

unboxing the Bitterness

A Graphic Memoir on Grief &  
Chinese Funeral Traditions

Colleen Tang Poy

# Foreword

This comic was created as a reaction to attending two particular funerals back-to-back in 2017—a Chinese funeral & a western funeral. The differences in attitude towards grief I witnessed then were so striking that it made me reflect on my feelings about grief & death—which I will admit were quite unhealthy and I'm still unravelling to this day.

However, I do not mean to insinuate that because Chinese funerals generally tend to focus on more controlled, quiet, & private methods of dealing with death, they are "wrong" or are inferior to funerals of other cultures. Rather, I want to introduce the idea that everyone needs to grieve in their own way. If you feel frustrated by some methods of grieving or that your grief is unresolved, you are not broken. Your feelings are valid.

I also want to acknowledge that not all Chinese funerals are how I've depicted them here & this account may not be fully reflective of other's experiences (even I've attended some Chinese funerals that are more accepting of the loud, honest, public mourning that is often taboo). The events depicted are not based on any particular experience, but are an amalgamation of many of my own, as well as other people's perspectives shared with me. Any resemblance to real events or of unnamed characters to real people is purely coincidental.

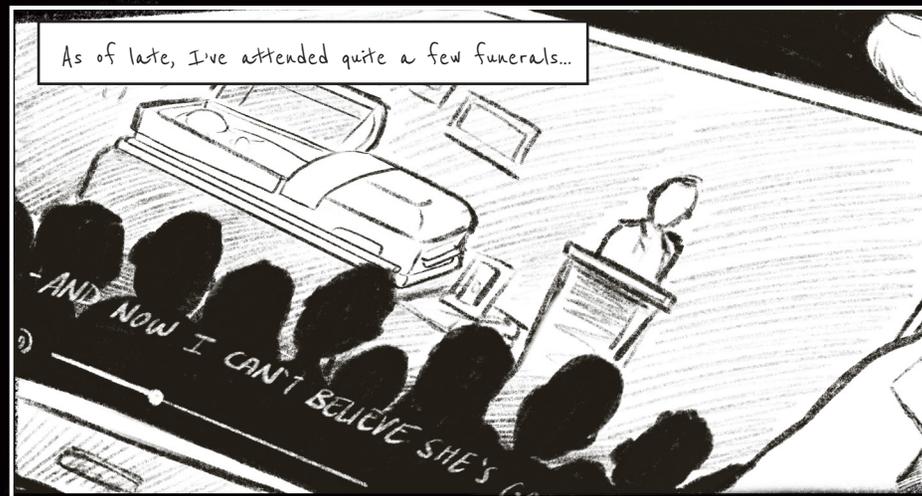
I've tried to write this last paragraph countless times, but I don't think words can truly express what I hope to do with this comic. I hope that by sharing this story, others like me—or anyone processing the loss of a loved one—might find this comic relatable & validating. I hope that it prompts readers to consider being gentler on themselves as they take the time/means they need to heal. I hope that it encourages them to share their own narratives & opens a discourse on the culturally diasporic experience. But most of all, I hope that it elicits honest self-reflection on your emotional state & open communication with those around you.

Thank you for reading & take care,  
Colleen

For all our loved ones we've lost,  
✿ for all our loved ones still here.

For Uncle Greg (17/03/2019)  
And for Sierra, Arienne, ✿ Auntie Eliza

As of late, I've attended quite a few funerals...



