

Deceased Parent in Distressing Dreams. Dealing with Problems in Bereavement Narratives

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This paper analyses three bereavement narratives in which adult daughters describe nightmarish after-death communication with a deceased parent. The narratives are approached with a narrative analysis in dialogue with psychological approaches to bereavement dreams and continuing bonds. In psychology, bereavement nightmares are usually assumed to signal difficulties accepting loss. However, in the context of bereavement narratives that depict life with the deceased, these nightmares do not appear to process the death but to reflect problems in the daughter-parent relationship. Expressing discomfort with a parent's behaviour, the nightmares are connected to an attempt to change or end the late parent's influence in the daughter's life.

KEYWORDS: death, bereavement narrative, nightmare, continuing bonds, family relations

Članek analizira tri pripovedi o žalovanju, v katerih odrasle hčere opisujejo moreče posmrtno sanje z umrlim staršem. Pripovedi so obravnavane z narativno analizo v dialogu s psihološkimi pristopi k sanjam v času žalovanja in k nadaljevanju vezi s pokojnikom. V psihologiji se žalovalne more običajno razumejo kot znak težav pri sprejemanju izgube. Vendar pa se v kontekstu žalovalnih pripovedi, ki prikazujejo življenje s pokojnikom, te more ne kažejo kot način predelovanja smrti, temveč odražajo težave v odnosu med hčerjo in staršem. Ker izražajo nelagodje zaradi vedenja starša, so more povezane s poskusom, da bi hči spremenila ali prekinila vpliv pokojnega starša na svoje življenje.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: smrt, žalovalne pripovedi, žalovalne more, trajajoče vezi, družinski odnosi

The loss of a close family member can cause mixed feelings, especially if the relationship was problematic. The bereaved may need to figure out how to live with the past and how to shape their relationship with the deceased. Dreams and narratives about the deceased have been regarded as a means of processing loss and reassessing relationships. There are also collective beliefs and personal experiences about dreams being real encounters with the deceased, allowing farewells or expressions of love. This article presents an analysis of three personal reminiscence narratives, which describe distressing dream experiences after the death of a parent. While one of the narratives explicitly presents the deceased as an intentional actor in a spiritual realm, the two others are less explicit about the ontology of the encounter. The authors of these texts are three Finnish women who

contributed to a death-themed data collection campaign by a folklore archive. I consider them to be bereavement narratives, i.e. narratives that describe and make sense of losing someone close. I suggest that, as autobiographical narratives, bereavement narratives not only recount the lives of the deceased but also define and perform the author's self. In addition to this narrative approach, I consider these texts in the light of dream studies and bereavement studies.

Questions of coping with loss, continuing a social relationship with the deceased, and processing one's emotions via dreams have been approached from diverse viewpoints by scholars in psychology, the social sciences and the humanities. In this paper, I put my narrative analysis in dialogue with the psychological research on bereavement dreams and continuing bonds. Such a dialogue is not without problems, as a gap persists, especially between the basic assumptions of analytical psychology and approaches in the study of culture and religion. The impact of vernacular traditions and beliefs on personal experiences and their interpretation is generally recognised and appreciated by researchers in culture and religion. We find it fairly common and unproblematic that people may feel the presence of their deceased relatives. Meanwhile, a large part of psychological grief studies is concerned with monitoring healthy and unhealthy forms of grieving. Instead of allowing for a variety of belief systems, psychologists often presume a shared scientific outlook. Therefore, they may tolerate after-death communication only to a certain degree and, for example, regard it as "normal" only within a strict timeframe of the grieving process – if at all (see e.g. Stroebe, Schut, 2005; Siltala, 2019: 200–201; Black et al., 2025: 185). Despite their differences, the results of psychological dream studies are relevant to the analysis of contemporary Finnish dream narratives. The discord between different scholarly views corresponds to the mixed feelings found in everyday Finnish contexts in which these bereavement narratives emerge. In Finland, there is no particular tradition of dream communication that would be generally accepted. The Lutheran church has never afforded any particular recognition to dream encounters and has equally condemned all forms of after-death communication. Even though people do have such experiences and may discuss them with those closest to them, they are seldom discussed in public, as they tend to be rejected by both a materialist worldview and religious discourse. Today, dreamers find it appropriate to explain their experiences through the lens of popular psychology, and oneiric encounters are increasingly interpreted as products of the individual mind (e.g. Koski, 2016b).

BEREAVEMENT DREAMS AND CONTINUING BONDS

Studies of dreams and bereavement have shown that the bereaved commonly dream of the deceased. The majority of the dreams have an emotionally positive tone but distressing dreams also occur (Worden, 2009; Wright et al., 2013: 3; Black et al., 2019: 68, 73–74; Black et al., 2021: 526–527). There is general agreement that dream contents are based on the dreamer's waking life and have an active role in emotion regulation. It has also been assumed that nightmares occur when the attempt to handle difficult emotions fails.

