

# Cold: A Meditation on Loss

Sarah Morton

**Abstract:** This first person narrative explores themes of empathy, resonance and loss through a challenging narrative form that seeks to engage the reader viscerally and emotionally. In particular, the narrative focuses on practitioner engagement with complex client issues including violence, substance use and child welfare within an Intimate Partner Violence agency in Ireland. The narrative form seeks to communicate the lived experience of a particular client, whilst also implicitly considering the impact on the practitioner of working with these issues, especially in the aftermath of loss.

**Keywords:** Intimate partner violence, substance use, first person narrative, practitioner engagement, loss, empathy.

That is what Rosie made me think of. Cold.

That awful deep, damp coldness, that gets into your bones, and your lungs and every cell of your body.

I had only been working with Rosie for a few weeks on the group work programme. I think she is ready, Geraldine had said, as we drew up lists, did preparation interviews, finalised times and location details, the endless organising of sheets of paper and berry pink manila folders. Rosie has made a lot of changes, quickly, she wants this, said Geraldine.

Sometimes, I said, those quick changes don't hold, my manila folders stacked in a neat pink pile.

I wish, I suppose, that I had listened to myself. But then, Rosie had sat opposite us, her hair pulled tight back into a pony tail, tied with those elastic bobbins that you get in Penny's in town. Thirty of them for €1.50, a little handful of bright colours. She had a stark, desperate quality. All I want, she said, is my little fella back. I am not taking anything now she said, except the meds. The social worker told me doing this programme would help me get him back, show them I was serious about the changes in my life. And anyways, she said, I am going nuts out there on my own.

We got her a house Geraldine tells me, out in Newcastle. No landlord inside in town would take her because, you know, of her, Geraldine pauses, connections. Geraldine does not have

to say anything else. Connections means the landlord giving a quick shake of his head, no one wants that sort of trouble.

My god, Rosie tells me, that house is so fucking cold. I thought, she said, it would be nice, that when you would look up and there would be the mountains right behind you. That first time we went out there, Rosie told me, that's what I liked about it, that it looked kind of safe. When you are out the road a bit you just see all the houses, and they look white, you know that far away. It is only when you get up close you can see they are not white at all, but grubby and older, much older than you would think, she tells me.

They said at least if I got myself set up and got a house there would be some chance I could get my little fella back. And that's all I want I said to them, is to have him back with me. But Jesus, she tells me, when I opened the oven in that house I thought I would be sick. The grease, Rosie says, was so thick there were flies had drowned in it. Rosie tells me this in a rush, clutching a cup of milky instant coffee, her nails torn and soft from cleaning.

It is the quietness that would get to you, Rosie tells me. Well, and that I am so skint. I know I have to have my own place, the only way, they said, you will even get to see the little fella is if you can be well set up on your own, well away from his Da and all...she pauses...that stuff. When she says 'stuff', I know she means cars arriving in the middle of the night, people crossing the road to get away from you, the carefully folded wad of grubby banknotes in your pocket. Then, the every day dealing with

violence. The hand on your wrist, the unwanted fingers trailing over your tits, his mate calling you a frigid bitch, the fella you get gear off looking for more than a little favour. The taste of blood on your tongue, the knowing that there can never be enough locks on the door, the sharp pain of your breath as he shoves you quickly, and hard, against the wall. Rosie, getting away from it all.

I think of Rosie now, of the long, long slow days, slimy tea and the mould around the edge of the grout in the bathroom that won't come off and the way the girl in local shop would never look her in the eye. Rosie, with her harsh city accent, with her tight pony-tail and wearing the black cuffed boots that have one heel slowly coming away from the sole.

Sure what can I be telling anyone out there, Rosie says to me. He beat the fucking crap out of me left, right and centre and then they took my little fella away and that's how I am sitting out here with no money for anything but shitty teabags in their stupid little village shop, living in a house they didn't even try to clean before they gave me the keys. Here you are, your man said that owned it, and even the key was grimy with an old red plastic tag on it. At least you are safe, said one of the girls. Safe, Jesus, she should try it, says Rosie. He may have been a bastard but at least he fucking loved me, she tells me. At least I had someone to fucking talk to. Sometimes I wake in the night, Rosie says, and I forget the little fella is not there. I am out of the bed looking for him, before I realise the place is empty. And then all I want to do is be able to hold him, Rosie tells me.

I can nearly feel the way her child's little ribs would bump under her hand. I can nearly feel how his little fluttery heart would beat up against her chest when he is pulled in close tight to her body.

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I was going to make this work, I really was, Rosie tells me. I cleaned that oven until there

was not an ounce of fucking dirt on it. Look at the state of my nails, she straightens her ragged nail topped fingers out in front of her body. And, she says, I thought I would never get the smell of the grease off me and the floor all around the cooker even that had to be cleaned after. And I sat on that sofa, she tells me, even though there is big rips in it and made notes about what I needed to do. Stay away from him. Keep the house. Pay all the bills. No drinking or anything like that.