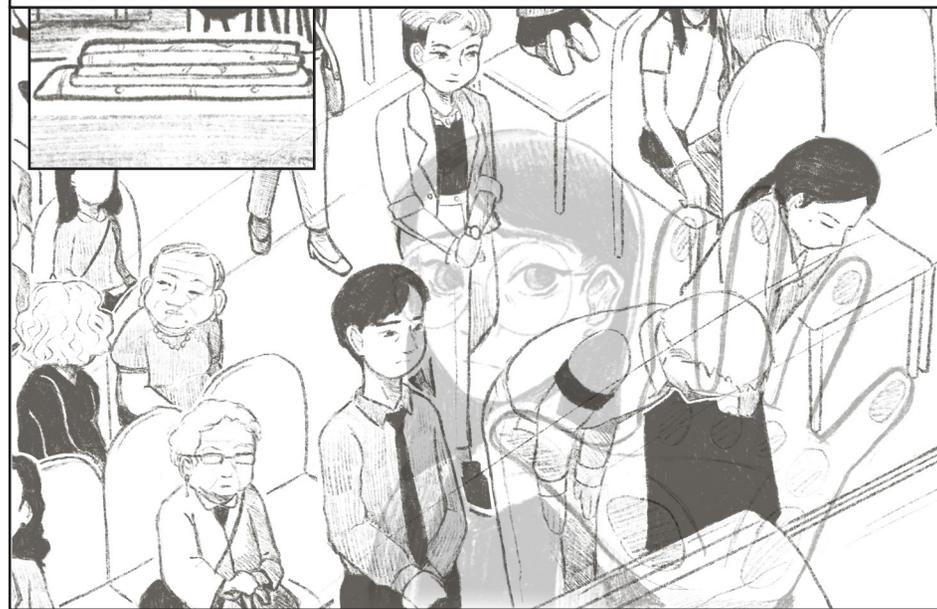
...but not the kind that you'd typically see on TV.



As a Canadian-born-Chinese person with Trinidadian-born-Chinese parents, I've often felt at a distance from my Chinese culture at these sorts of events.



Each time quietly observing as an outsider on the inside, trying to make sense of the slightly different combinations of customs that each family uses to grieve the loss of a loved one.



However, one thing in common that I've noticed is that generally the intense sadness associated with death is rarely outwardly expressed.

Death is already a sensitive subject that makes it challenging to openly talk about...

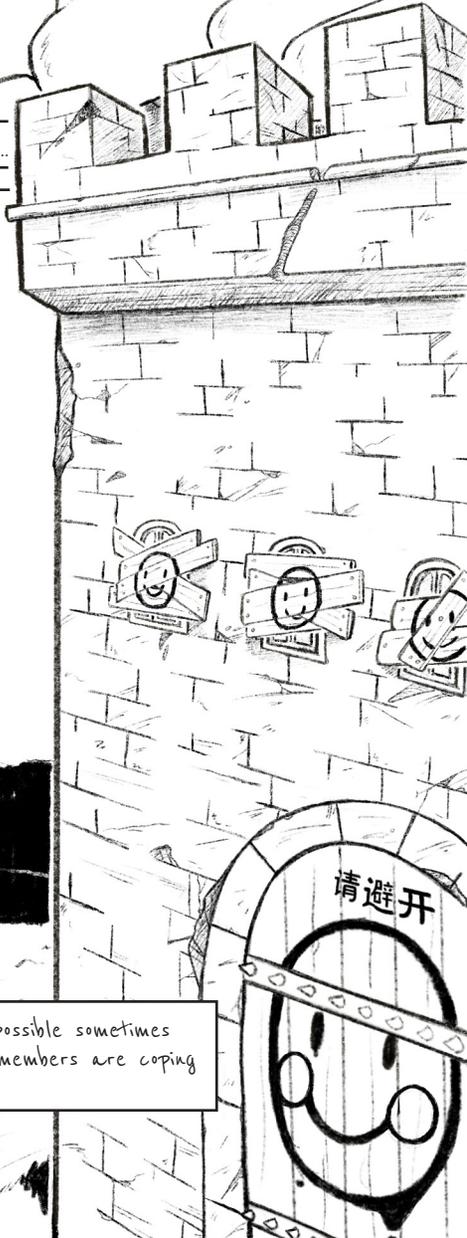


but with the addition of a language barrier...

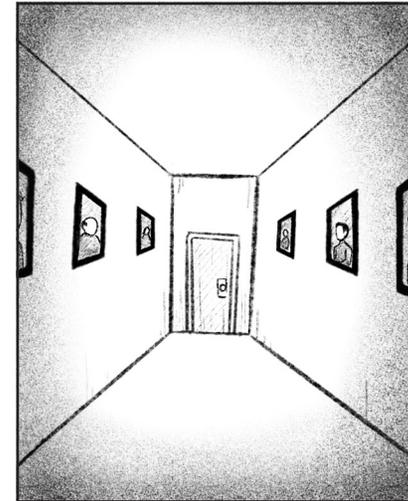


...and a greater emotional barrier still...