Nightmares should not, however, be only viewed as a failure. Researchers have recognised that not only positive but also disturbing dreams facilitate the emotional processing of loss and may therefore have an adaptive impact (e.g. Barrett, 1992: 107; Garfield, 1996; Nielsen, Levin, 2007; Nielsen, Lara-Carrasco, 2007; Worden, 2009: 28, 171; Germain et al., 2013: 270; Wright et al., 2013: 2). In psychological studies, however, nightmares are often portrayed in a negative light. Their close connection to disorders, trauma, mental health problems and unresolved grief, as well as their maladaptive role in post-traumatic stress disorder, have been discussed frequently (Nielsen, Lara-Carrasco, 2007: 255; Germain et al., 2013: 271; Sandman, 2017: 59–60). Yet, nightmares are also common in non-pathological grief. They occur together with experiences of anxiety and distress in waking life, thereby attempting to process problematic emotions, such as grief. Nightmares can thus be understood as a psychological response to a distressing situation (Barrett, 1996: 2–3; Nielsen, Lara-Carrasco, 2007: 255–261, 272). More detailed studies have shown that even trauma-based nightmares may prompt the dreamer to process the problem and thus carry a potential for balance and healing (Owczarski, 2018: 289–294).

Psychological research, which focuses on how dreams reflect adaptation to loss, portrays bereavement nightmares as a struggle to accept death or to cope with the emotions of grief. When grief is considered a process, different dreams are found to occur in its different phases. Negative dreams or nightmares usually occur soon after the bereavement, and they may express the question of coming to terms with the loss, or emotions of guilt or anger (Barrett, 1992: 106; Garfield, 1996: 100–102; Worden, 2009: 28). However, studies that adapt grief theories to dream descriptions have not given entirely consistent results. A major problem is that the dreams have been interpreted solely as expressions of grief. Nevertheless, dream contents are unique and ambiguous and often refer to a variety of events and meanings in the dreamer's life. Factors other than grief may be present in the dreamer's life concurrently, possibly including additional stressors that may affect the dreams (Belicki et al., 2003: 94–97, 102, 104). Furthermore, such dreams and visions are not limited to the bereaved; for example, the dying are likewise prone to have dreams and visions involving deceased loved ones. Recent studies on encounters with the deceased in dreams and visions recognise that such encounters, both in dreams or when awake, may serve a variety of functions, ranging from emotional regulation and trauma processing to providing comfort and maintaining continuing bonds with the deceased (Black et al., 2021; Black et al., 2025: 184–185, 187–188).

Within the framework of continuing bonds, it is possible to view dreams about the deceased as a means of developing or processing the relationship after death. The continuing bonds (CB) approach, which has prevailed in death and grief studies since the 1990s, recognises that the bereaved often maintain relationships with their deceased loved ones. In contrast to the long-influential Freudian imperative to sever the bond and move on, CB scholars have argued that the dead have held meaningful social roles in people's lives in various religions and cultures and continue to do so even in Western societies, albeit within the private sphere (Silverman, Klass, 1996: 14–15, 22; Klass, Goss, 1999; Goss, Klass, 2005: 3–5). It is also emphasised that each experience of grief is different. While some bereaved individuals benefit from maintaining a bond, others may cope

better by severing the tie (Howarth, 2000; Parker, 2005: 259–261; Stroebe, Schut, 2005; Valentine, 2008: 4–5). However, maintaining a bond has been understood in various ways in different fields of study. Especially in psychology, the continuing bonds approach has been connected exclusively with the grieving process and is therefore expected to last no longer than six months. CB is defined as an intrapsychic phenomenon, i.e. a relationship between the bereaved and an inner, imagined representation of the deceased. The so-called external forms of bonding, which refer to perceived activity of the deceased originating from the outside, have been labelled as illusions or hallucinations, signifying a failure to recognise the reality of death. As these experiences are not controlled by the bereaved themselves, they have been considered more likely to be distressing. Particularly when occurring outside the grieving period, they have been associated with a potential disorder and an increased risk of considerable health problems (Field et al., 2005; Field, Filanoski, 2010: 2–4).

These views have been criticised within the humanities and social sciences. An increasing number of studies have shown that people with no particular health problems have experiences of external communication with the dead. These encounters are often seen as positive and comforting experiences, and they are not only restricted to the mourning period but sometimes occur years or even decades after bereavement. When accepted and appreciated, they are not called hallucinations but, for example, visions (Goss, Klass, 2005: 6; Kwilecki, 2011; Siltala, 2019: 196–199). In qualitative studies, the presence of the deceased and conversations with them have been documented as recurrent and positive forms of CB, alongside ritual and social remembrance and the use of keepsakes (e.g. Hallam, Hockey, 2001; Parker, 2005; Valentine, 2008; Richardson, 2014; Koski, 2016a). CB scholars have emphasised that the bereaved who maintain such bonds are well aware of the changes that death has brought to their lives. It has also been noted that the distinction between internal and external experiences may not be important to the bereaved for whom the bond carries a social meaning. As a social and relational phenomenon, continuing bonds are based on the understanding that even though life ends, the relationship does not (Goss, Klass, 2005: 5–6; Valentine, 2008: 173–174; see also Day, 2012; Ellis, 2013). The gap between different disciplinary approaches is, ultimately, not unbridgeable. Supported by a growing body of research, new generations of grief psychologists have recognised the positive potential of after-death communication, extending beyond the confines of the grieving process (Black et al., 2025).

