Symposium Mindscapes

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**A Story Told in Three Deaths**

Joffrey,

I want you to know that you got the blue coffin you wanted.

I want you to know that you looked so peaceful in it, with a half-smile and a rosary bead interlinked between your fingers.

I want you to know that you haven’t been forgotten, that your father and I still think of you when your birthday comes around.

I should know, as it’s a day before my own.

The last time I saw Joffrey, we were playing in the “hammock” room. There was a mattress underneath us so if we fell, we wouldn’t get hurt. I was swinging Joffrey hard, as he pulled on the edges of the hammock and cocooned himself in it as if it were a blanket. He was laughing, we both were. Him because he felt the drop give him goosebumps in his stomach, and me because I had a friend to play with. Joffrey slept the night with his mother on that mattress, and in the morning my father drove them to the hospital.

I’d like to say that this is how I remember Joffrey, laughing and having fun, but I’d be lying to you. When I think of him I think of his coffin, and what my father told me back then. One of the last conversations Joffrey had with Alexis, his dad, was the color of said coffin. Blue, he told him. He wanted his coffin to be colorful. Even while dying, Joffrey still remained a kid.

Sure enough, Alexis kept his word.

Joffrey was smiling when I went to see him in his open casket. I don’t remember how old I was, but I know that I had to get on my tippy toes to get a glimpse of him. He had a rosary in his hands, as is custom traditionally, and his face had turned a faint purple. He had cotton balls up his nostrils, and the tubes that fed him still marked his skin.

If I remember correctly, Joffrey was born with kidney problems. He’d go to La Mascota, one of the only children’s hospital in Nicaragua, so the doctors could hook him to a machine that would clean his blood for him. At first, it was only the one kidney that didn’t work but as Joffrey grew older, the other one started to fail too. They tried finding a donor, but there weren’t that many children’s kidneys to go around back in those days. His parents tried so hard to keep him alive, to keep him laughing but in the end Joffrey died anyways.

There are times when I feel bad to say that Joffrey was my friend, because I think I’m a poser. I feel like I took all his suffering and transformed it into my own personal trauma. I have committed a crime by bastardizing the memory of him, by remembering more vividly how he looked dead than when he was alive.

Another thing that I think about is the words the priest used to comfort his family. The priest said that Joffrey died because he was a good kid, an angel, and god just really wanted to meet him sooner rather than later. This confused me, because in school when we read the bible in the book of Apocalypses it stated that nobody is entering heaven until the next coming of Jesus. So where the fuck is Joffrey then? If you ask me, I learned an important lesson in life that day: Joffrey didn’t die because god wanted him desperately, Joffrey died because we lived in an impoverished country.

Geronima,

I want you to know that my grandfather felt the pain your absence left.

I want you to know that he never truly recovered from losing you.

I want you to know that my memories of you are not all about death, that I still think about the posicles you made and your fridge that had the onion stickers in the form of an arrow pointing upwards.

I want you to know that your death meant something to me, even if I can’t express it.

When my grandmother died, I felt nothing. I don’t like saying that because it makes me think that I’m a bad person, that I didn’t care enough about her, that I didn’t love her, that I’m this monster that lacks any resemblance of humanity, that her death meant nothing to me. I remember sitting in church waiting for the tears to fall, for the sadness I’d heard so much about to hit, but nothing happened. I didn’t cry when my classmate, who was a friend of my cousin, told me my grandmother died, I didn’t cry when I came back from school to see her laid neatly in a wooden coffin, I didn’t cry when I saw her buried by dirt, and even when my mother slept in my bed for the following months as she herself cried into the night when she thought I was asleep I still felt nothing.

I tried speaking with my friends about my lack of an emotional response and the most common answer I got was that grief affects everyone differently. This made no sense to me, because I wasn’t affected at all, I stayed neutral through and through, so how was is it that I was grieving? Nobody really has an answer to that question of mine, but through the following years I’ve come up with my own conclusions. I didn’t know back then because mental health care in Nicaragua is pretty shit if I’m being honest but what was happening to me was that I was spiraling, getting entrapped in a never-ending cycle of despair that I couldn’t escape from. Death consumed my childhood, creeping up every now and then to remind me that it existed, that one day it was going to come for me. My theory is that because I was already sad before my grandmother died, I couldn’t grieve her death properly. If I had to explain it, it’s like putting on a second coat of paint on a wall without removing the old one first. You can’t see the old paint, but you know that underneath everything it’s still there, caked together and falling apart.

I didn’t know at the time, but I was already grieving even before she died.

When I think of my grandmother’s funeral, it’s impossible for me to not think of my grandfather. As the mass ended, he told the priest to wait as he ran up to the coffin. Well, he more like waddled to be honest. So, my grandfather waddled up to the front and as he passed where I was sitting (the family of the deceased usually sits at the front in the first two pews) I saw he was holding an old tattered and frayed rosary bead. He claimed that this was my grandmother’s, that she’d had it since she was little and kept it with her until the very end. He wanted her to have it, for her to be buried with something that she cherished her whole life. In that moment, I saw the love my grandfather had for my grandmother, I saw his pain. I think giving her the rosary bead was his own way of letting go. He could’ve kept it, as a token or souvenir with which to remember her by but he didn’t. He knew she cared about the thing way more than him, so he let the rosary bead go.

