



Grief Must be Love With Nowhere to Go

Chris Alton & Emily Simpson

Contents

4-7	Introduction
9	I'm in this language trap
10	So where does that leave me?
11	There's nowhere to go with pain like that
12	Grief, a wound that doesn't heal?
13	Sorry is the easiest thing to reach for
14	Fearing forgetting
15	Additional losses
16-17	Reflections #1
18-19	Centrefold
20	Steamed Tofu for Joy
21	Tara's Crumble
22-23	Reflections #2
24-25	Vegetarian Feijoada for Darren
26-27	Reflections #3
28-29	Pete's Spinach & Rice Casserole
30-31	Reflections #4
32	Ian's Christmas Dinner
33	Reflections #5
34	Credits

Introduction

Grief Must be Love With Nowhere to Go is a collaboration between Chris Alton & Emily Simpson. Having both been through significant losses in our mid-20s, we found the English vocabulary for communicating experiences of grief and bereavement to be lacking. We began having conversations about loss through art making and invited others to join us, in the hope of finding common ground.

Over the past 6 months we've been holding spaces for people to come together and share their experiences of living with loss. We've held shared dinners; where people are invited to bring a dish associated with the person they've lost. We've spent afternoons sewing with others; making wearable patches that communicate our grief (loosely influenced by Victorian mourning customs). We've invited people to sit together and share music that reminds them of the person who's died or their broader experience of grief. With each gathering, the activity has acted as a 'softener' for difficult conversations; where the acts of sharing food, sewing, or listening to music create a space that words are invited to fill.

Whilst this publication doesn't contain all these conversations, it does bring together some of the insights and reflections that we've gathered. It also contains observations about the areas of language that people have often considered to be 'lacking', as well as some 'cultural myths' that perpetuate unhelpful ideas regarding grief. Through these observations, we attempt to feel out areas that we would like to find language for. The hope is that by opening up more conversations about what living with grief looks like, we can better equip ourselves to support each other through the inevitable, and find more meaningful words to share than *sorry*.

Emily: When Chris and I met, I wasn't telling many people that my Dad had died. I couldn't find the words for it, and there weren't many opportunities presented to me to try. People generally avoided the subject, as I guess they feared bringing up my bereavement would upset me. This all left me feeling like it wasn't something I should talk about, and I started to feel ashamed of my experience. So I did my best not to talk about what I was going through, despite desperately wanting to. I must have sensed something of myself in Chris, because when we met the words tumbled out, and we discovered we'd both been through a similar thing; loss and shame. The relief we both felt about having found some words, even if inadequate, was transformative. It's a moment I'll never forget.

Chris: I'd been similarly tight lipped about my Mum dying. It's odd to think that Emily and I were able to open up to one another; perhaps there were some subtle cues we picked up on? Body language, tone of voice, skirting of topics and warping words to hide what had happened. When asked what my Mum does I might say 'my Mum was a teacher...' implying she's retired rather than dead. I still do it occasionally.

E: Yeah, using the past tense is still something I really struggle with. It feels cruel to say '*I loved my Dad*', because I still love him. But using the present tense confuses people, and means I have to do some awkward conversational reversing when they ask more questions about him as if he's alive. It makes everyone squirm. I hate it.

Language is a form of 'commons', and by adding to this 'communal pot' we can better explain what we're going through to others. What if there was a word to signify that someone wasn't physically present, but was still significant to your life? A tense to say that they're gone, but they're still here? So many conversations would be easier for me. The vocabulary that we currently have limits what can be articulated. It creates discomfort for the person grieving, by making them 'apologise' when words mislead.

C: During one of the gatherings, someone remarked "*I'm in this language trap!*" It's a phrase that really resonated with me. Without the vocabulary to describe - or even think about - experiences of grief, we become trapped. There's a silencing effect when a

language is so ill-equipped to articulate emotional pain. Then, when using the words and tenses that we do have, we often find ourselves trapped again. Their inaccuracy only serves to exacerbate misunderstandings. This project has only heightened my awareness of the holes that English is littered with and how easy it is to fall through them when trying to talk about grief and bereavement.

