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# Ghosts' Stories

Addictive Behaviors and Complicated Grief  
in George Saunders' *Lincoln in the Bardo*

JC Leishman

“And as the sun came up, we prayed, each within ourselves, our usual prayer: / To still be here when the sun sets next set. / And discover, in those first moments of restored movement, that we had again been granted the great mother-gift: / Time. / More time” (Saunders 339). As the ghosts of Oak Hill Cemetery drift to sleep at the break of day, they rejoice that they have not succumbed to the fate of their friends and passed on to the other side. All they desire is time—more time. These final lines in George Saunders' experimental novel, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, exemplify the fundamental heart of grief and suffering—a desire to live in the past for just a little longer, for the unknown future is far more terrifying than that which is known but painful. Although this desire is part of the natural grieving process, it can result in becoming moored in grief. Once stuck in this state of mental anguish, the brain might seek out subversive methods of avoiding the pain, such as using addictive substances or behaving dangerously. The ghosts of Oak Hill Cemetery and their attachments to life represent this phenomenon and act as a foil to those who move through their grief and onto the next life. *Lincoln in the Bardo* is a story about the spirit of Abraham Lincoln's deceased child lingering in his graveyard. Within the story, Saunders crafts a fascinating exploration of grief and trauma as the narrative plays between quotes from real life accounts of Lincoln and his

family and the interactions of spirits who have not yet passed on to the other side—all of them dawdling in the Bardo.

George Saunders' Bardo is inspired by the Tibetan conception of an *in-between* state and Christian ideas of purgatory—an ocean in which the ghosts either tread for a moment until their final passing or desperately grasp flotsam to remain attached to life so as not to move on. These various *flotsam* moor the ghosts to the bardo and are the driving force of the novel's narrative, representing how grief keeps one stationary and in the past. As the title suggests, Abraham Lincoln and his deceased son Willie are at the heart of the story, and after a first read, one may come away thinking that the novel is about the Lincolns—not so. The heart of the novel is grief, and the Lincolns are a vehicle through which the audience experiences this grief. But the story is not about them; the novel is about how one grieves. Commenting on this interplay between character and theme, literary critic Michiko Kakutani writes, “[the ghosts' involvement] turns Lincoln's personal grief into a meditation on the losses suffered by the nation during the Civil War, and the more universal heartbreak that is part of the human condition” (Kakutani). Here in the Bardo, the processes of grieving stand in for any number of things preventing the ghosts from moving on to the next life and at their center is this *universal heartbreak*.

As seen time and again in the novel, the heartbreak Kakutani calls *universal* plays a fascinating role in the development of each character and shines a light on a particular difficulty that can arise during the natural process of grieving. Consider President Lincoln postponing his grief by rending his child's coffin from its place and coddling the boy's lifeless form; or Willie deferring his grief by holding onto his father and lingering in the Bardo as long as he can. And surrounding these two within the novel are a variety of ghostly figures, each with their own flotsam in life that deludes them into thinking they are not actually dead, or at least providing a strong enough force to keep them from passing on to the next life. Each of these characters engage in a deeply complex and moving set of self-delusions that are not uncommon in the grieving process and are more typical of a mental disorder called complicated grief: a period of bereavement that is considered “severe and prolonged” (Nakajima 1). This essay will prove that the ghosts who have lingered in the Bardo are engaging in patterns of behavioral addictions to dissociate from their complicated grief, the result of which is a far deeper and meaningful understanding of the ghosts in the Bardo and humanity's predilection towards dissociation over progress.

