

## A Caricature in The Louvre

On March 9, 2012, a seven-year-old version of myself watched my brother silently shake—he didn't blink, he didn't speak, and I wasn't sure he was even breathing. I have to confer with the calendar of a decade ago, as my memory of the night Death was conjured into my life has now faded. It was a Friday night, and my brother and I were at my mother's house. The room was painfully plain: white walls that now were stained a molar crème tone with age, hardwood floors with nails protruding through here and there, rickety windows with chipped paint—so old that hell would've been a blessing in the summer because if you dared to open any of them, they'd fall right apart.

It was late, and we both should've gone to sleep hours ago. *What's wrong*, I have to had asked my brother. I had never seen him so shaken up, so defeated. He was always the strength of us both, but now, even though I hadn't known it yet, Death had stolen his solidity and bestowed it upon me—only, I wasn't sure what I was to do with such responsibility. Having gotten no answer from him, I went to my mother; surely she'd know what dark force had possessed something filled with so much steam. The hallway was dim, the light hanging on the wall beside the bathroom door was rusted with poverty, the light bulb was smoky, and if ever you attempted to turn it on, you'd question if the switch even worked. My bare feet were cold atop the creaking wood. Usually, I'd never go anywhere barefoot, but I was now attempting to wear my brother's brawn all too well. I knocked on my mother's door; it was cracked, but we'd never enter without knocking—even if we could make out the scene inside through the nearly transparent tape covering the hole where a door handle would be.

I asked my mother what had gotten into my brother. At first, I didn't quite understand what she meant, why she spoke so quietly all of a sudden, or why she seemed afraid to utter her broken sentences. She told me my grandfather had died. I immediately hugged her and told her I was sorry to hear that—as if I knew what that meant, rather than a child regurgitating mature representations of sentiment he'd picked up on over the years. But then, a different realization settled within me. She continued, clarifying: *Not G-pop, son. Your father's father.*

The warm lamp colored her dark eyes, and I nearly thought I spotted a tear forming. I felt empty inside. I didn't understand what she meant, or why she cared—to my recollection, her and my father's father never had the close bond one would expect of a father and daughter-in-law. And to my knowledge, my brother, like I, had never been close with my father's father either. Still, she ached; still, he shook—all night long.

A week later, my family, and other family I didn't know I had, gathered in a church. During said time, I felt like a ghost, stuck, masked, behind the veil between life and death. Before that night, death was a caricature hanging on the wall in the Louvre behind polyester fencing. Then suddenly, in the blink of an eye, Death was someone we all knew. He was someone to love, someone to hate, someone to kiss, someone to strike down, someone to touch and, unfortunately, be touched by.

Before my father's father passed, it would have been strange to celebrate life while simultaneously pondering death in a church. Surely a funeral parlor was more appropriate. Nonetheless, the sight was as lifeless as the man in the casket. If this had been anyone else, seven-year-old me would've thought the man was simply taking some weird nap—questioning why we had to waste money on baggy old clothes to watch some old guy sleep. But this wasn't any old man—this was my father's father. Having already been to a few faintly memorable funerals, I knew flowers were standard—yet, no reefs surrounded the pill casing of laminate plywood. I was too young to know the word, but it was all so melodramatic. Random women he had been intimate with during his years, ranging from senior to teen, threw themselves on his body, ran their fingers through the gel of his slick black hair, ran their acrylic along his sandalwood cheeks. I was just getting to know Death truly, and here, Death was still so unfamiliar as I wondered why all the theatrics over something so devoid of life. His daughters, ones I called Aunt and others we collectively didn't speak of, watered the casket, even after it closed, with salty fragments of their souls.

That day, March 17, 2012, I was born again from the womb of a funeral reception—while Death had taken life from this realm once more. Where before I would struggle to describe death—and ultimately resort to the animated strokes of the television and weekend blockbusters—now I had much to piece together. The puzzle still perplexed me, but so it did to everyone else as well.

*You okay, Devin?* my older cousin asked me. We were sitting towards the back, the stiff wood of the pew made my body sore. I wasn't sure how to respond and felt guilty even for being so okay with the entire ordeal—although Death had introduced himself to me, I was fine.

*Yeah, I'm okay,* I responded, trying as hard as a child so young could at sounding despondent. I hung my head low because looking at the podium seemed to make the singing louder.

*You sure,* she continued.

I nodded.

*It's okay to not feel okay, you know?* Said my cousin. *You can cry if you need to.*

*I don't feel anything,* I responded. The moving voice of the choir audibly overpowered our conversation, yet I still spoke in a hushed tone—as if I was giving life to a sacred secret.

*How come? He was your grandfather.*

*He was my father's father, I didn't know him for real.*

Her expression twisted in slight confusion. *You don't have to know him to feel hurt by this. You're right, he was your father's father, your grandfather, my great uncle, that woman's husband, that girl's baby daddy—he meant something to everyone here. That's what makes death so sad. None of us will ever be in his physical presence again, and yet he's still with us every day—a videotape we can never take out of the VCR.*

There was a brief pause as I suddenly felt more aware of my surroundings: the sacred art of the ceiling, the shimmering of the crystals dangling off the chandelier, the warm velvety red floors peppered with host crumbs. I could finally feel the faint drafts of heat passing past my

neck and behind my ear. I could smell everything: the lavender of the usherettes guarding tissues as scriptures during the Great Three Days, the notes of cherry from the wine, his blood, the oceanic vegetation of the holy water resting in the font. Colorless dresses and suits took on personality as they grew distinguishable hues.

I could feel my father gazing back toward us. He was in the front, and at that moment, I was thankful to be so far from him. We couldn't have been more than 20 feet away, but the distance felt continental. I peered up and stole a glance at his sorrowful expression. I was frightened, for the man in the casket never seemed so alive. In his stingy brim fedora, lined with black and colored with a sunset feather. His Sunday's best suit, long and sharply creased, as his father's would be every single day. His wide chest firm between broad shoulders, so sharp they could slice steel. The coal facial hair surrounding his mouth was streaked with a few strands of gray, but only on his chin—just as my grandfather's was, just as my oldest brother's was becoming, and just as mine would be.

*You don't understand, you're just a kid*, my cousin concluded as she wrapped her arms around me, a tear staining my stygian suit jacket.

*No, I do, now.* I breathed in, out. *But Death isn't a videotape, it's a person. It's a member of the family that we won't ever be without. We have to learn to live with him.* The words came out mature, deep, as I laid my hand over my father's headstone, speaking to my daughter—who never knew the image smiling under her. Who never felt Death's arms around her—only life supporting her toes on the summer concrete, laughter subtly aging her ember, love supplying breath as wind to her forest fire.