Continuing bonds are not exclusively associated with happy and comfortable relationships. Relationships that were problematic in life may continue to be so after death. According to the continuing bonds approach, the bereaved may need to work out the problems in the relationship, as they would do with a living person (Goss, Klass, 2005: 8). As each experience of grief is different, I suggest that although most bereavement dreams may concern traumatic loss, some may instead relate to problematic relationships and the need to reorganise them after death.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study is based on written personal reminiscences and descriptions produced in a collection campaign entitled “Death, loss, and memory” (DLM),¹ organised by the archive of the Finnish Literature Society (FLS) in 2014. Such collection campaigns, which encourage volunteers to write to researchers about their thoughts and memories without formal requirements, are a common method of collecting qualitative data in Finnish cultural research (Latvala, Laurén, 2013: 249–250; Latvala, 2016: 407–409; Savolainen, 2016: 208–210). In many ways, the reminiscence writings resemble the materials collected in the British *Mass Observation Project* (Savolainen, 2016: 208). Participants are motivated to contribute for a variety of reasons. Some of them have mainly observed other people’s habits, while others have focused on describing their own lives. Nevertheless, the material is rich and offers an insight into people’s lives and thoughts (Sheridan, 1993: 28, 30–32). The present DLM collection consists of 550 pages of text produced by 101 contributors. The material ranges from ethnographic descriptions of funerary customs and commemorative practices to personal memories of loss, representations of the after-life, encounters with deceased loved ones and opinions on palliative care. In this paper, my focus is twofold: on the one hand, I examine bereavement narratives; on the other, I analyse dream descriptions.

For the purpose of this analysis, I define narratives as meaning-making devices that convey a point of view but need not possess a solid structure. In my narrative analysis, I approach the concept of narrative in a twofold manner. First, my research materials include verbalised bereavement and dream narratives, which are personal interpretations of life events and experiences. I will present a careful content analysis of these narratives. Second, I analyse these personal narratives in light of more abstract underlying models – *implicit narratives* – which form a context of social expectations regarding how one should remember and recount experiences. The term *narrative agency* refers to the individual’s capacity to challenge these underlying models (see, for example, Meretoja, 2022).

The DLM collection includes 17 texts, which present one or more full bereavement narratives, i.e. narratives that not only describe a departure but also reflect upon the relationship between the writer and the deceased. For the bereaved, narrating the life and death of a deceased individual helps make sense of the loss, reassess the relationship and find a safe and permanent place for the deceased within social reality. Such a narrative can unfold in discussions with others who knew the deceased, as a personal process in one’s thoughts or in writing, with a counsellor, or in communication with an outsider, such as a researcher (Walter, 1996; Valentine, 2008: 5, 15–16). In their bereavement narratives, the bereaved often begin by describing the deceased and their death, then go on to the closely connected processes of loss and rediscovery of the deceased. Bereavement narratives frequently include thoughts about how the narrator has coped with the loss

¹ In Finnish “Kuolema, menetyks ja muisto”, archival code KUOLEMA. In this paper, references are shortened to K.

and how it changed their life (Valentine, 2008: 12, 92, 175–176). Constructing a new biography for the deceased functions in a manner similar to a mortuary ritual, creating a new status and identity for both the deceased and the bereaved (Walter, 1996). As not all relationships are actively maintained after death, the narrative can also reflect the deceased person's fading significance (Jonsson, 2015: 293).

In the collection, dreams are sometimes described in detail, while sometimes they are simply mentioned as having occurred. Dreams are subjective experiences that are accessible to others only through the dreamer's description. Dreams can be multisensory, chaotic and enigmatic, and therefore difficult to verbalise accurately. Descriptions of dreams are always interpretations and selections of the original experience (Rupprecht, 1999; Kaivola-Bregenhøj, 2012: 99–100). Therefore, dream narratives sometimes just briefly summarise the content, while the focus is on contextual information and evaluation: under what circumstances and why did I have such a dream, and what did it mean? Embedded within a broader autobiographical framework, dream narratives can function as commentary on and evaluation of significant life episodes. They can be presented as anticipations of unfolding developments in life, or they can illustrate the narrator's innermost thoughts, fears or expectations in a certain situation (Kaivola-Bregenhøj, 1993; Paal, 2009). In contemporary Finland, people often consider nightmares too intimate to narrate. Intertwined with distress and anxiety, nightmares may be perceived as revealing too much about one's most intimate fears or as portraying the narrator as mentally unstable. When connected to life situations that are socially recognised as upsetting or painful – such as bereavement – nightmares tend to be better accepted (Koski et al., 2024: 280–281).

The campaign call included a set of questions to inspire participants. One question was about encountering the dead in dreams, which may have contributed to the presence of 69 references to dreams of the deceased in the texts. Some contributors describe two or more dreams; however, I have generally counted each contributor's account of dreams as a single entry. Contributors typically mention that they often see their parents or grandparents in dreams and that the dreams are always pleasant. However, if a contributor reported, separately, pleasant and distressing dreams portraying different persons, I counted them as distinct entries. Four contributors explain that the deceased do not occupy a special role in their dreams but instead behave similarly to the living. The remaining contributors describe dreams involving the deceased either without defining the atmosphere at all or by evaluating them as positive or negative. Positively characterised dreams portray the deceased as happy and healthy, leaving the dreamer with a pleasant or comforting feeling. In some cases, however, the happiness turns into painful longing upon waking. I have nevertheless categorised these dreams as positive because the contributors are eager to have such dreams again. Approximately half of the negatively toned dreams are defined as nightmares (Finnish: *painajainen*) by the contributors. The remainder are described as dreams that leave a bad feeling or “give one the creeps” (K217–218, 2014).

Number of texts mentioning the deceased in dreams	69
Dreams in which the deceased do not play a special role	4
Neutral descriptions	19
Positively experienced dreams	33
Negatively experienced dreams	13

Table 1: Number of texts mentioning the deceased in dreams in the Death, loss, and memory collection, and a breakdown of these dream descriptions according to the emotional content of the experience (Provided by the author)

In these texts, nightmares often coincide with the contributor’s young age at the time of the death in question or with a sudden or violent death, such as the suicide of a family member. This is in accordance with psychological research suggesting that nightmares are more likely to occur if the death was violent or the bereaved has a lower capacity to process the loss, e.g. due to young age (e.g. Black et al., 2021). However, in three cases, nightmares were reported without any such background. These three texts are the object of my study.