E: On the other hand language, when used thoughtfully, can provide a lot of shelter and comfort. I'm very aware of this as a Queer person; how language can create spaces for communities to form around and a place for identity to grow within. People who are grieving need that too.

C: Exactly. Almost in reaction to the 'language trap', we've come to speak of and imagine 'language as a shelter'. It's become a fitting metaphor to guide the project. Shelter is a basic need and provides a place of rest and safety. We've sought to create this in each of our gatherings and workshops; spaces that provide support, grant permission, and offer mutual understanding. Creating the space for people to speak openly and honestly is almost half the work.

During the gatherings and workshops, there have been so many lovely moments of recognition, people saying, '*You felt that too?*' or '*I'm so relieved to hear you say that*' or '*I thought it was just me.*' By holding space for people to share their lived experiences of grief, we've been able to foster a kind of solidarity. It's been really affirming, really uplifting.

E: We spent a lot of time thinking how we could translate these experiences into an exhibition. We think it's important to respect the privacy and intimacy of the gatherings, whilst creating an opportunity for those who didn't attend to access those moments.

We decided to make a literal shelter; a huge textile canopy stitched with phrases and shared sentiments from our conversations. The canopy brings together multiple voices and speaks in a range of registers; some phrases are direct and others are poetic; some are tongue-in-cheek and others are heart-felt. These voices co-exist, but there's also space for contradiction and ambiguity.

We've also been thinking about the space the exhibition takes place

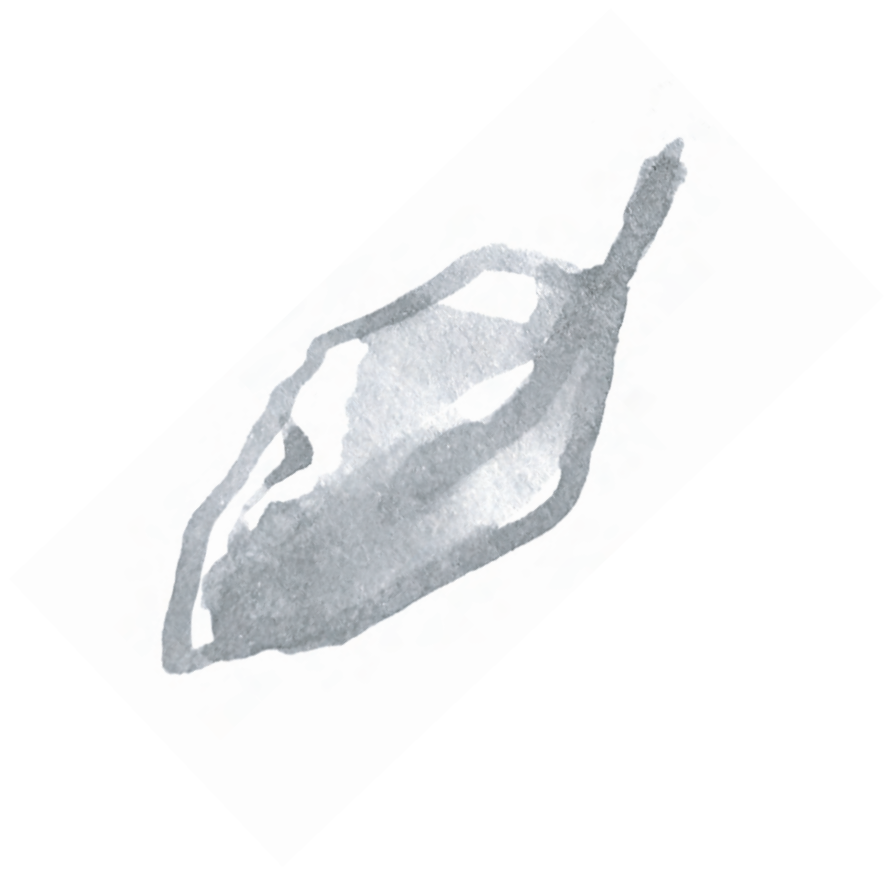
in. Galleries are usually vast, glossy, echoing places. There's something quite formal about them. And that space is relevant for certain conversations, but it didn't feel appropriate for this one. We wanted to transform the gallery; to 'soften' the space so it's more ready to hold these difficult conversations. We've tried to create a gentler space where people can sit, read, and spend time with their thoughts. We want the space to be cosy, comforting; almost like a giant den.