I've felt like it is nearly impossible sometimes to really tell how my family members are coping during such a difficult time.

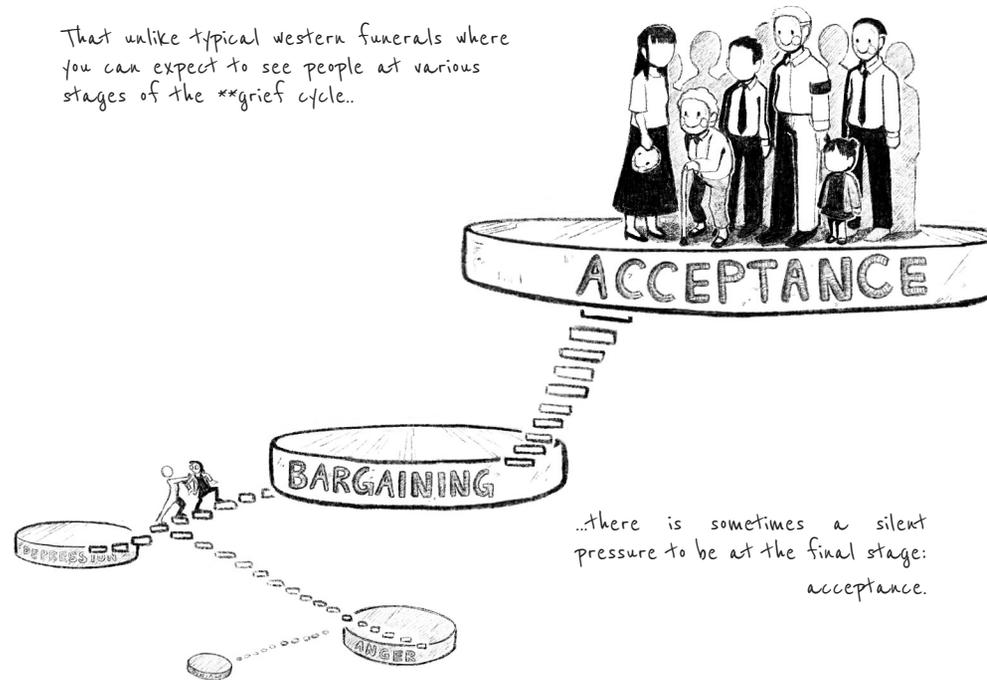


There seems to be a tacit rule to \*eat your own bitterness.



-that the intense, raw emotions are for behind closed doors only.

That unlike typical western funerals where you can expect to see people at various stages of the \*\*grief cycle.



...there is sometimes a silent pressure to be at the final stage: acceptance.

\*Phrase from the 'Joy Luck Club'  
\*\*Based on Kubler-Ross' (1971) grief cycle

And as a result, these funerals are generally...

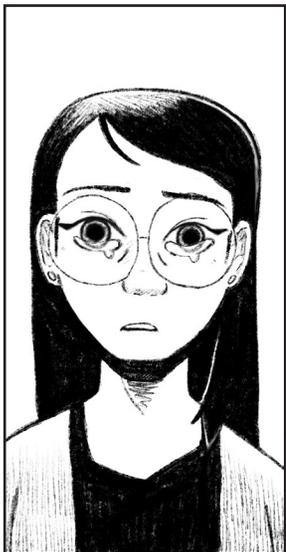
quiet

...for the most part.

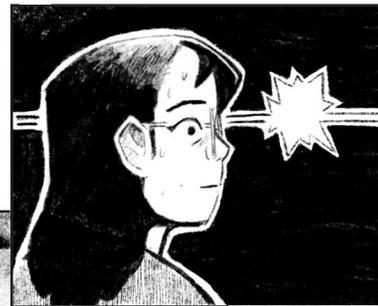


For some, the sadness can't be masked for too long, and it erupts.

For me, I find myself quickly wiping away tears I inexplicably feel guilty for shedding.