My grandparents went through rough times according to my uncles and aunts. He used to be an alcoholic and would hit her when he got drunk. Through all of this, my grandmother stayed by his side hoping he would come to his senses one day. And he did. He realized that he was being shitty, and he spent the rest of his life atoning for what he’d done. Although he never expressed his emotions or what he felt, I knew that he cared about her. He didn’t tell anyone, but he’d spent the last two days frantically searching for that rosary bead. Searching for anything that would make my grandmother smile one last time. Only, she didn’t smile because she was dead and if she had it would have been more concerning than heartwarming.

My grandfather is dead now, but he taught me something important: that there are more ways to mourn somebody’s death than just your tears, that grief doesn’t have a look or a grocery list of symptoms, that loving someone means caring for them in life as well as in death.

Niferd’s Grandfather,

Quiero decirte que a veces te comportaste bien verga conmigo.

Quiero decirte que siempre me acuerdo de todas las caballadas que hicimos.

Quiero decirte que aunque cuando estamos en grupo y tu forma de ser cambia todavia te quiero como un hermano.

Niferd, quiero decirte gracias.

On an early Sunday morning, I don’t remember the exact time, my father woke me up to tell me my friend’s grandfather died, and the mass would take place soon. I tried explaining how Niferd was an evangelist and he didn’t go to church on Sundays, much less a catholic church, but my father guilt tripped me, so I went to the mass.

This might sound controversial, but personally I’ve always found mass to be boring. From a young age, I was always impressed at the amount of knowledge that priests had over the deceased, and how they would pull all these stories out from nowhere and go on tangents about when the person was alive. It wasn’t until my grandmother died and my uncle gave the priest a sheet of paper with all the names of her children and these anecdotes that I realized that it was all pretend and make belief. I knew the priest couldn’t have all this knowledge on so many people, but it still felt like a betrayal. It’s like when somebody explains a magic trick to you and all your sense of wonder disappears in an instant, or when the curtain falls and the wizard of oz is revealed to be this normal ass dude. Because that’s what a priest is, don’t let anyone fool you: he is a normal ass dude that has about the same amount of knowledge on god that the rest of us have. He doesn’t know shit about what god wants you to atone for, and confessions are pretty worthless. If when you pray, god hears you why is it that I have to go to this specific person in a robe to obtain his forgiveness? Needless to say, my point is it’s very hard to take a priest seriously when he’s reading from a fucking script.

When we got to the church, the first thing I noticed was that my friend didn’t show up. So there I was, hearing this old man talk about this other older man that I’d never met before and the main reason why I’m even here didn’t bother showing up. To be honest with you, I was pretty annoyed. The mass ended, and I went straight to Israel’s house. I called for his name, and he showed up. He was in shorts and slippers, still rubbing morning crust out of his eyes. I was pissed. So I tell him, hey you didn’t show up to your grandfather’s funeral and I wasted two hours of my life. To which he replied that he doesn’t go to the catholic church and it was my own fucking fault for going to the funeral. Do you ever have that feeling when you’re right but your parents want you to do something that you clearly know is wrong but complying is easier than fighting them? Yeah, that’s what was going through my mind. Then Israel continues, he says eh he was a fucking idiot anyways. He died after a log of wood fell on him while working. The phrasing might be weird because he doesn’t speak English and I’m paraphrasing, but I still think that joke is very funny. So we laughed and went inside to play on his PS2, and called it a day.

There’s no moral to this story, in case you were looking for one. I simply thought it was a nice break for what follows. Well, except that one thing I haven’t told you yet, but if you’re patient and pull through I guarantee you it’s a fun one. I appreciate Niferd, and the friends I had, and still have, and everything they did back then. I don’t mean to be cliché or sound cheesy, but they were there for me when I was going through a really rough time. When my grandmother died Israel came to my house, but I told him to leave. And he did, he gave me space when everyone else was demanding to know why I hadn’t shed a single tear. He didn’t say that my grandmother was in heaven resting in eternal peace, he didn’t assume I was doing bad or told me how hard her death must be on me, and most importantly, he didn’t judge me for not crying.

Here’s the fun one I was talking about, Israel taught me that death doesn’t always come with a lesson nor do you learn the secrets of life by changing how you see it. Sometimes, all you need is space to grieve.

Epilogue

Death has always followed me wherever I go. I’ve lived in three different countries and I still feel that bastard breathing down my neck, lurking at every corner, waiting for me to let my guard down. The reason why I’m so fascinated by death is because I think of my own every single day, in some shape or form. I have converted this beast into my own self-serving coping mechanism. It’s not healthy, I’m not going to lie, but I don’t know what other ways there are to grieve. I try to remember all those that have died, I make sure not to forget who they were and the impact their lives have had on me. Sometimes I think of Joffrey and hate myself, because I have a life that I’ve been willing to throw away when his was cut so short. But here’s my silver lining, my metaphorical olive branch: remember the way they lived, not the circumstances in which they died. Remember the stories they’d tell, remember the way they would smile, remember how they looked happy, and please don’t bastardize their memory by doing what I did because I get it, sometimes it hurts to remember… but that doesn’t mean we shouldn’t.