When imagining what the installation would look like, we shared the same reference point: *'Like the canopy that Luke makes for Rory in the final episode of Gilmore Girls!'* It's funny that Gilmore Girls has been an inspiration, because it's also been the thing that's kept us going throughout this project. We've had it on in the background to keep up company whilst sewing this massive thing. A bit of comfort amidst all of the difficult emotions that creating this exhibition has brought up.

C: I don't think either of us realised how demanding this project would be, physically as well as emotionally. I certainly don't plan to sew anything on this scale again! But it's important to exercise an awareness of the demands that this kind of work can have. Whilst the workshops and gatherings have been really uplifting, we've noticed that we've felt depleted the evening or morning afterwards.

So we've tried to weave care and kindness into the process wherever we can; for ourselves and the workshop participants. At the end of every session, we invited people to voice something they would do afterwards to care for themselves. To consciously create a moment that centred their needs, so these thoughts and feelings could settle. For some people that was a walk, watching a favourite TV show, eating Pad Thai, meditating, attending Quaker Meeting, or drinking camomile tea.

Emily and I want to encourage you, the person reading this, to do the same. Be aware that there may be an emotional 'ripple effect' after visiting the exhibition or reading this publication. So please be gentle with yourself.



I struggle to use the past tense.
Saying *I loved my Dad* isn't true.
I still love him.

But using the present tense, *I love* feels like I'm tripping myself up. People assume he's alive and then it's really awkward and uncomfortable for everyone because he's not. I have to reveal my loss when I don't always want to be so vulnerable.

I'm in this language trap

Vocabulary emerges to address that which is deemed to be culturally important.

Grief can feel like a refusal to accept the terms of reality. You are carrying someone who is so definitively relegated to the past into the present. But there's no space for this in the English language.

It hurts to be forced to leave him there because of language (or lack of).

There's the word orphan, but I'm not an orphan. I still have one parent knocking about. It's also a word that's more commonly used for children. I'm an adult.

What about someone whose child has died?

Friend? Ex-partner? Sibling? Where are those words?

Some grieving experiences have the approval of a noun and others are left nameless. There's an implied hierarchy of grief that doesn't exist, but is *felt*.

So where does that leave me?

At the moment, I have to leave myself open and vulnerable by repeating the words I don't want to say: 'My Mum is dead'. What if there was a word that meant this? A shorthand to express what I've been through, so others could understand without me having to say those words.

And also, whether I would choose it or not, grief is a part of my identity now. Words provide space for identity to form underneath.

Your body just has to express it.

Almost everyone we've spoken to throughout this project has said the same thing. That they weren't prepared for how physical grief was; headaches, nausea, aching limbs, splitting chest, heavy heart, lack of focus, trouble sleeping, disorientation, dizziness.

When I heard my Aunt was going to die, my back went. I was standing in the kitchen, barely even moving, and my back gave out.

There's nowhere to go with pain like that

You are left with all of this love, all of this emotion. I don't think the mind can comprehend it, so *the body does*.

There was a strange comfort to the pain being so tangible. The last physical link I would have to my Dad. Letting go of that pain and learning to be comfortable was so difficult. I felt like I was letting go of him all over again.

Except it's nothing like a wound.

We noticed such a lack of language for expressing emotional pain. So people reach for the words available (wounds, healing, broken, plasters) because that's all they've got.

Our language is adept at describing physical pain. However, when it comes to emotional pain we are often left wanting. Might having more words to express emotional pain make it easier to express the nuances of grief to others? Or offer expressions of support?

