

A Relative Deathbed

by Yoon Chung

I was still half asleep when mom broke the news while leaning over the bed—we *have to go, now. Grandma died. Wake up dear, grandma died.* Hearing her tears, I rushed into my clothes in the cold.

The shock faded in half an hour. Maybe even less. By the time we arrived at the train station, I was hungry and ready for breakfast. Dad and I shuffled into a cafe for the embarrassing affair of eating in front of a grieving woman. I apologetically ordered a sandwich. The ham and lettuce were good. I told dad over coffee that it still felt unreal, perhaps to excuse my own indifference. I want to lie to make myself look like a better granddaughter, but the truth is that the whole affair was completely believable, as foreseeable as the last page of a queen's biography. An acceptable matter of course.

Once we got on the train, I was glad to have a seat to myself. Dad would sit with mom and hold her hand behind me. For the next 325 kilometers, the black blur outside the windows did not haunt me. I was more preoccupied with securing extensions on my school assignments. *Dear Professor Goodman, I am writing to let you know that I won't be able to make it to class . . .*

When we arrived at my aunt's, I was more nervous than anything else. They told us to come in. I pulled my shoes off my feet with what I hoped was the appropriate amount of gravity. What was I supposed to do? There was no obvious sign of distress I could hold up to prove myself. Looking up from my feet, I tried to appear as sorry as possible to make up for my dry cheeks, but I couldn't feel my face. Thankfully, they did not touch me or look at me for long. They were already crying too much to care that I wasn't. Relieved not to be noticed, I watched as mom broke down and flew to the bedroom where her mother lay. Dad and I trailed helplessly behind her.

I hung back between the door and the bed, hands folded and ears hot, uncertain of my place in the room. Not nearly distant enough to leave but not quite close enough to

put my head on someone's shoulder, I just stood there, neither comforting nor intruding. From there, I could just make out grandma's face on the pillow. She didn't look all that different than the last time I saw her. Was that a year ago?

People always talk about how being dead looks like being asleep, but once the paramedics have come and gone, it's impossible to mistake death for sleep. The blanket stretches too smooth over arms and legs that never show, betraying the lack of dreams or the occasional fit of insomnia. But what really gives you away is the mouth. It never stays shut when you're asleep, making you drool. Grandma's lips were neat and her face was clean, at peace.

Peace. It filled the whole room up to the ceiling like a scent, powdering the red eyes and lined faces within. Soft music played in the background. The glow of a night light fell on the creamy walls around us in buttery blocks of ivory. One wall was an entire gallery of oil-colors, covered in printed cut-outs of van Goghs and Monets. For all they knew, grandma could have been an apricot smudge of sun on a cloud. A large *Sunflowers* hung in a frame beside the bed, rising bright behind my aunt's hunched-up shoulders.

Death was our guest, and it was staying in the best room of the house.

"Here, come," another aunt said kindly, pulling me closer. "You should see her. You can hold her hand."

I was strangely grateful to be made a part of this. No longer a spectator, I approached my grandma. Sitting on the side of her bed, I slowly reached for her under the covers. When my fingers found hers, I held them very gently. Then, more firmly. She was stiff.

Out of nowhere—or everywhere—tears came.

Through the tears, I was led by some morbid, half-conscious curiosity to press on one of her fingers. Please, uncurl. It didn't. I imagined her finger snapping off in the middle and instantly returned to squeezing her fist. Sorrow was easier to name when I was eleven. I was sad, guilty, and regretful when grandpa died. Hadn't I learned from any of that? I was none of those things now. Grandma was gone. The news, so factual before, was at last, inexplicably, personal. She had never hurt me, but I was hurt. Even though her stiff hand in mine told me nothing I didn't already know, it added heat and humidity and breath to the words, *all true, all true*.

They say seeing is believing, but I don't know.

Touch is visceral. Instinctual.

There's something about it that truly brings home what is alien.

Sifting a pinch of moon dust through your fingers pulls the moon closer to the earth.

The night will lighten, the tide will rise, and the wolves, cry louder.



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