I interpret the bereavement narratives and nightmares in the context of the whole collection and in light of local vernacular discourses concerning death and dreams. I approach these as descriptions of encounters with the dead in dreams; however, it remains slightly unclear if all the narrators perceived these dreams as real encounters, or even whether the dreamer was indeed asleep or awake. This suggests that the exact modality of the experience has been considered less important than its meaning as a form of social communication. In any case, such experiences are not exceptional. Although experiences of after-death communication are somewhat stigmatised in Finland (Koski, 2016b), half of the population finds it likely that there is life after death. Around the same time the DLM collection was compiled, a large-scale survey conducted by the Church Research Institute found that one third of Finns considered it probable that the living can feel a connection with the dead, while 18% were open to the possibility that the dead can see the world of the living (Ketola et al., 2018: 46–47). In a subsequent survey in 2019, which included slightly different questions, 29% of participants reported one or more contacts with someone who had died (Ketola, Sohlberg, 2022: 103–104). Studies of personal narratives describing such encounters indicate that the majority of them are experienced through dreams (Alasuutari, 2017: 180–181; Siltala, 2019: 119). Finns generally view dreams and nightmares as products of the mind; however, a cultural framework that views dreams as a channel for otherworldly messages has persisted into modern times and emerges as a meaning-making device especially in stressful situations, such as illness or death (Kaivola-Bregenhøj, 1993: 216–220; Paal, 2009: 279–280). In other words, these bereavement narratives reflect a cultural narrative that things left unsaid before death may be expressed afterwards.

BEREAVEMENT NARRATIVES CONTAINING DISTRESSING DREAMS

The three texts that I chose to focus on were the only ones in the collection in which the narrator 1) explicitly describes or mentions recurrent interaction with a deceased parent in bad dreams or nightmares, and 2) describes the context and the relationship with that parent. All three narrators identify as female. By the time they wrote these texts, the women had already passed through the difficult period that had triggered these nightmares. Two of these women struggled with memories of a suppressive father. The third, by contrast, seems to have always been able to hold her ground and was strongly resisted by her mother only after the mother died. All these women have been given pseudonyms, and each story is analysed in the form in which it was written in 2014.

Ambiguous Memory: Hanna (K228–237)

Hanna is a 57-year-old woman whose father died of cancer almost 30 years earlier. Her father was an important person in her life. She begins her narrative by describing a pleasant and beautiful dream in which her father appears as he used to be when he was alive and healthy, always telling funny stories. But she soon admits that this dream was exceptional. She was more accustomed to dreaming of her father as a living corpse suffering from uncontrollable cancer pain. In addition to being distressing, these dreams were often followed by bad things in real life, such as the deaths of family members. Hanna found these dreams ominous and threatening.

It would be possible to interpret Hanna's bad dreams as expressions of traumatic memories of her father's suffering and death or as manifestations of unresolved grief. She writes that she was unable to face her father's approaching death and discuss his departure while he was still alive. However, her life story reveals two more reasons for the nightmares. First, her relationship with her father is difficult and ambiguous. While calling him "My Father Sunshine",² Hanna also expresses bitterness towards him because he used to govern her life without ever listening to her wishes. For example, she writes that she was traumatised by music competitions in which her father compelled her to participate. She blames her parents for not encouraging her to have a will of her own. Despite the painful aspects of these memories, Hanna is determined to cherish her father's legacy. She has painted a portrait of him and passed on his memory to her children by telling them his stories.

Second, nightmares typically emerge during stressful life situations (e.g. Sandman, 2017). Hanna was going through a difficult period in her life. She writes:

I have to admit, however, that my life was like hell on earth – I dreamt about him, and unpleasant things often happened at the same time. It increased my anxiety, and I started to fear those dreams terribly. It was really hard

² In Finland, the name Father Sunshine (Isä Aurinkoinen) ironically refers to Joseph Stalin. Hanna, however, seems to use the name without irony, as a term of endearment. She sharply contrasts this characterisation with her father's flaws of character as a parent. Also, she uses the possessive suffix -ni (Isäni Aurinkoinen), which makes the expression slightly different from the commonly used nickname for Stalin.

to have a nightmare about my father, and soon afterwards my own life felt like something from a horror movie. (Hanna, 2014)

The dreams that she interpreted as ominous became a serious burden, and Hanna sought help from the church and prayed that they would stop. Being a Christian, she was also worried about her father's soul and found comfort in praying for him. Members of her congregation emphasised that other forms of contact with the spiritual world should be avoided, but Hanna does not really share their view. She hovers between Christian interpretations and her relational bond with her father.

