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Goodbye to All This: The Ordinary Rhythm of Loss

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Abstract

Sophie Townsend's *Goodbye to All This* from BBC World Service is an audio documentary about Townsend's experience of losing her husband, Russell, to cancer. Beginning with Russell's diagnosis in the first episode, listeners follow Townsend through his treatment and death, then through the years as she adapts to life without him. The carefully constructed series focuses on Townsend's personal narrative while situating her within her community. At the same time, the memoir's precise storytelling and gentle, rhythmic sound design give structure to the podcast's poignant expression of loss.

Keywords

audio documentary, podcast, grief, narrative, community, BBC

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Hear: [BBC Sounds – Goodbye to All This](#)

What surprised me about grief was how ordinary it all is. When a close member of my family died, I organised her life into neatly labeled tabs and my grief into stages. I did the laundry and sobbed into her tidy, folded poplin sheets. I set up a meal schedule and put it on the fridge. It all hurt so much, but unlike other powerful emotions, it wasn't confusing or hard to articulate. There was a rhythm to it that was undeniable and easy to understand. Sophie Townsend's *Goodbye to All This* exists in a similar rhythm, carefully organising time to tell the story of Townsend's grief. It is gentle, graceful, and ordinary. Beginning with her husband Russell's cancer diagnosis in the first episode, listeners follow Townsend through his treatment and death, then through the years as she mourns his loss. The podcast creates a tightly-knit narrative arc with 12 neatly-balanced episodes centring on specific moments or imagery, each with reliable segments and a clear message, and resolves by looking towards the future. Much like me, with my meal plan and stages and tabs, *Goodbye to All This* uses the structure of a podcast documentary to take the crumpled moments of grief and spread them out over familiar frames, so as to better trace their patterns, to better tie them together.

The first episodes are clearly laid out, scheduled according to diagnoses and health. We meet Sophie's friends and her husband, Russell, is diagnosed. Through personal narration and interview, Townsend situates herself within her community. There are moments: a family picture, coffee with "the school mums", but there is also a clear progression as Russell's illness develops and Sophie tries to take care of him and her children ("the girls"), and as her friends and family try to take care of her. Each episode begins with a few timid notes on a piano, Sophie's voice and clockwork. Each ends with soft drums, a small band, a rhythm for melodic vocals to drape over, sometimes in step and sometimes not, then Townsend reads the credits.

While the episode structure remains, the series's relationship to time begins to quiver when Russell dies. "I remember this night in sharp flashes, but I don't remember the full narrative", Townsend says over an old, resonant wooden clock, then several smaller ones, sometimes together and sometimes slightly out of sync, "I don't know what happened when. What happened? When?" She presents her last day with Russell, but her memories are out of time; they're more isolated moments than a story, and sometimes multiple moments become one and the only thing that's clear is the feeling of being very, very sad. When she's done recounting the day, her friends and family step in. "I remember getting to the house at around sunset, or twilight", a male voice states, then another says what happened next, then another. These voices give a timeline for the day and they're recorded and edited together with such a professional, practised ease that it's unclear who is exactly giving us this story. The audio documentary format, with its balance between personal and collaborative storytelling, here provides a template for the personal yet still communal experience of grief. This is Townsend's story, and she is telling it, but she is not telling it alone.

With the eighth episode, the series's temporality shifts more completely: years pass between episodes, or maybe days. While the show's general outline stays the same, the moments in these episodes mean more to me than how they're stitched together. In "10. Appointment", her washing machine breaks and, like many of these memories, there's something about the ordinariness of it all that makes it so real. Russell fixed the washer the last time but now he's not here, just like he used to make weeknight dinners and go grocery shopping, and I can't help but think about all of those mundane little things my own partner does and how lost I'd be if he were gone. *Who would unclog the drains?* We married young and grew up together, each just half-way, and he makes sure we pay the bills on time and I schedule our check-ups and somehow we're ok, but I can't imagine him not being there for me to bicker at when nobody's hung the laundry to dry or taken out the trash. I cry. At the end of the episode, I, predictably, learn what the titular appointment is for. This predictability doesn't take me out of the story but allows me to feel the emotional weight of the moment, supported by the podcast's rigid structure just as Townsend's voice rests on the steady, familiar cadence of the tide, the chirping birds, and the clock.

Part way through "11. The Shoe", these moments start to fade and the overarching narrative of loss and recovery that Townsend promises in the introduction comes back into focus. At first, the episode seems like the ones that came before: a moment in daily life marked by grief—and it is, but in this moment she realises how much the girls have grown. It causes me to think back to what came before, the episodes I spent lost in these memories, and I realise that they had been growing the entire time and she has been, too. The "other side" is not a life without loss, Townsend explains, but a life with loss can be good: "I'll feel his absence every day, like a bruise that's tender to the touch. I loved him and it hurts. But even with that pain, life is good. With all the people around me who stood by me and still do, patiently helping me, helping us, get through" ("12. Moving"). Relief comes from the people Townsend has been in conversation with throughout the podcast, the friends and family she interviews, the doctors and delivery men she mentions, the podcast staff and consultants she thanks and acknowledges in the credits: The community who have helped her and her family *move* without having to *move on*.

Goodbye to All This is the careful, beautiful, and precise work of Sophie Townsend and the people who surround her. In unfolding her grief, draping it over the familiar, communal rhythms of memoir and audio documentary, Townsend invites me to experience mine, too, reassuringly alongside someone who, as she says in her introduction, "has come out the other side".



Alyn Euritt is a late-stage doctoral candidate at the Institute for American Studies, Universität Leipzig. Her current project, *Podcasting Intimacy: Community and the Sound of Closeness*, traces the relationship between intimacy and mediation in American podcasting. She recently co-edited a themed section on podcasts for *Participations*, has a chapter forthcoming in *The Routledge Companion to Radio Studies*, and has work on podcasting, and how it connects people, in *Popular Communication*, *Gender Forum*, and *kommunikation@gesellschaft*.