Grief, a wound that doesn't heal?

I expected my mind to mend like my body; that one day I'd 'heal', with patience and a bit of Sudocrem. But the grief didn't go anywhere. I just got better at managing it, and building my life around it.

I think I would have been a lot kinder to myself if I'd known I was never going to be better and that there was no 'better' to get.

I'm sorry, but I'm going to have to stop you there.

I'm sorry, but can I just say something.

Oops, sorry!

Sorry is such an overused and multipurpose word. Sorry can be an apology, a provocation, a sarcastic remark, or just something British people say reflexively.

Sorry?!

Sorry? I didn't catch that

I'm sorry, but I'm not sorry

I'm sorry for your loss

Sorry is the easiest thing to reach for

When someone says *I'm sorry*, I feel like I have to say *that's ok*, when it's really not. And it never will be. When I refuse to accept their apology, I feel mean.

But it's essential we reach beyond this.

I don't mind *I'm sorry for your loss*. It's about how it's said.

My condolences feels way too formal. My friend just said *It's shit your Dad's dead*. At least that was accurate.

We need a way to say *I see your pain, and I wish I could do something to soothe it. But I know I can't. I wish this hadn't happened to you.* We need language that holds space for the unfixable.

I'm so frightened of forgetting what my Dad looks like. Sometimes I practice picturing his face to make sure I still can.

Some days I'm obsessed with remembering everything about him, everything we did together, everywhere we went. I'm frightened that these precious details will slip my mind and be lost forever. Other days I can't bear to think about him. It hurts too much. Grief is a constant negotiation between forgetting and remembering.

fearing forgetting

There are days when I forget I'm grieving. Then I remember and feel guilty. Does it make me a bad person for feeling so happy without you?

I found myself not wanting to be happy, not wanting to let go. But I realised I had to stop living in my memories in order to make new ones.

There's a whole year I can't remember. I was too exhausted from grieving, that I didn't have the energy to commit any of my experiences to memory. The whole year is blurred in my head.

I've lost my permission to speak freely about my Dad. People look uncomfortable when I talk about him, because he reminds them of death. But he reminds me of everything in life that I love.

I miss being young and carefree.

I feel like my Mum was keeping the roof on; keeping out the elements. Without her to shelter me, everything is different. I'm relearning the world.

Additional losses

I lost the language to describe my experience.

I lost her, but gained all kinds of caring responsibilities that I hadn't anticipated.

When my Aunt died, I knew my relationship to her had changed forever, irreversibly. I wasn't prepared for how it would change my relationship to everyone else I knew too. I was 18, my friends no longer knew how to relate to me, or I to them.

**I lost my partner,
then I lost a lot of
friends too.**

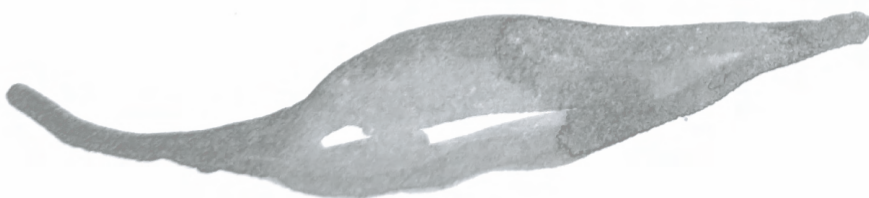
**I was lost, sad,
raging, quiet**

**I felt completely
different. And people
didn't know how to
handle that, so they
just left**

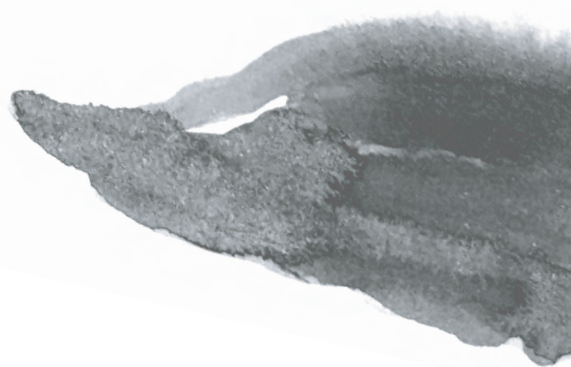


People say she's still with me,
but that's not always a comfort.
Carrying two people's memories