Writing the narrative in 2014, Hanna states that her life has now gradually become normal and that her latest dreams of her father have been pleasant. The dreams turned positive five years earlier, but she still expected them to be foreboding. Less than a month after the first positive dream about her father, she was diagnosed with breast cancer. However, she inferred that her illness would not be as fatal as her father's because the dream had been so beautiful. Despite her doubts, Hanna prefers to interpret the dreams as her father's deliberate activity:

Nevertheless, my mind began to develop the thought that my father might have come into my dreams of his own initiative. It is not possible to provide proof either for or against this idea. I also wondered whether he might have wanted to be my guardian angel and therefore always appeared in my dreams? The fact that he was an important person in my life for 28 years may also explain why I still dream about him. (Hanna, 2014)

Hanna uses the past conditional when discussing her father's role as a guardian angel. This shows that she finds these interpretations neither appropriate nor realistic. Nevertheless, she returns to them and – despite the past conditional – also presents arguments that appear to support such interpretations:

I would like to believe that the deceased can really appear in our dreams at will. And I would like to believe that, if my father had been allowed to decide, he would be my guardian angel. I could have been buried many times already, so it is a sheer miracle that I am still alive. What if my guardian angel is my own dad? It has been such a strong safeguard – it is a miracle that I am still among the living! (Hanna, 2014)

In her bereavement narrative, Hanna struggles to establish a positive memory and a comfortable relationship with her father. She seeks a scenario in which her father might compensate for having treated her badly as a child. In Hanna's latest dream, her father asked if she had missed him. Since no misfortune followed the dream, Hanna thinks that her father appeared on purpose to find out if she had forgiven him. He did not explicitly apologise in the dream, but his recognition that he did do something wrong would represent an important step toward the desired outcome.

Hanna's interpretation of her dreams draws on spiritual ideas about the soul's development after death. Such ideas have emerged in modern conceptions of heaven and within the spiritualist movement (McDannell, Lang, 1988). Even without an explicit spiritual framework, people who report encounters with the dead sometimes say the deceased have changed their mind or developed new ideas in the afterlife (Siltala, 2019: 182–183). Despite her religious outlook, Hanna's approach is not based on spiritual belief per se. In her case, the afterlife is a necessary condition because only a post-mortem development of her father will enable the formation of an unambiguously pleasant relationship, in which her beloved father will no longer ignore her feelings and her well-being.

Power Struggle: Kaija (K297–311)

Unlike Hanna, who only focused on her father's memory, Kaija, a woman in her sixties, writes a comprehensive essay that describes the deaths of many of her loved ones and includes both general information and personal thoughts on commemoration and social reactions to bereavement. Her account thus provides a valuable ethnographic description of contemporary death culture. In Kaija's text, distressing dreams occur in connection with her late mother, whose story is interwoven throughout the rich tapestry of her memories. As the protagonist of the text, Kaija presents herself as an active woman who knows what she wants, acts accordingly, and does not hesitate to express disapproval when other peoples' behaviour displeases her. She describes herself as a daddy's girl – so close to her father that her mother was sometimes jealous – but also depicts a close, though occasionally contentious, relationship with her mother. She provides a detailed context in which her bad dreams – though hardly described – can be understood as reflecting a power struggle between herself and her deceased mother.

In the narrative describing her relationship with her mother, it is Kaija who often decides for both of them and holds her ground. For example, she is dissatisfied with her mother's plans and behaviour after her father's death and steps in to put things right:

Mum hardly ever talked about Dad. She just kept repeating how magnificently she had cared for him: It was me who cared for him, it was me who was tired, me and me and me. She never asked herself what was wrong with Dad and never took interest in the medical matters. After Dad's death, Mum was very eager to dispose of Dad's things. Daddy had left an enormous garage full of all kinds of things, some quite valuable, which Mum started giving away for free. I hurried there to claim my share.

Mum never considered what Dad would have wanted or what could be kept. She wanted to divide the inheritance, sell the property and move to a flat [in town]. Thus, she wanted to flee from the past, deny the decades that had passed, and begin an entirely new life. I absolutely refused. The estate would remain intact until Mum's own death, and nothing would be sold or destroyed. It was important to my mother to sell, or almost give away, the last car belonging to Dad and me because she had no driver's licence.

As my mother was kind and soft, she backed down and agreed to live in [the estate]. (Kaija, 2014)

Kaija describes rifts in their relationship, followed by normal communion again. After her mother's death, she remembers not shedding a single tear, feeling only hatred. She gave away her mother's loom and plants and restored the house to the style it had had in the 1960s, when her father was alive. In anger, she finally succeeded in planting roses on her father's grave – a plan her mother had always managed to stop by hastening to plant her traditional begonias first. *"You got it! From now on, there will only be roses"* (Kaija, 2014).

In addition to substantial changes in the house, Kaija also made it clear in the neighbourhood that old agreements allowing trespassing had only been made with her mother and would cease to apply. All this finally provoked opposition:

I don't remember ever having dreams about my father. But with my mother, I fought in dreams almost every night for at least a year. We had furious disputes over who was in command, especially in [the estate]. There was a lot of fire and brimstone in these nightmares. (Kaija, 2014)

During the daytime, Kaija made changes that transferred control of the estate from her mother to herself, gradually dismantling her mother's order in the house. At night, she confronted her in her dreams. An old-fashioned, morally charged scholarly interpretation would have suggested that Kaija had nightmares because she felt guilty about abolishing her mother's personal legacy. Guilt was a central explanation for nightmares when early psychological ideas entered public discourse on dreaming in the 19th century. This perspective interpreted the haunting presence of dissatisfied deceased individuals as a reflection of the experiencer's guilty feelings. In addition, it echoed a long-standing tradition of viewing nightmares as a result of immoral and unhealthy lifestyles. The notion that nightmares were caused by a guilty conscience was widely disseminated, appearing in both adult and children's literature in 19th and 20th century Finland (see Koski et al., 2024: 79–81, 293–295).

