

Death in the Family

by Ruth Spack

A feast for the eyes. That's what I wanted my two young grandchildren to discover at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. But the specter of death loomed over our visit. More than a feast, we needed a balm for the soul. Zachary, almost eight, asked to see the mummies first, and so we headed toward the steep staircase leading to the ancient world. Refusing to hold my hand, his three-and-a-half-year-old sister, Annabelle, started the climb by herself. Zachary walked up a few steps in front of me, then stopped. I stopped too. I could see from his expression he had something serious on his mind.

Zachary pushed his long dark bangs away from his eyes, as if to clear a path for his thoughts. "It's too bad Lauren died," he said. "She was only twenty-eight."

Lauren, our beloved cousin, had overdosed on painkillers three weeks before. It was hard to talk about. "She had a rough life," I said.

"Now she has no life at all," said Zachary.

For much of Lauren's life, at least whenever I saw her, she wore a long ponytail, like the horses she loved to ride. Her sporty hairstyle complemented her perky personality. Lauren grew up in a playful but dysfunctional family. From a young age, her body became a site of uncommon transformations. Born with light brown hair, Lauren became a blonde in preschool, when her mother apparently began rubbing hair dye into her scalp. In her early teens, she suffered from a mysterious convergence of damaging medical events, initially presenting as acid reflux. At sixteen, she underwent radical lung and stomach surgery in a procedure lasting twenty-two hours. Post-surgery, Lauren remained in the hospital for two months, as multiple, sometimes inexplicable, complications arose to plague her.

Annabelle had made more progress on the steps than I'd thought possible for a preschooler. With my eyes fastened on her speedy gray leggings, I resumed my ascent. Zachary trailed after me.

When she was in her early twenties, Lauren's parents divorced, remarried, and moved away, one to a distant state, the other to a distant country. If not for her devoted younger brother, Will, her soldier in arms, Lauren would have been left alone to deal with her compromised physical and mental health. Her weakened lungs triggered labored breathing, which robbed her of a comfortable night's sleep, which deepened her clinical depression, as did an unrelated diagnosis of systemic Lupus the year before she died. Nevertheless, with a near constant smile and seemingly cheerful outlook, she hid her profound emotional stress, sometimes even from her brother and closest friends. Despite her limitations, Lauren lived a life of consequence as a caretaker on a horse farm, her favorite place to be, and as a loving mentor to children in need.

As Annabelle neared the top of the steps, I questioned the wisdom of taking the children to an exhibit of Egyptian sarcophagi. Annabelle was unlikely to understand what she was seeing, but Zachary might be disturbed by it. His anticipation at seeing the mummies had stirred up unsettling thoughts about Lauren's passing. Or perhaps it was the other way around, that her dying had stirred his desire to see the mummies. Either way, he was preoccupied with death, as he had been from an early age.

Ever the fierce pirate or brave storm trooper, Zachary spent much of his play time wielding plastic swords and rifle blasters, yet he would not allow anyone to step on an ant. He worried about plants that wilted and leaves that fell from trees. From the time he was four until he was seven, he refused to eat anything that had been killed for food. One day, as he passed by a man smoking a cigarette, he mumbled, "You're going to die." And now I was taking him to view a room full of embalmed bodies and stone coffins, including those of small children. Would the experience haunt him?

Lauren's brother, Will, suffered from acute grief, not only because Lauren was gone, but also because he felt guilty for not preventing her death. He'd known toward the end of Lauren's life she was living on the edge. He'd observed, for example, the drastic drop in her weight and atypical indifference to her appearance. Tirelessly,

heroically, Will did everything he could for his sister; he was only twenty-six himself when she died. But in his mind, he'd also contributed to her demise.

Annabelle reached the top landing and disappeared from sight. I bounded up the rest of the steps, with Zachary close behind. Annabelle was running through a vast hall, her pink sequined sneakers rising and falling against the tiled floor, her slender arms pumping beneath the puffy sleeves of her gray-and-white striped dress. Turning her head, she giggled when she saw me in hot pursuit. Winning the race, I stooped down and gathered her into my arms.

"I have three really big questions," said Zachary. His eyes widened, emphasizing the magnitude of his inquiry. "Really big."

"What are they?" I asked, hoping I could hold onto his squirming sister long enough to answer. I lifted Annabelle off the ground and held her tight.

"Number One," said Zachary, "Who created God? Number Two: When God created Adam, did he come out a grownup or a baby? Number Three: What does it feel like to die?"

An image of Lauren's last moments burst into my head. I saw her on the couch, or was it the floor (they'd told me but I couldn't remember), surrounded by empty bottles of drugs and booze. Did she kill herself deliberately, or was she too intoxicated to know what she was doing? Did she slip away peacefully, in a state of sleep, or was she wracked with pain?

Annabelle was bouncing against my hip and pointing energetically toward the arched glass ceiling of the cavernous hall. "Look, look!" she shouted. "He's flying!"

Way above our heads hovered a wooden sculpture of a barefoot young man. Dressed in a red shirt and blue pants, his arms and legs outstretched, he had the appearance of a comic book hero endowed with supernatural powers.

As Zachary gazed up at the suspended sculpture, his solemn expression brightened in astonishment.

"How did they do that?" he wanted to know.

I could have told Zachary about the attached wire, imperceptible to his child's eye. I might have speculated that a team of installers had used a crane to fasten the wire to the ceiling, or that the artist had found a balancing point, making the sculpture

appear to be floating in space. But I didn't answer immediately. In a matter of minutes, Zachary's mind had journeyed from the finality of death to the magic of illusion. There would be plenty of time for him to confront the realities and practicalities of life. For now, while he could, I wanted him to enjoy the wonder of it.



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