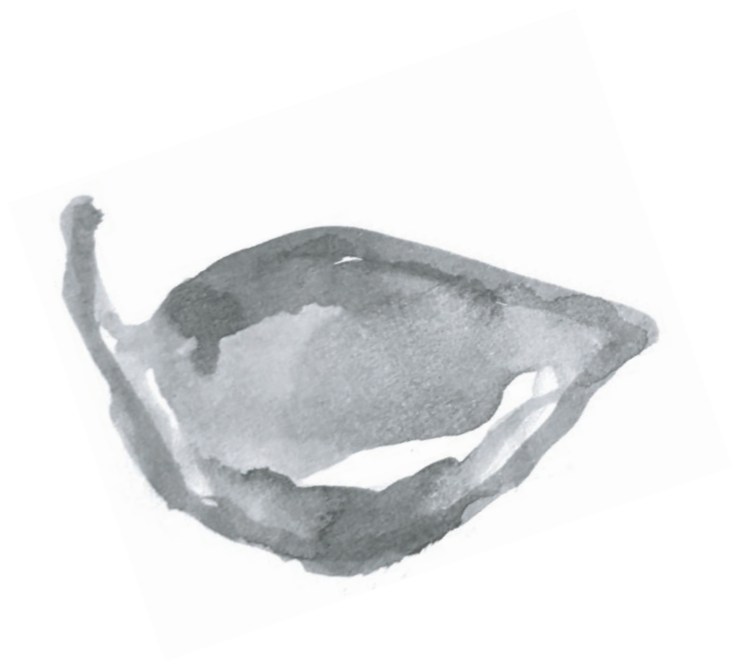
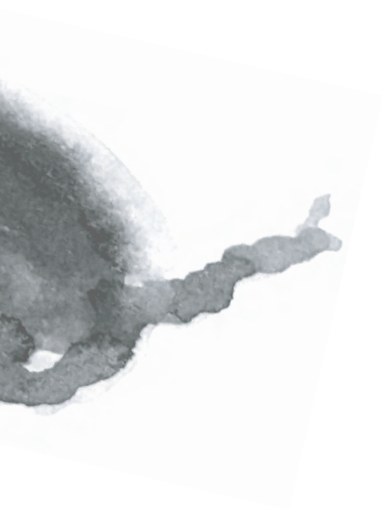
That's a big responsibility.



I'm Tending
Much Like



to My Grief a Garden



Steamed Tofu for Joy

made by Sunshine



Ingredients

- 1 block of tofu
- 1 big thumb of ginger, julienned
- 4 medium stalks of spring onion, julienned
- 4-5 tbsp of good quality soya sauce
- 3-4 tbsp vegetable oil

Method

1. Steam the tofu for 10 minutes on low-medium heat
2. With 3 minutes left, heat up the oil on high-medium heat
3. Quickly stir fry the ginger and spring onions until fragrant
4. Slather over the tofu followed by the soya sauce
5. Serve immediately, enjoy!

Tara's Crumble

made by Jeff



Ingredients

- 1 bag of frozen soft fruit (I used a berry mix)
- Sugar for sweetening
- A bag of Tesco Crumble Mix
- Brown sugar and cinnamon for topping

Method

1. Place fruit in bowl and defrost, add sugar for sweetness
2. Open bag of crumble mix and sprinkle on top of fruit
3. Sprinkle brown sugar and cinnamon on top for extra flavour
4. Place in the oven at 190°C and cook until brown on top