I know, Rosie says, I have messed this up again, but this is not as bad, surely. She looks at me, her face tense. She picks again the dry strips of skin around her finger nails. I was so lonely and it seemed like I would never get my little fella back to live with me. It's not even that I used to be drinking that much when I had him and I never took much of anything else though there was plenty of it around, she says. My friend used to say, Rosie, you are so good compared to half the mothers I know. I mean the odd time I could be off my head but really I was just trying to cope with all that was going on, him screaming in my face that he was going to fucking kill me and his arm pushed up into my throat and the little fella howling in the bedroom, she tells me. Lord that child could howl. And later when he would be asleep in his cot, he would be breathing away steady, and I thought see, he is fine. Rosie starts to cry again. I hand her a tissue.

I know what you are saying, Rosie tells me. That you can help me with this. I can feel this baby moving inside in me, she says. Were you ever pregnant, she asks me. Did you ever get that when they start to flick around inside in you like a little fish?

I know that quickening, the salmon like flick of life in the very middle of you. My daughter sucked out, her head an odd cone shape for a week. A month or two later her inert little body lying still in my arms and I keep talking to her in case her father realises she is gone, because he is driving the car so very fast. Her screams behind the closed door as the ER staff get her back. My son, leveraging himself out, all elbows. He grows into a wild warrior of boy,

sinew legged, tumbled, carving spears and making arrows. A fella that was here before. His father over his still body, mud crusted, compressing his boy's chest with his strong hands, his face desperate. My boy, his bruised and still muddy body, all angles and length, curled against me in the hospital bed, breathing now again, in and out. His heart against mine, beating again.

And then a long, long time before that, this time before the quickening flicks even started, that deep knifing pain and blood that was an astonishing red. A scurry for tissue roll and trying not to make such a mess.

You know, Rosie says, I am going to keep this one whatever they say. I don't care what you call it, what the hell happened. See, she says, her arm wrapped over her belly, I can feel him quickening. Rosie holds her mug of tea in her other hand. The tea is cold now, little pools of dark scum on the top, clinging to the edges of the cup. But god, she says, that house is cold, so fucking cold, she tells me.

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I know that kind of coldness alright.

Back, once, a long time ago, I lived in a house that was so, so cold. Standing overlooking the mighty breadth of the Blackwater River, the walls seemed to draw the damp coldness up the cliff from the water. I would stare out over the green black flow of the river, watching its drag and pull out toward the sea and back again. A tidal river, my friend said, you never know what it might bring in, or take out.

It was not the sort of cold that you could contain with a fleecy jumper or your thick woolly tights, your winter jeans or a layer or two extra. This was a nasty, nasty insidious kind of coldness that didn't seep or chill, it just dug deep into your bones and stayed there. A deep down bone-coldness, one that wanted to stay, forever. A coldness that laughed at your woolly hat and your tights

and your three jumpers. That ignored your two duvets and your hot water bottle and all those cheap fluffy fleece blankets you thought would keep the damp from seeping up through the mattress. Even my little dog, dead as she is now, nearly wasn't able for it. Her whole old tough fragile little body set in a permanent shivering.

It was a coldness held in by darkness and damp and lino-topped concrete. A coldness contained only by the snow on the mountain. A coldness that would go through you and then come back to stay. A coldness that would have you breathing, just to keep going.

I would lie at night, with the two hot water bottles, their thick rubber sucking red marks onto the soft skin of my belly, my body immobile under the heaviness of grey wool blankets. The coldness never left you though. The water in the bath could never be hot enough, cooling quickly as it hit the vastness of cast iron. The open fire barely heated the air a foot from the grate. That's the kind of fire, my friend said, that you could be sitting on top of and you still wouldn't be warm.

Mould grew on the jam and crept, blue green, through the bread. Rain slipped in underneath the damp swollen front door and sat in slick puddle across the hallway. I started to wear my woollen hat to bed. I contemplated mittens.

My sister came to stay and closed herself in by the fire, throwing on turf, sticks and all the coal I had for the winter. She left, the scuttle empty, long before the winter began to slow. Looking at the empty coal scuttle, my blanket heaped bed, the condensation pooling on the window sills, I thought to myself, I must get out of this place. This deeply cold place, where you could just slip away to nothing, where you could just stop showing up to get some milk, where you could just not drop over the rent, where you could just stop telling people that you are getting sorted out. Those every day moments of struggle. I must, I thought to myself back then, looking at the empty scuttle, its battered iron rim powdered with black damp dust, get out of this.

