

Dying with Grace

On Sundays, around 2pm, dinner would be ready and spread out on the kitchen table. It usually consisted of a hunk of some kind of meat, bleached white sandwich bread, a canned vegetable, and salad from a bag. If we were lucky there would be mashed potatoes, and they would be fresh instead of made from those instant flakes that come in a box.

Around that time I was usually sinking into one of the lazy boy chairs, letting the television brainwash me to sleep. Then the clock on the wall next to me would chime out on the hour, and one or two of my uncles walked through the front door, sometimes more, and I never looked to see who it was because it was always the usual suspects. Dishes and silverware would start clanking and scraping, and sometimes one of them would come over and sit in the second lazy boy with their plate, maybe stay for a few minutes after they've finished, and then a few more minutes later the front door would open again and everyone would leave.

Most Sundays it was like clockwork, but there were also many days when no one would show up. Dinner would be spread out on the table, all the lights in the house would be off, and the clock would tick on while the food got cold and dusty. My grandmother, Grace, the central figure and head of the household, always made the food, but never ate herself. When she was done cooking she would shuffle over into the living room, plop herself down on the couch, and light a cigarette, expecting everyone to fend for themselves.

Eventually she would fall asleep, and I'd go into the kitchen and make a plate for myself. I left the lights off, letting only the natural light streaming in through the windows show me what I was eating. The hollowness of the silence and the tick of the clock surrounded me as I sat at the table alone.

When I was done I put the plate in the sink and went to stand by the kitchen window. Outside it was bright, and from inside it looked like a bleak summer day, like if you went outside you'd feel like you were stranded in the desert, but once you actually left the house you would realize that was all in your head. Grace never left the house, and it often felt like I couldn't myself. I would walk around the house and peer out each window, like exhibits in a museum. I'd look out at the big world and up at the big sun, feeling small, watching it look down at me, so small in comparison, like I was trapped in a dollhouse. But I knew I wasn't trapped, and I often left the house to get away from such obscure thoughts.

I walked through the yard, observing her nearly empty garden, which only had a couple of rose plants in it. They were covered in thorns and only bloomed one blossom at a time; when one would die only then would another take its place. I watered them, and continued to walk around to the back of the house where there once used to be a cherry tree and more grass, but now there was only an empty lot of gravel.

I'd only heard stories of the tree, and some of the pleasant memories the family had of it. It was cut down before I was born, but even still, seeing nothing in its place day after day saddened me, as if I had memories of it too. Maybe I used to climb it and swing from the branches. Maybe in the spring, when it bloomed, I would fall asleep under its shade and dream. I would look up at it and ask it to watch over me while my unconsciousness swims around in pools of possibilities, because it was known to be a trustworthy and reliable member of the family. Its blossoms would fall soft like snow and cover me, maybe as its way of protecting me from the outside world.

In the summer when the fruit would begin to ripen, the children would take turns picking them off the tree. One would hold the ladder, and the other would pick. Grace would watch through the kitchen window, and her husband stood in the yard watching proudly with his hands on his hips. There would be fighting and laughter, and afterwards the girls would help their mother make cherry pie.

Most of the time when I asked Grace about the tree she would just say something distantly like: "Yeah... that was a nice tree," and nothing more. She didn't seem to like to talk about the tree, or even just think about it once and a while. The tone of her voice would change, and she averted her eyes away from me or whoever was prying.

I could taste and smell the cherry pie in my dreams. I stood in the middle of the lot and kicked around the small stones as if they were the bones of all the fallen fruit. After a while I would make my way back inside and continue watching over her, and after a while longer Sunday would be over and my Mother would arrive to take me home. It was a comfortable and lethargic routine we had. I'd hug her goodbye, with both our hearts weary, and they would remain like that until the next Sunday.

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In the morning I woke to the sight of yellow floral wallpaper, and after a few groggy blinks I realized I was in her bed, and it was Sunday once again. She was already awake, shuffling around the kitchen, back and forth, from the coffee pot to the newspaper spread out on the kitchen table. I would continue to lie in bed, wondering how long she expected me to sleep.