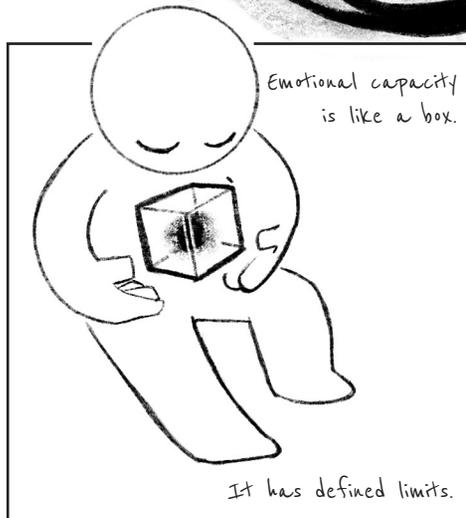


However, expecting yourself to be at the stage of acceptance when you are not ready is unreasonable.



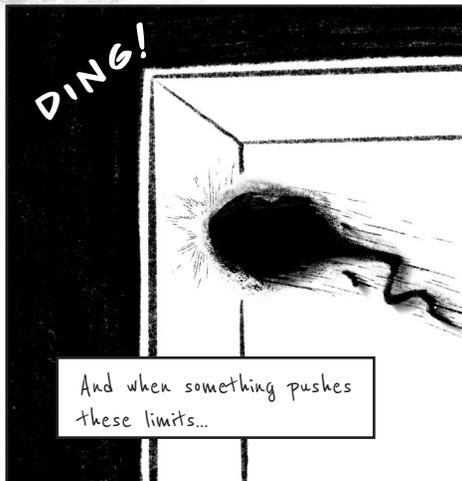


Grief is like a charged ball of energy that unpredictably moves in all directions



Emotional capacity is like a box.

It has defined limits.

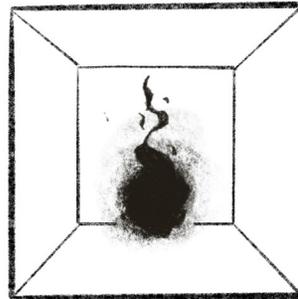


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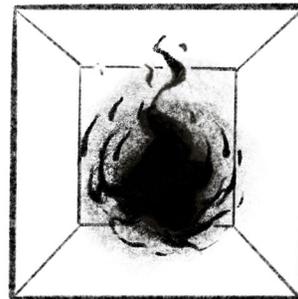
And when something pushes these limits...



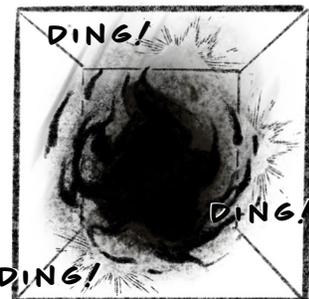
...we feel pain.



After the loss of a loved one, the ball forms within our box.



And at first the ball is huge...



And it seems like any movement causes pain.



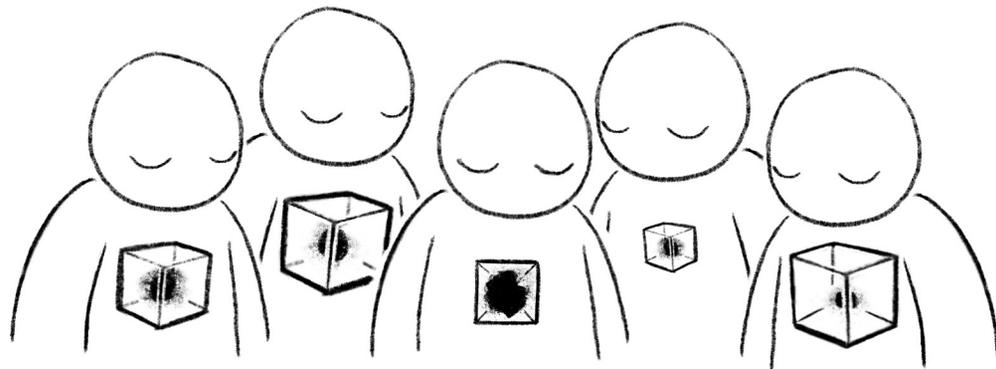
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Some people have larger boxes, and while it may be difficult, they can manage their pain.