To better understand the grieving processes of the various ghosts, it is important to foreground the processes of grief and behavioral addictions. All humans experience loss and grief—whether it be the loss of a loved one, a pet, or a lifestyle. Everyone experiences losses, and everyone must grieve. Grief is the psychological process of adapting to loss and processing emotional pain, the natural process of dealing with the absence of someone or something. Just as the body stitches itself back together and fills in the gaps when an abscess is removed, so too does the brain work to deal with loss through the process of grief (“What is Grief?”). This grieving process, often known as the five stages, is defined by Elizabeth Kübler-Ross as denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance (Gregory). The normal human process of grief is to experience loss by these means, finishing the cycle by accepting the loss and moving on. Although everyone experiences this process in different ways, and it can take much longer to resolve for some than others, resolution is natural. If grief does not resolve, then a person will experience the phenomenon of complicated grief that retards the grieving process and prevents individuals from moving on. Complicated grief can cause individuals to engage in various dissociative methods ranging anywhere from actual psychological dissociation to destructive substance or behavioral patterns that distract the mind from grief and pain (Nakajima). It is important to note that this state of persistent bereavement does not always look the same in every case. If we consider complicated grief to be a barrier on the road of the five stages of grief, that barrier can sit at any point before acceptance (the stages of grief are not just a line, but a cycle that can repeat as one naturally processes loss). When unable to process loss as a result of complicated grief, individuals tend to engage in destructive behaviors that detract from the loss and help them circumvent the grieving process entirely.

The obvious example of a behavior meant to bypass pain (for our purposes, pain caused by loss) is substance abuse. Alcoholism, drug use, and other substance abuse work to create a physiological effect that prevents the brain from experiencing pain. In the case of alcohol, it literally works to make one forget and lose their memory (Nall). But over the last few decades, researchers have found that certain behaviors work very similarly to substance abuse, creating a psychological effect (rather than physiological) that temporarily bypasses pain; these behaviors are called behavioral addictions (Grant et al.). Although certain behaviors pose more of a risk for inciting compulsive behaviors, it is the mindset and diminished control of the individual that causes the behavioral addiction,

not the behaviors themselves that define them (Grant, et al.). Addictive behaviors work to circumvent processing pain, and these same behaviors play a key role in understanding the process of grief in *Lincoln in the Bardo*.

The most glaring evidence of addictive behavior in the novel is that the ghosts of the bardo go to such extreme lengths to convince themselves they are still alive. The ghosts believe themselves simply sick, referring to their bodies and coffins as “sick forms” and “sick-boxes” respectively (Saunders 58). The living cannot interact with them as the result of their curious malady, and they simply wait to be made whole again and go back to their lives; but as the novel goes on it seems that the ghosts are not so sure that this is the case. At one point a ghost comments on those who have passed on to the other side saying, “Truth be told, there was not one among the many here—not even the strongest—who did not entertain some lingering doubt about the wisdom of his or her choice” (73). If they are simply sick, what choice is being made? What strength is required to stay sick if they are in fact only ill? A similar sentiment is exchanged between Bevins and his friend Vollman who reminisce about their early days in the Bardo stating, “We had not done enough. / Being rather newly arrived back then. / And much preoccupied with the challenges of staying. / Which were not inconsiderable. / And have not lessened in the meantime” (113). The fact is they know there is an effort in staying and that they go somewhere else afterward, yet they continue to maintain their state is one of malady rather than mortality. The unknown future, the potentiality of further discomfort, is too much to handle, and they go to great lengths to dissociate from their reality and postpone the future.

The behavioral addictions those in the Bardo use to dissociate from their predicament are further revealed to the reader during an interesting interlude when an army of unknown beings comes to tempt the spirits away. Preceded by a comforting breeze “fragrant with all manner of things that give comfort: grass, sun, beer, bread, quilts, cream—this list being different for each of us, each being differently comforted” (Saunders 89). The tempting spirits appear to each of the ghosts in forms meant to seduce and tempt them—it is these temptations that further prove the ghosts’ addictions and attempts to dissociate themselves. One ghost, Mrs. Blass, explains what the spirits offer her; lamenting, she shares, “Where they wanted to take me, the tide would run in, and never go out. I would live atop a hill and the stones would roll up” (95). Roger Bevins is tempted with flattery and absolution, the spirits saying, “You are of finer stuff. Come with us, all is forgiven” (93). Repeated