When I was grieving,
people crossed the
road to avoid me



Maybe they didn't
know what to say

Maybe they thought it
was something they
could catch



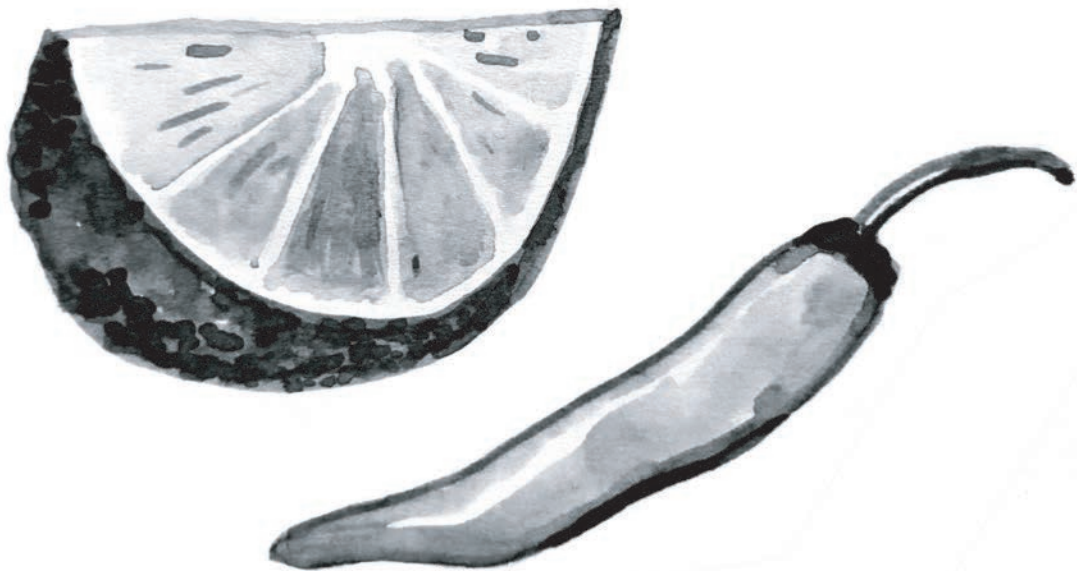
Time is a healer

is a slap in the face



Vegetarian feijoadada for Darren

made by Chris



Ingredients

- ½ butternut squash (600g)
- Olive oil
- 1 heaped tsp ground coriander
- 1 heaped tsp smoked paprika
- 3 peppers (mixed colours)
- 2 red onions
- 4 cloves of garlic
- 4 fresh bay leaves
- 2 x 400g tins of black beans
- 100g baby sweetcorn
- 150g brown rice
- ½ tin of coconut milk
- 2 ripe mixed-colour tomatoes
- 1 fresh red chilli
- 1 bunch of fresh coriander (30g)
- 1 lime
- 2 tbsp natural yoghurt

Method

1. Preheat the oven to 200°C/400°F/Gas Mark 6
2. Halve and deseed the squash, then chop into 3cm chunks. In a large roasting tray, toss and massage it with 1 tsp of olive oil, the ground coriander and a pinch of sea salt and black pepper.
3. Deseed the peppers and cut into 3cm chunks, then, in a separate tray, toss and massage them with 1 tsp of olive oil and the smoked paprika.
4. Place both trays in the oven for 35 minutes, or until softened
5. Meanwhile, peel and finely chop $\frac{1}{4}$ of an onion and put aside, then roughly chop the rest and place in a large casserole pan on a low heat with 1 tablespoon of oil. Crush in the garlic, add the bay leaves and a good splash of water and cook for 20 minutes, or until soft, stirring regularly.
6. Tip in the beans, juice and all, then half-fill each empty tin with water, swirl and pour into the pan. Simmer until the time is up on the squash and peppers, then stir both into the pan.
7. Trim, finely slice and add the baby sweetcorn, and simmer for a further 20 minutes, or until the feijoada is dark and delicious, loosening with an extra splash of water, if needed.
8. Meanwhile, cook the rice according to the packet instructions, add the coconut milk substituted for an equal part of water, roughly 50% water, 50% coconut milk. Then drain.
9. To make a quick salsa, deseed the tomatoes, then finely chop with as much chilli as you like and most of the coriander leaves. Scrape into a bowl with the reserved finely chopped onion and toss with the lime juice, then season to perfection.
10. Serve the remaining feijoada with the rice and salsa, a spoonful of yoghurt and a sprinkling of the remaining coriander leaves.