Eventually I made my way into the kitchen, when the daylight became too hard to ignore. I sat down at the table and stayed quiet, like I was still sleeping. I watched her scan the paper like she was searching for something, reading the obituaries like everyday news, holding down the edges with both hands, and then she would pause and shuffle over to the coffee pot to warm her cup and back again, never once sitting down. I assumed it was just easier to flip the pages that way.

In her cup, decaf, with lots of cream and sugar, the complete opposite of how I take my coffee. Just thinking about the amount of sweetness and lack of caffeine made me cringe, and her restlessness made me anxious, so I headed into the living room to watch TV.

The whole house filled with light as I let the TV brainwash me into mindlessness. In that state every hour begins to seem like it was only minutes away, then seconds, and every hour the clock would chime out in eight consecutive tones. After a while she also shifts into the living room, plops down on the couch, turns on her shows (mostly news shows reporting updates from trials of murders and missing children), and lights a cigarette. I get up once and a while and shuffle around myself, stretching my legs as to not become part of the furniture.

Besides the clock ticking and the chatter of the television, the house would be quiet for hours. We had one of those things where you didn't need to say much to know each other well. You didn't have to say anything at all, that's the way unconditional love goes. You just sit there together in the silence, not saying a word for hours on end. A mumble and shuffle here, comments on the TV program there, giving the answers to Jeopardy, and expressing subtle disgust towards the news.

Occasionally some of her children would come and go, no need to knock, no need to say goodbye, come as you like, do as you please, just don't wake Grace up from her nap, and don't disturb her routine. Busy bodies and sluggish drunks could come and go and it wouldn't faze her in the slightest, but that didn't mean she didn't notice or care. It was her house. It was her lovely doll house that she let others enter and go about in. It was hard not to take it for granted.

One afternoon, we were halfway through our routine. I sat in the lazy boy, and she shuffled around in the kitchen. The TV had already put me to sleep, and I was becoming part of the furniture, sinking into it like quicksand. The slam of the door woke me suddenly, and for once I actually turned my head to see who it was. It was one of the usual suspects, my uncle, and he was running over to Grace, who had collapsed on the floor. I pulled myself out of the quick sand consuming me, and ran over to her as well.

While everything seemed to progress in slow motion, my uncle called 911, and some of the other family members. My heart raced, and it was all I could hear in my head as I helped her into a chair, her gripping her chest. My ears began to ring. Suddenly any memories I had begun to pulse away from me, with each heart beat I was becoming further and further away, while her frail boney hands squeezed mine.

A few minutes later we could hear the sirens approaching from the distance, until they were blaring right outside. My uncle flung the door open, and two men in clean white uniforms ran in and took her away, leaving us feeling useless. And after that everything went blank.

Later on, we all sat in the hospital room. The beeps of the monitors and its consecutiveness drew my mind back to the tick of the clock. When she came around, we were

there to greet her and ease the fear she had just met — the fear of death. Then she turned to me, looked me in the eyes, and asked where I was when she called my name time after time to come to her aid. I didn't have an answer, because the guilt had already begun to eat me alive. Saying the words "I didn't hear you" to her would break every heart in that room, including mine. Having those words said to you would only make you realize how alone you really are, even with people that were supposed to be looking after you. That was supposed to be me. Instead I just choked up an "I'm sorry," and again felt her frail boney hands squeezing mine. The rings on all of her fingers left bruises. But we still a habit of communicating through silence, so when she got another glimpse of my eyes, that were still distant, she could see the truth.

During the days she was kept there, the flowers in her room kept adding up as word spread to extended family and friends. I visited everyday along with many others. I sat next to her as she slept, and when she was awake I read her the notes that came with the flowers. At one point she told me to stop and turn on the TV for her instead.

"I've heard enough of that. I don't like all this attention. Turn on my shows."

I stared at her and then up at the TV with sadness, and went over to turn it on. The thought of having the TV on put a pit in my stomach.