four separate times to four different ghosts is the line, “You are a wave that has crashed upon the shore,” appealing to their sense of injustice and validation (100). When that doesn’t work, the spirits seek to break the veil of delusion the ghosts set upon themselves by forcing the ghosts to acknowledge their own mortality, declaring truths like, “You are not lying on any floor, in any kitchen. Are you? Look around, fool. You delude yourself. It [suicide] is complete. You have completed it” (94); and “Do doctors put people into ‘sick-boxes’? I do not recall that practice ever being followed in our time” (98). Yet, even after being confronted by all these truths, the three main ghosts continue to skirt the issue by later saying, “I felt a renewed affection for all who remained. / Wheat had been separated from chaff. / Our path is not for everyone. Many people—I do not mean to disparage them? Lack the necessary resolve” (103). What the tempting spirits offer is a freedom from pain, from discomfort, from grief—they offer a way to circumvent the pain of the barrier that prevents them from processing their grief, a brilliant move on Saunders’s part as this is already what the ghosts are doing. There remains ambiguity of what actually happens to those who succumb and accept the words of the tempting spirits, but the inferences are nothing if not ominous. For all intents and purposes, the methods the tempting spirits employ to remove the ghosts from the Bardo are just another means of distracting them from reality, so perhaps where the ghosts go after what is referred to as their “matterlightblooming phenomenon” is not much better than where they are in the present—but they are too caught up in their own subversive delusions to be distracted by these new ones (96). What they know, what they are comfortable with, is far less terrifying than that which they do not, and so they begin to engage in addictive behaviors to retard their progression and stay mired in their deluded and halfhearted existence.

These delusions about the ghosts’ state are not simply the result of white-knuckle willpower to resist reality but are the direct result of patterns of behavioral addictions. The most apparent example of this comes from a husband-and-wife duo stuck in the Bardo by the name of Baron. A pair of vulgar and raucous ghosts, Eddie and Betsy Baron live by the mantra, “Got plenty of celebrating left to f—ing do, right?” (Saunders 94). Described as “drunk and insensate, lying in the road, run over by the same carriage, they had been left to recover from their injuries in an unmarked disreputable common sick-pit just beyond the dread iron fence, the only white people therein, thrown in with several members of the dark race, not one among them, pale or dark, with a sick-box in which to properly recover,” the Barons go

around the Bardo reliving their wildest hedonistic exploits in life, all the while struggling with the reality of their failure as parents (87). The two consistently oscillate between cursing their children for their negligence, having not come to see them in the graveyard, and lamenting their failure as parents who maybe, “had too many parties” (212). At first glance the Barons are a riotous couple who seem completely “unrestrained,” as the Reverend describes them, however, they represent a unique case where their patterns of behavioral addictions are laid bare both in their corporeal life as well as in their afterlife (88). The Barons lived in a trash heap and essentially died in one, their whole life being a cycle of tragedies and partying, each contributing to the other. The Barons attempted to circumvent their grief and pain by way of debauchery, boisterous living, and even substance abuse. In death they relive this cycle; the tempting spirits reveal the Barons’ grief as failed parents when they come to them in the guise of their daughter, saying she is exhausted “from all my successes,” and consoling Betsy by saying, “Please know, everything is alright. You did the best you could. We blame you for nothing” (99). Yet, as outlined before, the defining feature of addiction is the eventual loss of control. The Barons experience this loss firsthand in death, and to console themselves they turn to what they know—party. The Barons relive their riotous days, scold their absent children, and deny that they did anything wrong. But in the end they are exposed by way of Betsy, who, finally accepting her fate, processes her grief in front of the Bardo on her way to the other side.

Her flesh became thin as parchment. Tremors ran through her body. Her form flickered between the various selves she had been in that previous place (too debauched and impoverished and shameful to mention) and then between the various future-forms she had, alas, never succeeded in attaining; attentive mother; mindful baker of bread and cakes; sober church-attender; respected soft-spoken grandmother surrounded by her adoring, clean brood (Saunders 325).

Betsy’s healing came from the experience of accepting both the truth of her reality and her failure to fulfill all of her potential accomplishments. It is through this acceptance that Betsy was able to finally let go of the past. Eddie, reluctantly accepting his reality as well and “compelled by his inordinate affection for that lady,” follows her to their next celebration (Saunders 325). The Barons’ life was at once horrifying and disreputable, their death was not much different, but in the end their salvation was a literal processing of their

griefs and final acceptance to break the cycle of behavioral addictions. The Barons' hedonism and substance abuse represent the cyclical relationship of complicated grief and behavioral addiction patterns and foreground many other characters that succumb to behavioral addictions in the same, if not more nuanced, way.