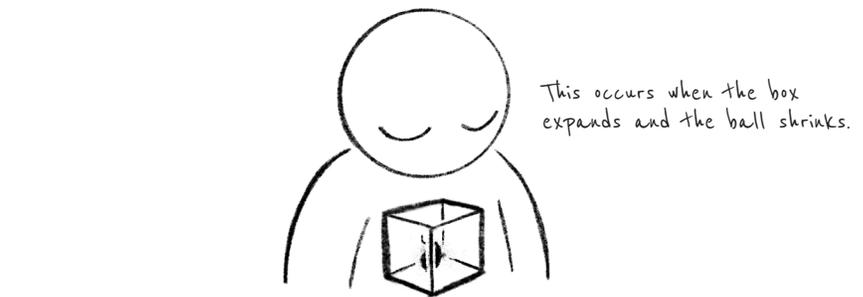
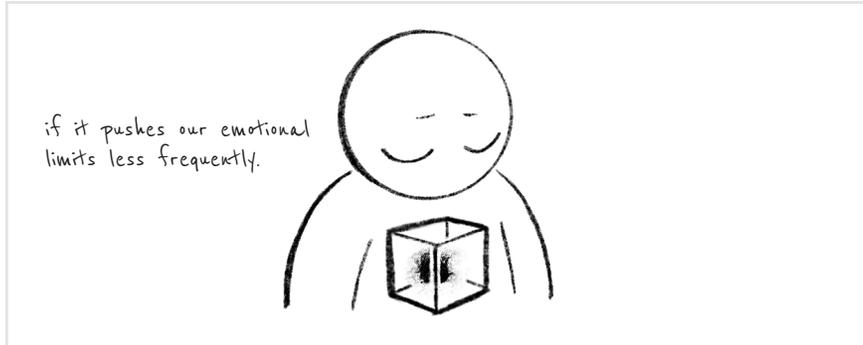
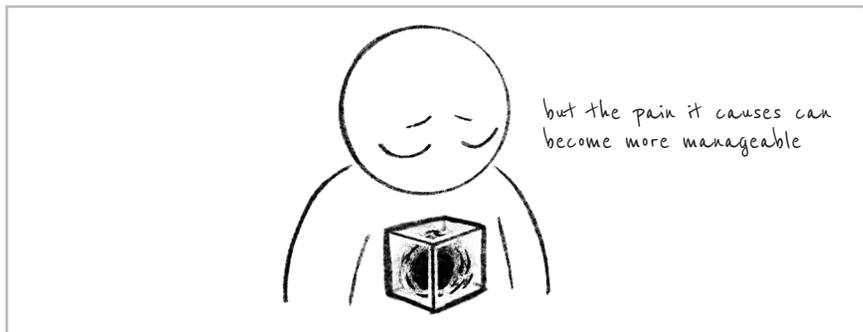
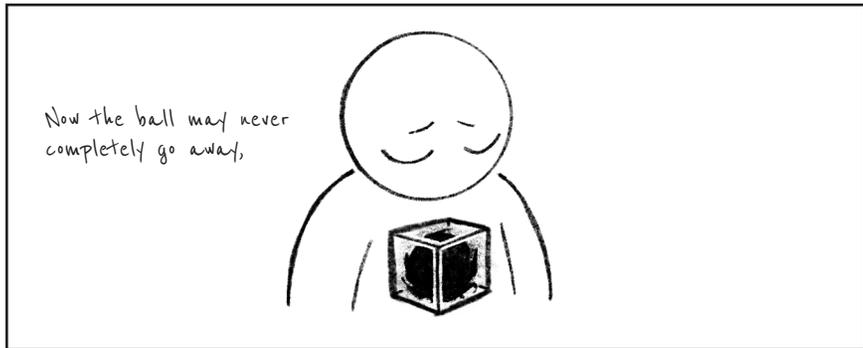


