

# FORT GANSEVOORT

## “She’d Be Checking On Me Right Now”: Artist Zoë Buckman On A Year Without Her Mother

*On Mother’s Day, Brooklyn-based British artist Zoë Buckman reflects on her journey through grief a year after losing her mum and “best friend”, the playwright and renowned RADA acting teacher Jennie Buckman, to cancer in 2019.*

By Zoë Buckman  
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They say grief is love. But they also say grief is a madness. It’s anger and injustice, the deepest agony and the most acute gratitude. It’s both unfair and inevitable. It’s fucked up and important and beautiful.

I don’t feel I have wisdom on this topic, as I am very much finding my way with it, but I have learned that when your mother and best friend dies, you have to die too... and then rebirth yourself. No-one can do it for you – no-one will. People abandon you because they can’t handle the depth and complexity of your experience, and that is ultimately a gift. It shows you what is important, who is important, and who is really, truly in your corner. It teaches you to lean on those precious few, but not depend on them – because they too are imperfect, and impermanent.

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*A playwright and acting coach, Jennie Buckman, seen with Zoë as a baby, was Head of Acting at RADA*

I live in Brooklyn but I'm from east London. My mum, Jennie Buckman, was a north London Jew who, with my dad, proudly chose to raise me and my two brothers in Hackney. I mention this because there are cultural differences in the ways we respond to grief. In New York, women put a positive, pop- spiritual spin on my experience. "She'll always be with you," they said. "She lives on in you and your daughter," and so on. They're not wrong – she is with and within me. But the chasm between this new reality and actually having her here is immeasurable, so I hated hearing that. Especially from friends who enjoyed the luxury of having two healthy parents. I couldn't tell if their sentiments were intended to make me feel better, or them. But that's okay.

In England they avoid the topic, or talk over you, tell you how you feel and put words in your mouth. That's okay, too. Considering it's such a fact of life, it's surprising that we, as a society, haven't learned how to hold space for someone who is grieving, to

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listen, instead of trying to problem solve. We haven't learned how to say, "That's shitty, I'm sorry," instead of, "It's going to be okay, and here's how."



*The artist Zoë Buckman with her mother, Jennie Buckman, who died in January 2019*

Some days I wanted to talk about my mum and share my memories, hear others' memories of her. Some days merely thinking of her felt as though someone were clenching their fists around my lungs, stopping my breath. Some days I wanted to go out and get drunk and dance and have sex. Other days I wanted to burn incense and chant mantras, cover the mirrors, cover my head (a nod to my Jewish roots) and place my forehead at the foot of an altar. And some days I wanted to lay on the cool bathroom floor, pour into the cracks between the tiles, and never come back.

Even today, I have moments when I swear I can feel her. I picture her stroking my hair. Other days I think that's just my imagination, she's *gone* gone... and that right there feels like losing her all over again. I find the death and rebirth cycle to be non-linear and continuous. I hate that.

It's been one year and two months since my mother passed away after a nine- year battle with breast cancer. She died at home in Leyton with my dad, having made the courageous decision to cease treatment – it was one of the only times she felt she had

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control over her situation. And here I am, feeling out of control: self-isolating due to the coronavirus crisis. This new status quo of uncertainty has intersected with my grief, creating a cocktail of loss and aloneness that slow dances through every vein. I know she'd be checking on me right now. She'd make me laugh. She'd be so annoying. Together, we'd ricochet between panic and banter. She'd soothe me: "Shhh, Boobalah."

*"I miss the stuff no-one else saw"*

Caring for someone who is terminally ill is traumatic, but it's a privilege too. It's part of being a woman. I didn't want to miss a moment of it, but I saw too much, and so am left with a wealth of painful memories to metabolise. The anxiety of knowing she was dying but not knowing exactly when. The way her body rapidly warped, letting her down one piece at a time. The sounds of her pain and her fear as she drifted in and out of a

*Jennie with Cleo, Zoë's daughter with her former partner, the actor David Schwimmer*

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morphine stupor. How she worried about me. How she wasn't ready to go.

The revolving door of people eager for her time and energy when I wanted that for myself (and didn't I fucking deserve that? And why was she being so fucking generous to everyone?). The stench of Whipps Cross Hospice. How she lost her mind: said nonsensical things. How she aged 10 years in one. And the cemented image of her body as the undertakers took her away. I wish I'd looked away like my brothers did, but I wanted to cling to every last part.

*Their complementary tattoos were Zoë's mother's idea*

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Those difficult memories, and those of her grace, warmth and humour until the end, are all lumped together now, shrouded in the same darkness. But the bright ones that glow with her familiar incandescence, and bind me back to the essence of my mum, those are the ones that hurt the most. It's the happy memories that, like a BB gunshot to the chest, bring me to my knees.

*It's the happy memories that bring me to my knees"*

They are pieces of thread that together weave the fabric of a whole relationship: a complex bond galvanised in the bathroom and at the kitchen table. Her, there, in a crisp white shirt, with a badly-rolled spliff and a cup of tea so thick a spoon would stand up in it. The jangle of her bangles; the smell of fountain pen ink; her crumpled tissues; clumps of cobalt mascara clinging to the brightest blue, most honest eyes. That generous smile. That potty mouth. Her enthusiastic use of emojis. How she tried to adopt her kids' slang.

The way she'd do "gun-fingers", but would end up gesturing like Bill Nighy. How she

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loved nothing more than rebellion, always supported the underdog, and welcomed everyone into her orbit. The joy and creativity she poured into grandmothering my daughter. The way she taught me how to be a mother, an artist... to wear my heart on my sleeve, be honest, late, and bad with money.

Just as she wasn't done, nor am I. My journey with grief, with learning how to grow through it, rather than get over it, will be a lifelong one. Because they say grief is love, and I believe them.



*Her mother "welcomed everyone into her orbit," Zoë writes*

*Playwright Jennie Buckman taught at RADA for 21 years, where she became Head of Acting. Her former students include Sophie Okonedo, Tom Hiddleston and Andrea Riseborough. She established a theatre company, Giants, and her final play, "Lilith", written while she was terminally ill, was shown at London's Bunker Theatre earlier this year.*