbor's dog. Friday, April 1, 2016. 5:13 p.m. He had long hair. He was pudgy. She counted back—four, five, six years. A banner on his phone encouraged him to practice French. On the app she discovered an eighty-day streak, broken Thursday, and a cartoon avatar in a beret.

No rest that night. Her head hurt, and she was sweaty. She groped for the fan shoved away on the back of the closet shelf. Why was everything built for tall people? She thought of the times she had to ask him for help at the grocery store because a can or box was too high up. She rolled her step stool from under the bed. She climbed up, feeling very, very dumb, and tore out a vacuum-sealed bag of blankets and pillows and the Mr. & Mrs. sign used at their wedding reception.

One neighbor suggested she ransack the house. "Box up anything you don't need, donate the rest. You're young," he said, sipping his coffee. She couldn't remember his name. "Start fresh. I know it hurts."

How many days had gone by? She emptied the fridge. She polished his guitar. She tore up mail delivered in his name and lit a bonfire with the shreds. A woman called: his insurance agent. Apparently he had life insurance. She said, "I'm so sorry for your loss. I only met him a few times, but he seemed to be a good man. I lost my daughter two years ago, and it isn't the same, but…"

When she did sleep, she dreamed he was dead. Terrible, random fates: hit-and-run, drowning. She waved him off on a cruise and gawked as war planes blanketed the sky. She dreamed he was poisoned. She dreamed her third-grade teacher, Mrs. Wilson, was mugged, and he wouldn't stay put, despite her telling him to leave it alone, and he tried to grab the attacker and was stabbed.

Strangers posted on his Facebook. *Rest easy, brother.* Who the fuck was Jim Cummings? She flipped through old yearbooks. He received an email from someone who had worked under him at the bank.

Long time, no see. Hear you tied the knot—congrats!! Me and Rosie are expecting our second in November. Crazy how things change, right? Well, I'm interviewing for this job in Massachusetts…

She began using his toothbrush. She donned his favorite hoodie. She picked through a grocery list on his phone and ate soup and grilled cheese and her boss called to check in.

"I'm not ready," she said. "Maybe next week."

Heavy rain flooded the lawn. She wore his slicker and paced the neighborhood, drowsy. Ten, twelve hours of rain. She dragged the comforter to the living room and napped and realized she hadn't showered in four days. She dumped the trimmings from his razor. She read the first page in a book about loss.

December 15, 2020: *As an addict, this has me fuming. If you start cutting off friends because they have a bad day, who will be there for you? The most destructive and misinformed video I've seen all year.*

The Internet cut out. She unplugged the router, reconnected it. A cardinal hopped along the driveway.

She drove to the hardware store and bought gardening gloves, a trowel, and three packets of sunflower seeds. She would be a gardener. Marbles of shit were clumped on the lawn like tapioca. Dig, plant, turn. He'd relished that kind of work. She wanted so badly to reach over and wipe dirt from his cheek and argue about whether sunflowers should go by the window or mailbox. Music blared from the house next door. She finished her planting and knelt, cooing the soil. A man strolled by with a poodle, and the dog yapped and wagged its sweet tail and lunged for her.

"Be good," he said. "Be nice to this nice lady. You stop that. He's just excited," the man said.

"Animals don't really like me."

"That can't be true," he said, lying.

Her witch friend dragged her to a pub with greasy wood tables. They drank IPAs and the friend conjured a deck of tarot cards. "Pick any three. But not that one." Her friend smirked.

"I'm kidding. Any at all."

"Just let me drink."

She shopped online for dried fruit. She binged a comedy about pirates. A package arrived with candles and a bathrobe and a note, printed on the gift receipt, instructing her to grieve. *This too shall pass.* No name.

Her sister rode the train up from the city. It was the first truly gorgeous weekend in months. She walked to the station and the warm breeze wrapped around her ankles and she huddled by the gate and eavesdropped while a father and daughter bickered about soap. The train horn sounded.

"Jenny was asking about you," her sister said. "She might call. I don't know."

"Wait—who is that?"

"You remember Jenny. She was in the chorus for *Oklahoma*? Black hair? She's a Buddhist or some shit now."

A group of tween boys practiced kickflips on the asphalt. She was convinced he could be anywhere and told her sister as much. That it wasn't uncommon to see dead loved ones from time to time. And he was there, like an itch, when she discovered some old grimy towel in a heap under the bed.