Another example of characters that yield to behavioral addictions is that of Mrs. Ellis, a woman who lived life knowing that she was destined for greatness: "I felt myself a new species of child. Not a boy (most assuredly) but neither a (mere) girl. That skirt-bound race perpetually moving about serving tea had nothing to do with me" (Saunders 76). Dreaming of traveling the world and visiting the greatest cities of the Earth, she is disappointed to find herself stuck with a husband who thinks her "silly" and a "mere woman" (77). But then she finds herself in motherhood, lovingly doting on three little girls in whom she "found [her] Rome, [her] Paris, [her] Constantinople" (77). In these daughters she finds an escape from her life and fulfillment in the extraordinary life she always knew she was destined for. Now dead, Mrs. Ellis is somewhat haunted by her daughters as she is plagued by distorted images of them. The Reverend describes the scenario:

Mrs. Ellis was a stately, regal woman, always surrounded by three gelatinous orbs floating about her person, each containing a likeness of one of her daughters. At times these orbs grew to extreme size, and would bear down upon her, and crush out her blood and other fluids as she wriggled beneath their terrible weight, refusing to cry out, as this would indicate displeasure, and at other times these orbs departed from her and she was greatly tormented, and must rush around trying to find them, and when she did, would weep in relief, at which time they would once again begin bearing down upon her (Saunders 79).

In life these daughters were her escape, but she was ultimately consumed by them as her daughters came to replace her reality. Now, in death, Mrs. Ellis cannot function without these leech-like creatures that stand in for her daughters; she dotes on them only to be crushed by them, and so on, and so on. Ultimately, the three girls prove Mrs. Ellis' demise as she succumbs to the tempting spirits who seduce her with a vision of her real daughters, the very behavioral addiction pattern she engaged in willingly. Herein lies the volatility of these behaviors: they can just as easily work against their masters as they do for them. Mrs. Ellis does not have a resolution in the



same way the Barons do, but her complicated grief (as a result of unfulfilled desires) and subsequent addictive behaviors are plainly on display.

Another example of this cycle of complicated grief and behavioral addiction patterns comes from Mrs. Blass. Not as much is known about Mrs. Blass, but she is described as “notoriously frugal, filthy, gray-haired, and tiny (smaller than a baby), spent her nights racing about, gnawing at rocks and twigs, gathering these things to her, defending them zealously, passing the long hours counting and recounting these meager possessions” (Saunders 81). In the Bardo Mrs. Blass is tiny and almost stepped on, obsessed with hoarding random objects. When approached by the tempting angels, they show her a vision of a place where “the tide would run in, and never out. I would live atop a hill and the stones would roll up. When they got to me, they would split open. Inside each was a pill. When I took the pill, I had—oh, Glory! All I needed. / For once. / For once in my life” (95). Although the details of her desires are not specified, it seems that her pattern of addictive behavior revolves around having all she needs “for once.” Perhaps she grew up in great poverty, or perhaps she experienced a great loss which resulted in her compulsive tendencies. The tempting spirits hint at an answer saying, “You had it rough / The tide ran out but never ran in. / You never in your life was given enough” (96). Whatever life took from her, it never seemed to give back. Now she is depicted as a reduction of herself—consumed only with gathering things that, after her departure from the Bardo, are described as “her treasured dead-bird parts, twigs, motes, et al., now unattended: objects of value no more” (102). Unable to get past the trauma caused by her lack (or perceived lack) of material treasures in life, everything becomes a gem to her so long as it is hers, just like a hoarder in the real world. Perhaps it is here where the addictive behaviors, the means by which the ghosts delude themselves, are most concisely described. The things the ghosts rush to hold on to, the things they bring with them in the Bardo, these are all, in the end, of absolutely no value. When they leave the Bardo, these behaviors have as much worth to the remaining residents as the twigs and bird parts do for anyone else. If the Bardo can be considered a sea in which the spirits must eventually drown, the behaviors they delude themselves with are flotsam that they convince themselves are continents.

