



*By Josephine Brouard*



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# Nostalgic reverie

Loss can take us to unexpected places. Some weep, others withdraw, but most can't help taking a wander through childhood memories

I'M NOT USUALLY SENTIMENTAL, but lately I've been returning to the well-loved books of my childhood, courtesy of online bookstores, and finding the experience unexpectedly thrilling.

Modern-day kids may sit transfixed in front of Xbox screens immersed in virtual worlds, but I'm nose-deep in the adventures of Tintin and his canine companion, Snowy; reliving the duels and standoffs of pistol-packing cowboy Lucky Luke; and chortling happily at the madcap community that surrounds diminutive Gaul Asterix and his beefy pal, Obelix.

So why the swift transformation into the world's oldest kid? I blame it on my father. Being French, affectionate and volatile – as well as cuddly and round – we children used to think of him fondly as our very own Obelix. But, sadly, he passed away earlier this year, leaving us countless memories of a laughter-filled life, as well as a collection of adorable ceramic figurines.

My younger sister took Obelix. I took Asterix. My younger brother took Tintin. We didn't have to explain ourselves – each figure represents, essentially, everything that was good about our childhood.

Now, each time my gaze falls on Asterix perched on my sitting room bookshelf, I'm transported to a more innocent time when my father was alive, and I was gobbling up books as a precocious six-year-old.

I've also dusted off my empty aquarium and now have two goldfish, Paul and

Virginie, with whom I chat as I feed them their weekly flakes. My father would talk to his fish, finches and budgies, and I find myself considering the acquisition of a pair of lovebirds, in homage to Papa. The only thing standing in the way is my malevolent pooch, Indiana.

What's happening, I suspect, is as predictable as the cliché: "Everyone mourns in their own way". Some people weep or sink into depression when a loved one passes; I appear to have become sentimental as I acclimatise to becoming newly orphaned.

Standing at the bathroom basin each morning, I look in the mirror and see reflected – quite suddenly and unexpectedly – my parents' features. Silently, I bless my folks for being inspiring people, and for equipping me with values that have served me well in my life so far.

The same frisson of familiarity greets me as I gaze upon the photographs I have framed and placed throughout the house. Every picture of Mum or Dad tugs at my heart. Yet, despite the bittersweet pain, my prevailing sense is of acceptance, and of peace.

Still, death does bring about a shift, and new beginnings. Suddenly, I feel like the keeper of the family history and find myself methodically updating the contact details of relatives scattered all over the globe.

My extended family, in turn, seems to have sensed my new role, as I now find myself receiving correspondence formerly forwarded to me by my father. How weird it is to become unexpected matriarch of my current generation.

Music is another way of remembering, and nothing does it for me more than the compilation of music I created for my father's 80th birthday. From Jacques Brel to Carly Simon, Puccini to Piaf, I can't hear my parents' favourite melodies without being catapulted to a time when we all sang along lustily as a family to anything by Rodgers and Hammerstein, or Andrew Lloyd Webber, and more.

The death of my loved ones has, to my surprise, occasionally triggered feelings bordering on the religious. As I imagine my parents together in an Afterlife, I feel as though I want to pray. And as I picture them gazing down on their bumbling, wayward daughter, I'm reminded of the beautiful Eskimo proverb that suggests that stars are perhaps "openings in heaven where the love of our lost ones pours through and shines down upon us to let us know they are happy".

Like the sunny books and songs of my childhood, these are the things that comfort me until my time of mourning passes, and I feel more cheerful again. ●

*Josephine Brouard has a psychology degree and a fascination for human behaviour.*