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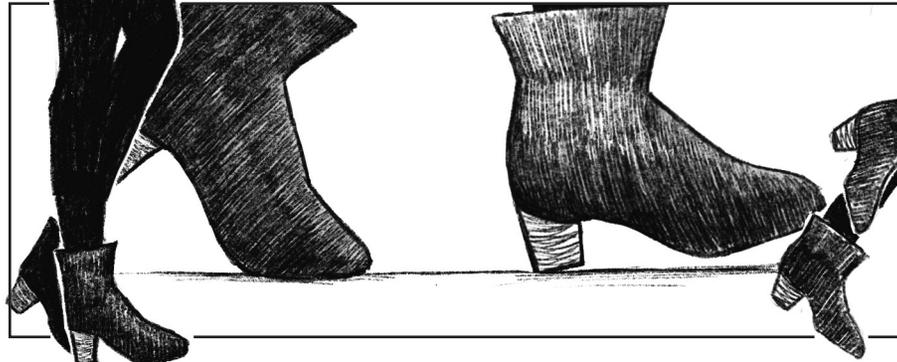
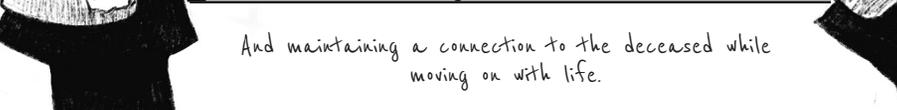
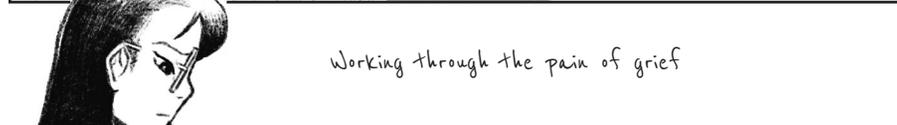
Other people have smaller boxes, and the ball feels relentless and the pain is unbearable.



Everyone deals with grief differently because everyone experiences grief differently, from the size of their ball to the size of their box—things no one has complete control over.