"Have you *seen* him since?"

"No."

"What would you do?"

Faint, sinewy clouds churned overhead. She unlocked his phone. She found a picture of the three of them on Halloween: Wanda, Cosmo, and Timmy Turner. His costume, per usual, was totally bare-minimum. He wore a pinkish ball cap and a faded pink shirt. She passed the phone over.

"Is that *his* phone?" her sister asked. "You shouldn't keep that."

They weeded by the mailbox and her sister tended the soil around her budding flowers and commented on how thin she looked.

"Thanks?"

"It's not a compliment. You need to eat."

She awoke the next day to eggs and bacon. She nibbled toast, argued with her sister. The subject was irrelevant. She lugged out a collage they had made of their time abroad. Plane and theater tickets were glued with putty. Three weeks in Greece, with a layover in Bergamo, Italy. The photos were cute: cheesing by a monument; scalding on the beach. They got shit-faced in a nightclub and wandered to the base of the Parthenon and scratched the ears of a stray dog with a cherry-sized tumor on her forehead. She knew a photo existed of him, crouched beside the dog, slobbery chin on his palm. She flipped through again, then panicked, scouring their phones. She opened Google Photos and searched by date range and subject.

"Take a deep breath. It'll turn up. Let's watch a movie."

How to explain a memory of a memory? He always got teary around strays. The moon had set, bright and watery, and she remembered squeezing his hand, but did they stop anywhere else? Did they contemplate having kids that trip, or was it in Portland, the night that dude with a mullet wouldn't stop hitting on her?

On Monday she clipped her nails and showered and tied her hair back. A text from his mom: *You Got This.* She checked on her flowers. She finished a chapter in the book about loss. Of course it wouldn't work; she'd get to the office and everyone would know she wasn't ready, because she wasn't, it was too soon. She plucked dead ladybugs from the gap in the kitchen window. A cable truck puttered across the road. She imagined the face he would have made, seeing her dolled up. *You don't look like yourself.*

"I'm not myself," she answered, but to whom? She was alone. She was late. She rinsed dishes from the weekend.

The air in the car was stale. She ignored the gas light. Right on Main, up the hill. It shocked her that so many people were heading to work or the store and their cat just died, their uncle was sick. Her foot grew heavy. Forty in a school zone. The crossing guard threw up his hands and cursed and she was flying—past the office, past the Starbucks and the park with the Vietnam memorial. She hit the brakes, but no one came for her.

"What's up," said her boss. "Where are you?"

He continued. "Mel saw you driving. We got donuts. You're coming, right? The Vryloxi campaign's due Thursday. Look, I get it, it's just—we need you down here. You're coming, right?"

Back home, she closed the drapes and changed into PJs. She cleared voicemails from his phone:

Hey, baby. Wanted to make sure you two are holding up. No need to call back. Alright. Love you so much.

Yo dude. Check your email. Let me know when you get it.

Nothing from her. It wasn't that she never called, or left messages. He just hadn't saved any. And there were dozens more, all unread, across time zones and friendships. People she never knew. She lit a candle and drank tea and watched a documentary about rock climbers.

She filed for unemployment. She bagged his shirts and jackets and brought them to Goodwill. She slouched in a lawn chair on the patio, smoking. No one bothered her. More rain. More chilly nights, leaves on the trees.

"Did you know the Iroquois invented football?"

"No."

Her card had just been declined. She fumbled for another and slid it across the bar.

"I like to picture them tailgating. Isn't that a funny thought?"

It wasn't. But he was cute, and he told her she was pretty in a fun way, whatever the hell that meant. She let on that she was awaiting her husband's life insurance payout.

"So he died?"

Yeah. Anyway.

"I've never lost anybody like that," the man said. "I'm lucky. If you don't mind me asking, how long's it been?"

She couldn't say. A month? Five weeks? At their worst, after big fights, she had considered moving to California, where she would kiss strangers and meditate and maybe someday return to find him haggard but steady, a new man, ready for love. She realized a time would come in which she had spent more time without than with him. She finished her drink and the man called her an Uber and that was it, she was alive: wind on her cheeks and blood in her heart and around her a shifting continent of grief, of mothers and friends who never knew him, not like her, the way he kissed her fingers or the messages he typed in a comment box or the dreams he pondered in silences only they ever shared. That was for her to remember. And it would have to be okay.