Unlike the many other ghosts who only showcase their complicated grief, the two main ghosts of the novel, Bevins and Vollman, open the novel with their stories and end it with the acceptance of their fates, demonstrating

the full circle of grief and eventual healing. Bevins suffered in life from what he calls “a certain predilection,” suggesting his attraction to men, and laments in death that he was spurned by his illicit lover, who denied him for another man (Saunders 25). Losing the will to live, he commits suicide in his bathtub and then remains in the Bardo, stating that he is “waiting to be discovered . . . so that [he] may be revived” (27). Upon first examination it seems that Bevins’ flotsam in the Bardo is his unresolved grief at being rejected by his lover, but this is not so. The obsession with his rejection acts as the addictive behavior through which he circumvents his real grief being his suicide, or more specifically, his loss of the pleasures of life by way of his suicide. While recounting his story, Bevins shyly adds, “well, it is a little embarrassing, but let me just say it: I changed my mind. Only then (nearly out the door, so to speak) did I realize how unspeakably beautiful all of this was, how precisely engineered for our pleasure, and saw that I was on the brink of squandering a wondrous gift” (26). For Bevins, his delusion is the same as the other ghosts: he believes himself to be alive, but the means by which he deludes himself is an obsessive replaying of events between him and his lover. The result of this is an unresolved grief he suffers in the realization that he spent all of his time focusing on what he was *not* rather than the “unspeakably beautiful” world that was around him. Bevins’ friend,



Vollman, suffers a similar experience, except his delusion is that he still has something to live for rather than whether or not he is alive at all. On the day he had waited so long for, the day he would consummate his marriage, “A beam from the ceiling came down, hitting me just here, as I sat at my desk . . . / I saw that our plan must be infinitely delayed. What a frustration!” (5). Vollman, described as having a gigantic “member,” no doubt representing a certain unfulfillment, holds on to the idea that he is merely waiting to get better so he and his wife can pick up where they left off. Unfortunately for Vollman, as is learned later, his wife had actually come to the cemetery “and recounted many things, happy things concerning her life . . . and thanked you—thanked you, imagine—for your early kindness to her, which had, as she put it, ‘allowed me to deliver myself, unsullied, to he who would prove to be the great love of my life’” (327). Vollman conveniently forgot that this had ever occurred, deluding himself into thinking that he still had something to live for by replaying over and over again how wonderful it would be once he could just finally consummate his marriage. Bevins is stuck in a past that took away from the present, Vollman is stuck in a future that will never be, both of them replay the events they could never get their hands on in order to ignore what they know to be inevitable. This is the cycle that happens again and again throughout the book. Whether it is the ghosts or the Lincolns, each of these examples showcase a wrestle with grief. This wrestle is not pleasant, it is not simple, and as is often seen in the novel, sometimes it is all-consuming, but as the novel also seems to admit, it is the procession of this grief and the shucking of destructive behaviors that leads to the lasting peace of progress.

In an interview on the novel, George Saunders said of the ghosts, “If they realize they are dead they can leave, and also if they can recognize that their attachment to life is just not meaningful” (“In Conversation”). At first it seems that Saunders is suggesting that the ghosts’ lingering stay in the Bardo has no meaning (perhaps undermining the greater part of the novel)—but this is precisely the point. The entirety of the novel is a cacophony of characters delaying the inevitable. Perhaps they’ve spent a day in the Bardo, maybe a millennium; no matter how much time they’ve been there, the focus is what lies on the other side. In dealing with grief, humanity tends to take drastic steps to divert its attention, thus miring itself in a veritable “Bardo,” inside of which there is nothing but stagnation. In the end, Saunders’s Bardo is not so different from life, and it becomes a meditation on life. The Bardo becomes the

things we become occupied with and the bizarre aimlessness that life becomes when we cannot move on. Saunders is right; the things attaching these ghosts to life, their anesthetics, just aren't meaningful because without experiencing the full process of grief, without coming out of the experience with closure and clarity, everything in between those two points is meaningless and simply retarding one's grief.

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