However, Kaija's narrative does not support a moralising interpretation of a guilty conscience. Kaija shows no remorse and seems to feel she is doing the right thing by restoring her father's legacy, which her mother had undermined. Rather than guilt, Kaija explicitly mentions feeling hatred after her mother's death, and her anger and annoyance are reflected in her harsh critique of her. If nightmares are a means of processing difficult emotions, it is this hatred that should be consumed in the dreams.

By the time of writing, the hatred has dissipated, the nightmares are gone, and Kaija is satisfied with the changes she has made in the house and the estate. She also thinks that her mother's legacy is adequately preserved: *"Mum could enter through the door any time. She would probably comment on how clean everything is"* (Kaija, 2014).

As the conclusion of the bereavement narrative, a stable relationship between the living daughter and the deceased mother has been established. In Kaija's imagination, her mother's comment would be positive and approving. The power struggle has ended, Kaija has assumed control and her mother has acquiesced to the changes she has made.

Breaking Free: Tuula (K246–250)

Tuula writes about her father's sudden death from a heart attack in the 1990s. She lived and worked on a farm together with her parents until their lives were abruptly changed. Tuula describes the feelings her father's death evoked, her and her mother's struggle to cope with the hard work on the farm, and, in particular, her battle with the distressing memories of her father. In her narrative, Tuula skilfully captures the oppressive atmosphere that pervaded the household while her father was alive.

Memories circle in my head. In my mind's eye, I can still see how a medium-height but rather stout man enters the room and fills the space. His presence feels overwhelming and makes other people kind of shrink. The feeling that I have managed to do something wrong again surges into my mind. (Tuula, 2014)

Tuula is aware that the feelings she describes are not those generally expected of the bereaved: she was not missing her father but someone to drive the tractor.

I guess you might find it inappropriate to read that the bereaved are grieving over unfinished work and money when the body is not even cold yet. But money and work were something we understood, whereas the father who had died was something incomprehensible – something that could not be grasped in an instant. (Tuula, 2014)

Even though Tuula writes that everyday life ran more smoothly without her father being there and constantly admonishing the women, they were left with an unrealistically large workload, which caused considerable stress. Not being able to cope with the tasks made Tuula suspect that her father had been right all along when he declared she was a mistake and good for nothing. Tuula was not free from his oppressive behaviour even after his death. First of all, the ways her father used to define her still had an impact on her self-esteem. Second, he began appearing in her dreams and scolding her. However, she finally found the courage to confront him:

Yes, father did try to take care of the farm even after his death. He appeared in my dreams and reproached me for one task or another left undone. Finally, I got tired of being scolded every night, and half asleep, I summoned from my memory the image of my father's coffin in the grave and of myself throwing earth onto it. I said to the old man frowning at my bedside: you are dead and buried, stay in your grave. I remember throwing earth with a shovel onto your coffin. So get lost, ghost. I may even have made a sign of the cross on it. After that, there has been peace. (Tuula, 2014)

Tuula's final response to the ghost takes the form of a direct confrontation. She justifies – perhaps as much to herself as to her late father – that he is dead, properly buried

according to custom, and no longer has any place among the living. The sign of the cross does not belong to the Lutheran repertoire of lived religion, but is performed by the minister in the funeral ceremony. Tuula's wording suggests it was something extra, employed as a Christian symbol for warding off the ghost. In Tuula's narrative, the aggressive outburst by the bedside marks the end of her relationship with her father. The episode is followed by a short paragraph: *"Ten years ago, I got married and moved into a home of my own, where nothing reminds me of my father. I even got a job"* (Tuula, 2014).

This passage indicates that her life took a turn for the better once she was able to leave her father behind. It also rebuts her father's claims: she was worthy, despite what he used to say.

Unlike Hanna and Kaija, who both had ambivalent relationships with their parents, Tuula had nothing positive to say about her father. Her decision was to break free and dismiss him entirely. The sociologist Annika Jonsson's research on post-mortem social death finds reasons why some people are not remembered after their death. The usual reasons are estrangement or the absence of close friends and relatives (Jonsson, 2015). People such as Tuula's father represent a different category: those whose closest kin are better off forgetting.

PORTRAYAL OF THE PARENT IN BEREAVEMENT NARRATIVES

To justify my interpretation of the role of nightmares, I analysed how the parent is represented in each of the three bereavement narratives. In a closer analysis, these three texts differ from the other fourteen bereavement narratives in the DLM collection in that they portray the parent in a more negative light. In bereavement narratives, the image of the deceased emerges not only through explicit characterisations of the deceased person, but also through depictions of everyday activities or discussions with them, and reflections on the relationship and loss. Overall, Hanna's narrative includes 18 textual units describing her parent and their interaction, Kaija's 25, and Tuula's 15.

On the basis of their content, I grouped the units into five categories: 1) Negative remarks, 2) Positive remarks, 3) Care and guidance, 4) Life history and reflection, and 5) Processing the memory. *Negative remarks* depicts the deceased in negative terms or portray interaction with them as difficult. For example, Tuula's recollection of her father's messy table manners, Hanna's complaint that her father never listened to her, and Kaija's repeated disagreements with her mother cast the parent or the relationship in an undesirable light. *Positive remarks* includes descriptions of togetherness, everyday cooperation, and warm memories. For example, Hanna reminisces about laughing together with her father, and Kaija writes about their good mother-daughter cooperation in planning her father's funeral. *Care and guidance* refers to taking care of an ill or dying parent. Kaija writes extensively about organising her mother's care during her long illness, while Tuula, whose father died suddenly, could only find him collapsed on the floor, place him in the recovery position and call an ambulance. Hanna mentions praying for her father's soul and caring for him after his death. The category *Life history and reflection*

includes information about the parent’s life, their interests, family relations and personal qualities, often accompanied by thoughts about how the past has affected the present. For example, Kaija shares parts of her mother’s family history, whereas Tuula writes about her father’s special interest in war and military discipline, contrasting it with his own behaviour. *Processing the memory* includes descriptions of the narrators’ actions and thoughts in relation to their parents’ legacy, such as cherishing or rejecting the memory. For example, Hanna describes actively passing on her father’s stories, while at the same time dwelling on the ambiguity of his memory. This category also encompasses the nightmares and their interpretations.