**I felt like my grief
had an expiration date
in the eyes of others**





**People say “I’m sorry for
your loss,” as if I’ve
misplaced him and will
find him again.**

He’s not lost, he’s dead



Pete's Spinach & Rice Casserole

made by Ruth

Ingredients

30g(ish) Butter
1 small onion, diced
2 large eggs
200ml milk
120g cheese, grated (I used cheddar)
900g cooked and cooled rice; *brown rice is authentically 'Dad', but white rice is fine if that's what you've got leftover. This is about 300g of uncooked rice. Scale this up or down depending on how many people you're serving. This will serve about 6.*
300g frozen spinach, defrosted and roughly chopped
1 or 2 slices of stale bread, blitzed until breadcrumbs
1 tsp cayenne pepper (optional)
1 handful of additional grated cheese (mozzarella, parmesan)
Chopped parsley
Mango chutney, to serve (optional)

Method

1. Pre-heat oven to 180°C/Gas Mark 4
2. Sauté onions in butter until soft, in an oven proof casserole pan
3. In a large bowl, beat the eggs. Stir in milk and cheese.
4. Mix the cooked rice into the onions. Then stir the egg, milk, and cheese mixture in well. Add the chopped spinach and stir through until it's well combined and evenly spread through the rice mixture. Season with salt and pepper.
5. In a small bowl, mix the fresh breadcrumbs with the cayenne pepper (if using) and chopped parsley, and add the handful of the additional grated cheese (if using).
6. Pack the rice mixture well into the pan giving it a flat top. Sprinkle the breadcrumb mixture on top, covering the rice.
7. Bake for 35-40 minutes, or until a skewer comes out clean.
8. Leave to rest for 5 minutes. Serve with mango chutney and, for some, a good dose of nostalgia.

Not long after my
Mum died, a friend
said to me that there
was an elastic quality
to grief.

You can be snapped
back to those feelings
at any time.

**I was conscious that
I had to perform grief
in a certain way.**

**To manage other
people's emotions,
when I could barely
manage my own.**



Ian's Christmas Dinner

made by Robin

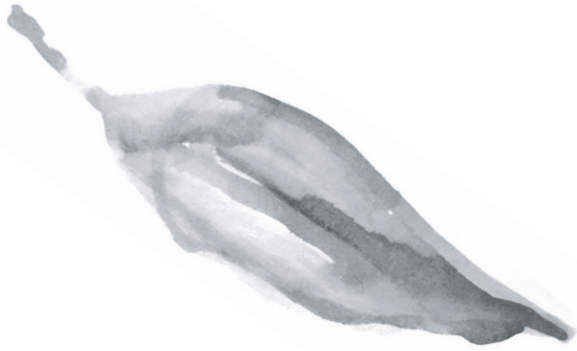


Ingredients

1.5kg Maris Piper potatoes
125ml whole milk
1 tbsp salted butter
Linda McCartney vegetarian sausages
Bisto vegetarian gravy

Method

1. Peel and chop potatoes into small chunks, boil until tender
2. Cook sausages in the oven
3. Add milk and butter and mash potatoes until smooth
4. Decant mash into a large dish
5. Chop sausages in half and squish them into the mash
6. Add gravy as desired



Supporting someone who's grieving involves being brave enough to hold space for problems that can't be fixed. It's always better to try and to say the wrong thing, than to say nothing at all.

I find it easier to close down a conversation that I don't want to have, rather than having to ask when I need help the most.

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Dedicated to
Douglas, Eleanor, Jane, Kathy, Margaret, Phil

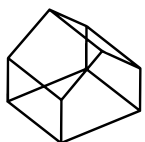
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