The box expands with personal growth from a change in perspective

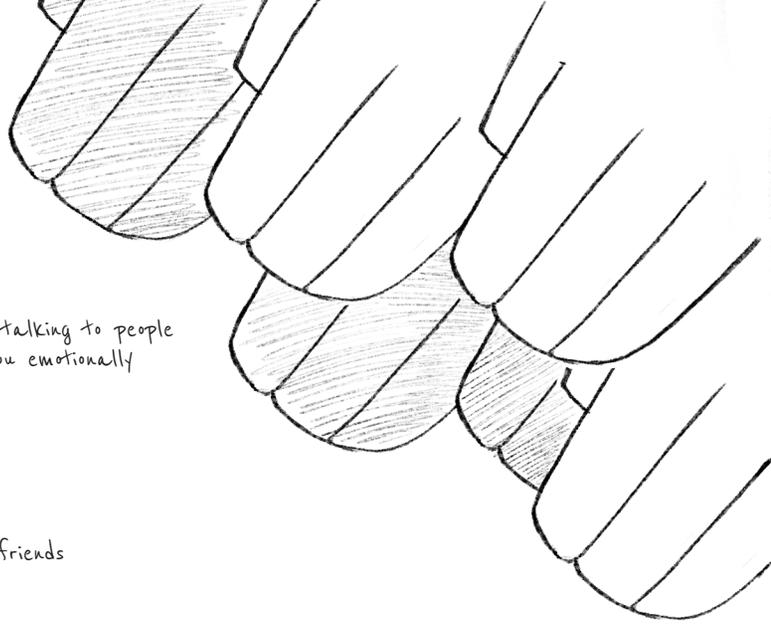


This can occur by talking to people who may support you emotionally

friends

family

grief counsellors



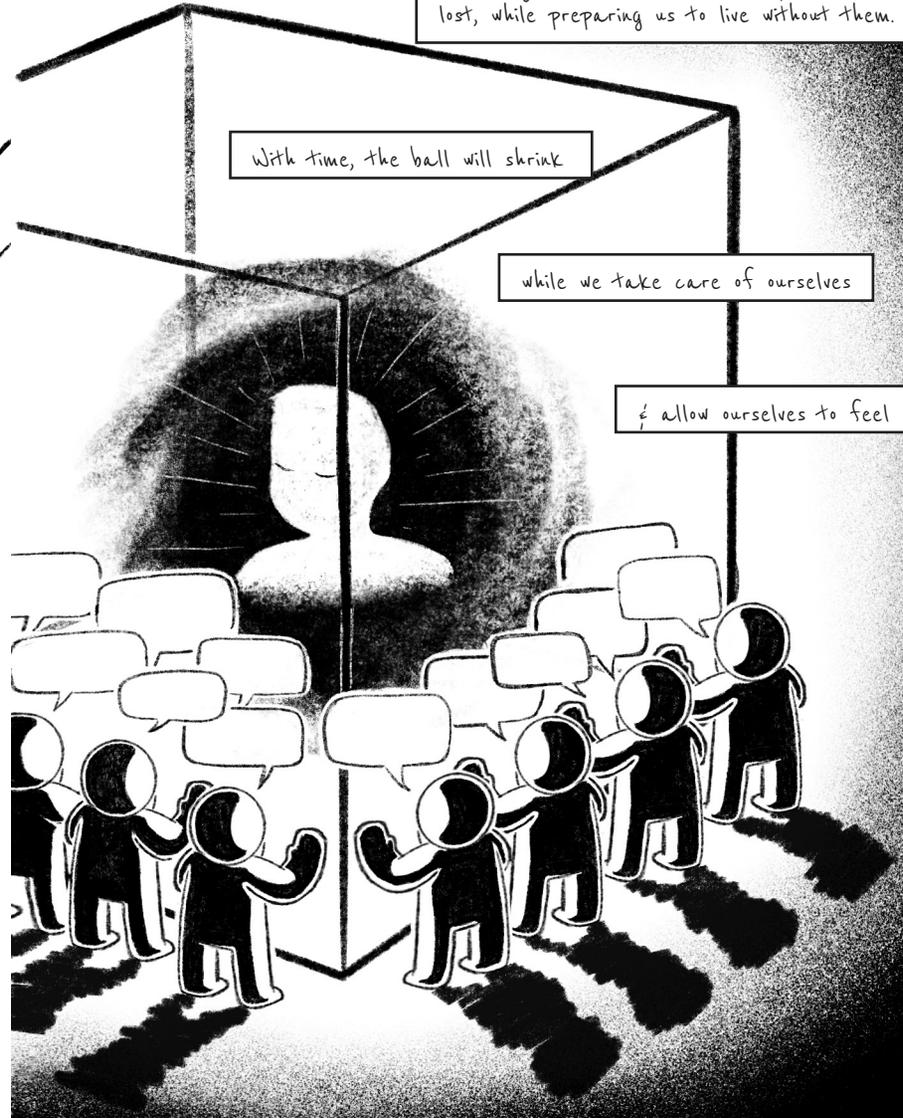
These people can give us the tools & insight we need for self growth.

They can help us reflect on the positive memories to strengthen our bond with the person who we lost, while preparing us to live without them.

With time, the ball will shrink

while we take care of ourselves

& allow ourselves to feel sad.



Chinese funeral traditions can be the means to changing one's perspective. They can be comforting reminders that we are not alone...

... that there is sweetness among the bitterness, a way to say goodbye, and to get a sense of closure.

Envelope candy "sweetens a bitter time".

Envelope money is for good luck. It must be spent before going home.

Fake money & joss paper are burned to send them to the deceased so that they can buy things in the after life.

White chrysanthemums are given in condolences to the family.

Bow three times in front of the casket to pay respect.

You must turn around when the casket is lowered into the ground.

White envelopes with money & candy are given out; the envelope represents bad luck & must be thrown out before going home.

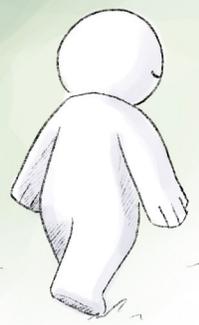
At the annual Qingming festival, families visit & clean the tombs to pay respect. Our family calls it "hang san".

The blanket ceremony involves families layering decorative blankets on the deceased to ensure they are safe & warm as their spirit continues on.