The following table shows the number of these units in each woman’s story. Hanna’s story differs from the others in that it assumes her father’s conscious existence in the afterlife. By attributing post-mortem agency to him, she processes the relationship not merely as a memory but as an ongoing bond. The numbers in brackets refer to actions or thoughts concerning her father’s well-being and development in the afterlife.

	Hanna (18 units)	Kaija (25 units)	Tuula (15 units)
Negative remarks	3	7	5
Positive remarks	2	4	-
Care and guidance	1 (+2)	4	1
Life history and reflection	1	4	4
Processing the memory	6 (+3)	6	5

Table 2: Analysis of the bereavement narratives’ textual units, in which Hanna, Kaija, and Tuula characterise the person of their deceased parent and the relationship before and after the parent’s death (Provided by the author)

All three women have written more negative than positive or neutral remarks about their experiences with the parent. Tuula’s narrative contains no positive descriptions of interaction with her father. In this respect, these accounts differ markedly from the other bereavement narratives in the DLM collection, which contain exclusively positive remarks about the deceased. This does not mean that the DLM collection lacks critical remarks or mixed feelings about the deceased. However, participants who produced full bereavement narratives have generally chosen to describe a loved-one whom they portray with love, respect and gratitude.

NARRATING THE SELF IN RELATION TO THE DECEASED

Bereavement narratives not only reassess the role of the deceased; they are also building blocks of the narrator’s own life story. Contemporary narrative research views the self as fragmented and situational. Personal narratives shape the past and create causality and coherence between the self that acted in the past, the self that acts, feels and evaluates the events in the present, and potential future selves. Culturally prevalent underlying

models – implicit narratives – guide the ways in which experiences are remembered and narrated. However, narrators can apply their own narrative agency and choose how to position themselves in relation to cultural expectations, either conforming to them or resisting them. They can also position themselves and other actors in their narrative in ways they find meaningful. Thus, narrative has the power to create new potential selves and to change social structures (Ochs, Capps, 1996: 20–23, 29, 36–37; Bamberg, 2006: 144–145; Koskinen-Koivisto, 2016: 49–52; Meretoja, 2022: 292–300).

In their bereavement narratives, each of these authors resists the role previously assigned to her within the daughter-parent relationship. The distressing dreams highlight their discomfort with their parent's memory, and as the story unfolds, the relationship changes. Hanna is dissatisfied with her position as a neglected child who was never taught to stand her ground. Her nightmares did not occur immediately after the loss but emerged later, during a period marked by other stressors. Yet it was her father who appeared in these nightmares, and she links them to his personality. She weaves both the distressing dreams and the subsequent pleasant ones into a narrative of potential positive development, portraying them as her father's attempt to protect her from the hereafter – possibly as a guardian angel. By suggesting a change in her father's behaviour and attitude, the narrative improves Hanna's own role, ultimately portraying her as a daughter who is cared for. Hanna's narrative about her father as a guardian angel diverges from mainstream beliefs and from the views on the afterlife prevalent in her own social circles. She expresses doubts about its validity, but it is the social reality she wishes to be true, and she narrates it in the context of the collection, which permits full narrative agency.

Kaija resists both her mother's and her neighbours' expectations that she could continue her mother's legacy and conform to her choices. In particular, she resists her mother's management of the house after her father's demise. Both her narrative and the concrete actions she describes testify to a reassessment of family relations: by restricting her late mother's personal agency, she recovers her late father's neglected legacy. Kaija justifies this change of power relations by portraying her mother's treatment of her father's memory and belongings as hurtful and unjust. The nightmares reflect the emotional strain and difficulty of this process, but in the end, she finds the outcome pleasing and balanced.

Tuula, in turn, entirely rejects the role assigned to her by her father and explicitly states that her life improved once she freed herself from his influence. Tuula's narrative is more straightforward than those of Hanna or Kaija and gives the impression that it does not weigh various interpretative lines but simply describes Tuula's experiences. It recounts the circumstances of their life and the death of her father, culminating in the confrontation with his ghost and leading to a better life elsewhere. Tuula portrays herself as a woman who escaped oppressive family dynamics and managed to build a new life and strengthened sense of self-esteem. As a consequence of her past experiences, she appreciates her pet dogs more than some of her human relatives.

CONCLUSION: NIGHTMARES AND CONTINUING BONDS

In this paper, I have analysed bereavement narratives that describe problematic relationships with a deceased parent and nightmares occurring in the course of processing the memory. From the perspective of psychological dream studies, nightmares are typically understood as responses to distressing experiences in waking life. In the context of bereavement, they usually occur soon after the loss and within the early phases of grief, when the bereaved are still struggling to come to terms with the loss. Within psychological approaches to bereavement, external forms of communication with the deceased – that is experiences interpreted as encounters with them – are generally regarded as part of the grieving process and likewise refer to a struggle to understand the reality of death. While it is commonly assumed that the loss itself is the primary source of emotional turmoil and distress, grief is highly individual. In some cases, it is the nature of the relationship that continues to cause anxiety even after death.