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Rosie has come back into the shelter, Geraldine tells me. That is good, I say. Three days later Rosie miscarries, a bloody, glutinous gush of loss. She cries as she meets me in the corridor, her hands wrapped tightly around her body, even though it is warm in this building, a roaring, oil burning, fierce warmth, pumping out of all the radiators. Rosie, I say, we will support you through this. She only looks at me. She has no words.

Then Rosie disappears. She left on Monday, Geraldine tells me, gone up to the shop and never came back. Back to Limerick, I say. It is a statement, assumption, kind of question. That would be it, says Geraldine. God knows where she is staying up there, I say. I know, says Geraldine.

Rosie had told me, in the week before she left the shelter about the pregnancy, in a rush of words, checking every moment that she was not shocking me. There were so many bloody people in that house she tells me, I could hardly tell you where it was, she said. The varnish was peeling off the front door, she said, it was all dry and flaky. And up the stairs there were handprints, grey and smudged, a trail, all the way along the wall. And the bathroom had a sour smell, like you know when the heat from the rads is just drying out the damp. Rosie puts her two hands up and tightens her pony tail as she tells me this, the skin on her hands hard and dry.

Whoever the fuck he was, she tells me, he wasn't taking no for an answer. He had me shoved up against the wall and the towel rail was dug into my back. Surely I was thinking, the rail is just going to snap in two, Rosie tells me. And I would have told him he was a bastard, but he had my head kind of shoved to one side with his arm and he calling me every name under the sun. And the weird thing is I thought you know that's it, it just can't get any worse, and I thought you know the little fella, you know he is best where he is, safe. Rosie starts to cry, thick rich tears. I just miss the smell of him, she says, with those thick

eyelashes of his and the way he'd be thrown in the cot, all soft and breathing in and out.

You know what your man called me when he was done. A fucking whore. Then, she says, he shoved a bit of gear into my hand. To fucking shut you up, he said. And I thought you know what, as I sat down on the floor, I'd take the whole lot, now. But, I threw it out, Rosie tells me, the coke. And I said to myself, she tells me, right then, sitting on that bathroom floor, she pauses and looks up, her face suddenly softened, tears dripping slowly, I must get out of this shit.

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I thought of that cold house I had lived in years ago, when I heard. They did not find her for three days, said Geraldine. The landlord checked the flat, eventually. Rosie's body cold, hard and stiff, a slightly rancid smell just starting to fill the air. She had taken one of those apartments in the city centre up the back of the old bank building, said Geraldine. Sure you wouldn't leave your dog stay there, I said. I had only walked past them once, a few years ago, a cracked-window, grimed-up façade of crumbling brick, all elegance lost. Was she back using, I asked Geraldine. Using something, Geraldine said.

Why wouldn't you, I thought. How could you not. With the thin wad of cash from your social welfare, your fingers rough against the fine grim dirt of used notes, with your little fella in care, his body strong and solid now. Sure that foster woman was telling me he is taking a nine-months baby grow now, Rosie had told me, the last time we met. Why wouldn't you, I thought. With your child strong and thriving, away from you now, no longer your forefinger he grabs with his chubby hand, no longer your hair he curls his sticky fingers into as he is held up on a hip, not your hip. When there is no longer the smell of lemon shampoo and sleep from the top of his head, in your nostrils. Why wouldn't you when you felt the sticky gush of that next hope spill out of you in a mess, your tears, the pain.

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The house still looks out over the expanse of the Blackwater River. The tide flows back and forth at its base. They spent a lot of money on it in the end, my friend tells me. Made it all into fancy apartments. I imagine brocade curtains in neutral colors, smoothed plaster walls, pale glossy floor tiles and stainless steel double mixer taps. Deep retro-style cast iron baths and polished wood sleigh-ended beds with small mountains of extra pillows. Duck down perhaps. Always a cold place, mind, he adds. Still. I nod. Well there was no amount of insulation was ever going to warm it, he adds, only sucking damp up off the river that place. True, I say. Sometimes you can never put a place like that right, can you, I add.

And I think again of Rosie, of her dark long hair pulled tight into a ponytail, of that cold dense silence in the house out underneath the mountain, of the quiet desperate loneliness that pulled her back in to the city.

The roaring oil burning warmth of the shelter, the hot tea, the soft touch of fresh linen and brushed cotton sheets. The cosy chairs, each one that you could curl up in and not move for an hour. The compassion, the care, we can help you with this Rosie. It was too much, I think, and of course, not enough. In the end.

You know, I say to Geraldine, a little while afterwards, we probably only knew the tip of the iceberg, with Rosie. Of course, she says, of course. We only ever do. She turns and walks away down the corridor, with its soft cream coloured walls, past the radiators wafting out little waves of heat.

*About the Author:* Sarah Morton, Ph.D. is Senior Lecturer and Director of Community Partnership Drug Programmes, School of Social Policy, Social Work and Social Justice, University College Dublin (01 7168582, sarah.morton@ucd.ie).