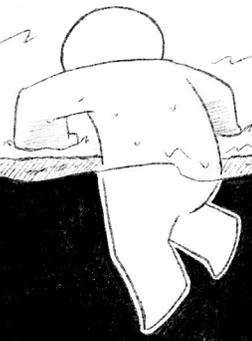
Grandchildren of the deceased will often kneel and "kowitz".

\*Chinese Funeral traditions include but are not limited to those depicted. Variations of these traditions exist

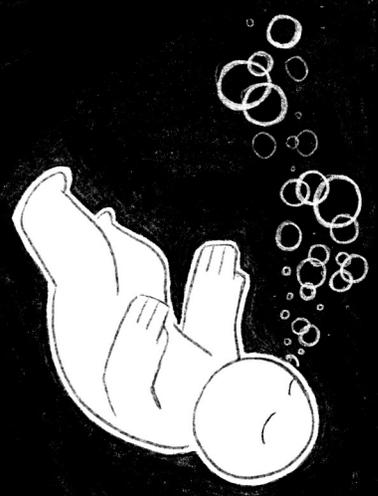
For some, the window these traditions define as a time to grieve are enough to fully recognize the loss and come to accept it.



When the traditions conclude, they can begin to move on.



For some...



...it simply isn't enough.

For me, most of these traditions still feel alien.



Most can agree that we do them out of



And while I can find comfort in knowing this would have made the deceased happy, my grief still feels unresolved.

I don't feel like how I think I should.



I feel broken.



But everyone experiences grief differently because everyone is different.



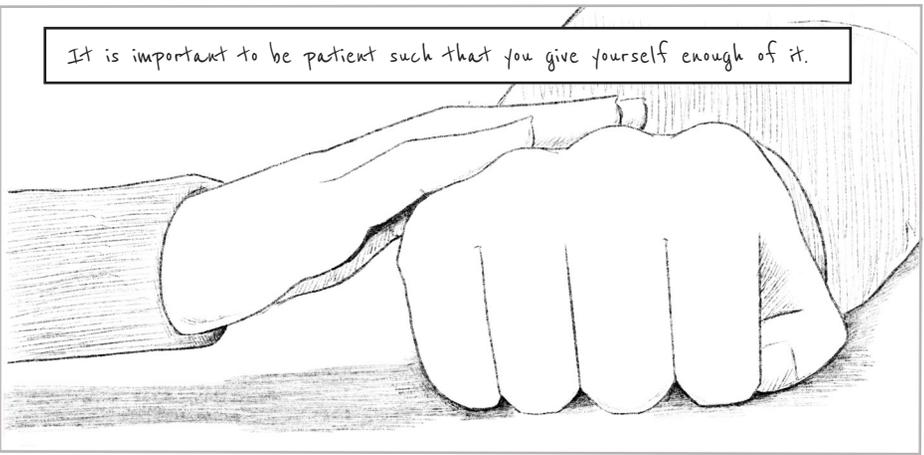
How you grieve and how long it takes you to be okay can vary.



You may not be okay by the time you expect, but that does not mean you are broken.



The ball shrinks with time and the box expands with support.



It is important to be patient such that you give yourself enough of it.



Life may not seem to stop for anything

but it does not mean that you shouldn't

to ask your loved ones that are still here

How are you?

Is there anything I  
can do for you?

be kind

be gentle

I've come to realize that we cannot expect ourselves to deal with grief that we do not have the emotional capacity for.



We can only be patient and take care of ourselves until we do.

## Acknowledgements

Thank you to the friends, family, & strangers who willingly shared their thoughts & feelings with me on something so personal; thank you to Lauren Herschel for sharing her box metaphor for grief on Twitter & allowing me to adapt it for this comic; finally, thank you to Dr. Shelley Wall & my peers in the MSCBM's Graphic Medicine Seminar at the University of Toronto Mississauga for their support throughout this first foray into long-form comics.

## Typeface

The typefaces used in this comic are Adobe Typekit fonts: Reenie Beenie (designed by James Grieshaber) & **CHANTAL BOLD** (designed by Rian Hughes).

## References

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