Within the framework of extended narratives, it has been possible to analyse the context of bereavement dreams and other factors beyond the loss itself that may have contributed to the experiences. In these three bereavement narratives, the temporal patterns of nightmares differ considerably: they began several years after the loss in Hanna's case; occurred repeatedly during the first year after the loss in Kaija's; or took place occasionally, probably during the first months or so in Tuula's account (although she does not specify the exact timeframe). Instead of dealing with the loss, they seem to be connected to other critical issues. In Hanna's case, the nightmares of her father coincided with health problems, the deaths of female relatives, and other unspecified crises. Yet, she interprets them as rooted in her unsatisfactory relationship with her father. In Kaija's case, the nightmares are not connected with the death itself but with the dismantling of her mother's order in the house and decreasing her mother's status in the family. In Tuula's case, the most acute stress was caused by the workload on the farm and her feelings of having failed instilled by her father during his lifetime. Therefore, it seems that it was not the loss as such but her father's personality and their living conditions that caused the nightmares. For these women, the question was not how to cope without the deceased parent – as is usually the case in bereavement narratives – but how to cope with the impact the deceased had exerted on their lives. Instead of perpetuating the deceased in their bereavement narratives, their goal was to change or dismiss them.

These three narratives can be viewed as examples of continuing bonds, as they depict after-death communication between the daughter and the late parent. None of these women wanted to simply continue the relationship, but there was an effort to change it. Hanna wanted to continue the bond, but only after transforming her father into a more responsive and compassionate parent. Kaija wanted to actively diminish her mother's legacy and dismiss some parts of her life. While she clearly retained an internalised image of her mother, it needed to serve Kaija's own interests, not her mother's. Tuula experienced undesired continuity due to her father's presence, but it gave her the opportunity for explicit rejection.

STATEMENT ON RESEARCH DATA MANAGEMENT

The author states that the article is based on archival sources, which are cited in the list of references below.

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POKOJNI STARŠ V MOREČIH SANJAH: SOOČANJE S TEŽAVAMI V PRIPOVEDIH O ŽALOVANJU

Po izgubi družinskega člana žalujoči pogosto na novo ovrednotijo svoj odnos do pokojnika. Sanjanje o umrlem in pripovedovanje o njegovem življenju sta običajna načina predelovanja izgube ter oblikovanja spomina nanj. Vendar pa niso vsi spomini in sanje pozitivni. Prispevek analizira tri pripovedi o žalovanju, v katerih odrasle hčere opisujejo morečo komunikacijo s pokojnim staršem po njegovi smrti. Pripovedi izvirajo iz arhivske zbirke *Death, Loss and Memory* (Smrt, izguba in spomin), ki je bila leta 2014 deponirana v arhivu Finskega literarnega društva.

Besedila so obravnavana kot osebne pripovedi v okviru interdisciplinarnih raziskav sanj v času žalovanja ter koncepta trajajočih vezi (*continuing bonds*). V psihologiji nočne more veljajo za odziv na čustvene stiske. Kadar se pojavljajo v kontekstu žalovanja, jih navadno razumemo kot znamenje težav pri sprejemanju smrti. Prispevek se od psiholoških pristopov razlikuje po tem, da nočnih mor ne obravnava v okviru procesa žalovanja. Namesto tega so izkušnje analizirane v kontekstu pripovedi o žalovanju, ki ne opisujejo zgolj smrti, temveč tudi življenje pokojnika in njegov odnos s pripovedovalko.

V primerjavi z drugimi pripovedmi o žalovanju iz iste zbirke, ki ne vključujejo nočnih mor, te tri zgodbe prikazujejo pokojnika v izrazito negativni luči. Osrednji problem teh besedil ni vprašanje, kako živeti brez izgubljenega starša, temveč kako se soočiti z njegovim trajnim vplivom na življenje pripovedovalke. Nočne more zato ne predelujejo same izgube, temveč čustveno stisko, ki izvira iz problematičnega odnosa med hčerjo in staršem.

Vsaka od treh pripovedi je analizirana kot samostojen primer. Prvi primer predstavlja besedilo hčere, ki meni, da jo je oče v času svojega življenja zane-marjal. Po njegovi smrti si prizadeva izboljšati podobo njegovega starševstva in si ga predstavlja kot svojega angela varuha. Drugi primer prikazuje boj za moč med hčerjo in ostarelo materjo. Po materini smrti hči začne spreminjati družinsko posest z namenom zmanjšati sled materine osebne zapuščine, zaradi česar se z njo nato spopada v sanjah. Tretji primer predstavlja oblastnega očeta in hčer, ki

njegovo neodobravanje čuti tudi po njegovi smrti. Nazadnje se sooči z njegovim duhom in se osvobodi njegovega vpliva.

V vseh treh primerih moreče sanje predstavljajo problematično obliko trajajočih vezi ter razkrivajo nelagodje sanjalk ob spominu na starša. Analiza pripovedi izhaja iz koncepta narativne dejavnosti oziroma agensa avtoric. S pripovedovanjem lahko te ženske zavrnejo vloge, ki so jim jih pripisali pokojni starši. Kot performativna dejavnost jim pripovedovanje omogoča spreminjanje družbenih položajev in preoblikovanje odnosov v skladu z lastnimi potrebami. Namen teh pripovedi o žalovanju zato ni ohranjanje pokojnikov v spominu, temveč njihovo preoblikovanje ali celo simbolna zavrnitev.

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