It was time for Jeopardy. I watched her as she watched the show and answered the trivia questions aloud, and just then I remembered it was Sunday. It had been a week and I didn't even notice. I looked out the hospital window and out at the sunny day that looked bleak from inside. The lights in her room were off and filled with the same kind of afternoon shadows that would be in her house that time of day. Some of the things here remained the same, but with sickly undertones. She still wanted to try and keep up with her routine, and the world outside tried to keep up with her.

The TV went to a commercial break and began advertising products directed towards people like her, and that suggested your life might fall apart if you didn't buy them. They knew it was almost time for her nap and for many other elderly people across country.

"Did you get to read the newspaper this morning?" I asked her curiously

"Yeah, but the pages were hard to flip. And Margret Hughes died," she said, without taking her eyes off the TV, and without emotion.

"Didn't she live somewhere in the neighborhood?"

"Yeah, she did, and only sat a few pews over from me in church," she said, still glued to the screen.

"Grace it's time for your medicine," announced the nurse as she walked in with a small white paper cup in her hand, and a glass of water in the other.

“Can I have some coffee to wash it down with?”

“No I’m afraid not, the doctor doesn’t want you drinking any coffee, but I brought some refreshing water for you.”

She looked at the smiling nurse blankly and took the water and pills from her hand. Then she showed the nurse the inside of her mouth and bottom of her tongue to prove she swallowed them.

“This is more like a prison,” she grumbled when the nurse finally left the room. It was clear and not surprising that she was frustrated that she couldn’t do everything in her usual routine. None of us liked change. So she sat trapped in a bed, and trapped in her own mind, as I was in mine.

An hour or so later, after she woke from her nap and started watching the news, my mother showed up to take me home. I wanted to insist I stay and watch over her all throughout the night, but I knew me leaving at the same time every Sunday was part of her routine too.

Outside the daylight was actually bleak like it seemed it would be from inside. As I walked through the parking lot I could feel the heat of the sun weighing me down and causing my mind to hallucinate, like the whole world outside the hospital was an endless desert. I could tell the sun was watching me, like a giant eye in the sky. Each day, to and from the hospital was never ending and exhausting. My canteen would run out of water, and I would become lost among sandstorms and dunes. Only one day did it rain; the sky was dark, and in her room it really did feel like a prison.

When she was allowed to leave the hospital and return to her home she was relieved as anyone would be. She could finally and properly get back to her routine. We helped her out of the car, up the steps, and through the doors of her home. Everything was exactly the same as it had been. The chair I helped her into was still pulled out from the table, and as she shuffled passed she pushed it back into place. The TV in the living room was still buzzing, and I swiftly walked over to turn it off, while she stood at the counter making a fresh pot of coffee.

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The following Sunday I woke to the yellow floral wallpaper, and lay in bed for a while staring at the ceiling. The days had seemingly gone back to the way they were, but I was changed now. Eventually I got out of bed and made my way into the kitchen to sit down at the table, but as I did I noticed I couldn’t because she was already sitting in my chair. The newspaper was open, and her coffee cup was empty.

“Can you fill up my cup?” she asked almost embarrassed, and so I did and sat back down next to her while she continued to read. It was quieter than usual, even though we didn’t talk

much to begin with. Now our minds were quiet too, empty and troubled, not sure what to think or do. The rest of the day was like this, and at one point she crawled back into bed wearily.

At 2pm the clock chimed out like it did, and none of the usual suspects came barging through the door to see what was for dinner because there was none. I stood alone in the kitchen with all the lights off, buttering a piece of toast.

Soon, every Sunday after that became slower and quieter, until one day I arrived Saturday afternoon and she was nowhere to be found. I searched the entire house, but there was nothing but empty rooms and darkness filling them. I sat down in the living room and waited awhile. I left the TV off, and it began to mock me as I stared into the dark mirror like screen, surrounded by the silence and ticking. There was a sickening feeling in the dry smoky air. My reflection looked concerned, and was trying to tell me that something was wrong. I sat still, while she motioned something to me from the other side.

Later on the door opened and my Aunt walked in with Grace's arm in her hand, helping her shuffle along. She could no longer walk for herself, along with many other things, and according to the doctors we had to start treating her like the stroke victim she was, and the cancer patient we would soon discover her to be.

The Sundays, the dinners, and habits had disappeared, and were replaced by busy bodies tending to her every need. Instead of coffee they gave her health shakes and Jell-O, and the pills were endless, one of every color and size, just like we were back at the hospital. It seemed the prison had been brought back to her home and had her trapped again. She sat at the kitchen table speechless and saddened as the days passed her by. She would sigh shortly, rub her boney hands, and stare at all her rings. Each one on each of her fingers represented a different memory, and so she reminisced.

Sometimes I would slip her her coffee and cigarettes when I knew no one would see. She desperately wanted her humanity back, but it didn't take long for her to become hopeless. She spent hours sitting, staring at the walls, staring at her rings, and staring at the paper. Often I would sit and stare with her, and flip the pages for her. She no longer seemed eager to search, for whatever it was. She pushed away the paper when she got to the obituaries, because maybe she was afraid that what she would find would end up being herself, staring back up at her, alongside Margret Hughes. She sighed, and pictured all the empty church pew seats that kept adding up.

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The end of summer had arrived suddenly. It snuck up on me and consumed the whole town in heat and anticipation. I knew I had to leave town soon, I had already packed, and so I also knew I had to say goodbye, for now, to Grace, and to everyone.

I got up from my seat next to her when my mother beeped the car horn, and told her I'd see her soon. I tried to leave her with a smile, but she didn't look at me to see it, and then quiet tears began to stream down her face. I put my hand on her shoulder for a moment, and then left out the front door.

A couple days later she passed away. Constantly the image of her crying face appeared in my mind like a bad dream for many days after. No one had ever seen her cry, I realized, and at the time I should have seen that the hopelessness in her had been replaced with more fear, and that she knew it would be the last goodbye.

When I returned home for the funeral, I also returned to the house. I could already see the color in everything beginning to fade, and the shadows getting ready to take their place and fill up all the emptiness left behind. I sat in my lazy boy chair, and waited for the clock to chime out and join the silence. It was four in the afternoon, and I was the only one in the house. Everything was still untouched, and the dust and the pictures it clung to still hung on the walls. All the objects in the house were staring at me. I looked over at her seat on the couch, and then reclined to the fullest the chair would allow, feet up and all, so I was staring up at the ceiling and the cobwebs in its corners. When I closed my eyes I could picture a time lapse of all the dust piling up on the furniture, and the wallpaper turning yellower and starting to peel off. Eventually the shadows would consume everything, and the house would disappear.

The remainder of the summer was a thousand desserts, all merged together into one long one, and one long sweltering day, underneath a blazing sun. I crossed it with my feet dragging in the sand, pulling myself along with no end in sight, as it soon turned to quicksand and began to consume me. The eye in the sky watched me with sickening pleasure when the heat began to get to me and burn my skin. I dropped to my hands and knees and began to crawl away from the vultures that had begun to circle high in the sky above. They could see me dying slowly, or maybe that was just all in my head.

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Years later I stood in her kitchen, buttering a piece of toast. All the lights in the house were off, and light streamed in through the windows while the clock still continued to tick on, just like one of those Sundays; except it wasn't Sunday, and Grace wasn't there. No one lived there anymore, and no one came by after she passed away. But I still had a habit of wandering through the house and peering out the windows. I watered her roses, and thought longingly about the cherry tree.

Then after a while I would return to the house to watch over the place she used to sit. I sat in the lazy boy, looking around at all the strange silence and the dust particles floating about in the slivers of light, while suffocating in the stale smoky air, fighting with myself whether or not to turn on the TV. I fought with myself until the late afternoon was creeping up on me, and the shadows were beginning to set in. They now hung on the walls like all the framed memories and

pieces of art that now collected even more dust, as if someone put her house in the attic, and with me the only one left inside. Everything was already in motion, and her memory was already set to fade away.

And even when I left and no longer returned, and the house no longer existed, I was still stuck in the dollhouse in the attic with her memories and her lingering ghost. I'd go through the rest of my days, finding myself in strange places, and all of a sudden I'd hear the clock chime out. I'd look at my watch and expected it to read 2pm.