

Mortem

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I was wide awake thinking about it during nights when the moon was at its brightest.

I laid my head on the side near the window, close to the wall. Our windows were always open. I could see the big round silver rock, the soft luminescent glow bathing my face. The house was eerily quiet because everyone was asleep. I took care not to get close to my brother's feet as we lay opposite of each other. And my mind would take off and roam, flitting from thought to thought until it landed softly on death.

What happens when we die?

All I knew was we stop living. I tried to imagine what that would be like. But of course it's hard. Being a living, breathing child all I could do was: to exist and be alive. But then I thought: *if we stop living, that means we stop thinking*. I could start there. I would stop thinking. No thoughts. But my mind was essentially playful. What tricky imaginations and playful thoughts constantly inhabit the mind! It could even go meta: I was thinking to myself to not think.

Quiet. Is this what not thinking feels like? Wait, I am thinking that question.

Damn. No more thinking.

I did it again. *No more thinking*. But I just thought of the words "no more thinking" and that counted as a thought. *Argh!* And I would stop, frustrated at my own brain, and I'd try to go to sleep again.

One night, another thinking session of what-happens-when-we-die went by.

We don't think when we sleep (at least not consciously because our brains still work through dreams). But what about my child mind? It did not know yet at the time so maybe it's just like sleeping? A forever sleep. To die is boring, then. All we do is sleep. Young adult Keziah cursed child Keziah for thinking sleep is boring.

The concept of souls and ghosts had already been instilled in my 7-year-old mind which thought this:

that dying starts when our souls leave our bodies. We drift upwards and we look down to see our body, unmoving, unfeeling. Does that mean, then, that we are separate from our bodies? The voice in our minds, is that our soul talking? Or our brain? Can we still think when our souls leave the body?

So many questions tormented young Keziah but no one to answer them. So she just thought and thought. She did the thinking so hard that she felt a strange sensation. She became hyper aware of her own body.

Every limb moving with and against each other. Every nerve tingling. My steady heartbeat I could feel. Every breath I took I felt move through my insides. My vision narrowed then suddenly widened. I felt I was floating but at the same time I was grounded. I was aware I was still in bed but the night sky felt so near and endless, with tiny pinpricks of light dotting it. That sensation only lasted for a few seconds. I returned to normal. I was a curious kid again, musing about things a child shouldn't think about yet. That tired me out that I immediately fell asleep.

I did not know how that happened. Or if that particular sensation even had a name. Through the years, I had had experiences of death through friends and relatives. But – at the risk of sounding callous – those encounters were underwhelming.

The first was my uncle, my father's brother. He was tall and thin and kind, always letting me get any food from their sari-sari store. In contrast to my father, whose voice was loud, my uncle was soft spoken, mild-mannered. He lived in Cugman and there was a time when we visited his family during the weekends. The visit became less and less frequent though as time passed.

Then one day, my mother just dropped the news: "Your Papa Epok has died."

Of course, there was the initial surprise. Then the remembering. And then the sadness. But I didn't cry despite the fact that we mourned him at the wake, and we saw the coffin laid at the sala. I remember Mama Enot sitting dutifully near the coffin. Her eyes puffy and her smile sad as we went to her. I was still quite short at that time so I had to stand on my toes to look at my uncle inside the coffin. It was only a quick glance before my mother called me back to her side. It was difficult to think he was dead. To me, death looked like a deep sleep.

But I was more intrigued with the tents being set up outside the house. The crowd were either playing mahjong and cards or eating. It was weird – the gambling and the gossip in front of the dead.

I was still tearless, even when we got home and the whole affair had finally sunk in my head. I had another thinking session that night. *The mahjong, the noise, the dead – a weird combination, why does it have to be like that.* I drifted off to sleep without finding an answer.

The second time I got up close with a dead person was when a schoolmate suddenly died in my school. I was a high school student then and the girl was in grade 6. Our class advisor and my classmates were having a lighthearted chitchat when the topic drifted to her.

"She had aneurysm. She was just talking when she suddenly fainted. By the time someone got to her, she already smelled of urine and feces. That's how you know when someone is really dead. The body releases all that waste out." Someone said. I was not sure if it was the teacher or one of my classmates.

The news shocked the whole school. By next day, everyone already knew, including the personnel, the canteen attendants and the parents and guardians loitering outside the school. They said she was the brightest in her class.

I couldn't remember her name but I could tell she was a sweet and nice girl. Before she became my acquaintance, my guy classmates would sometimes make jokes about her because of her dark brown skin. But her skin glowed in a healthy way, no matter what they said. I regretted not

telling them off. I got to know her for a little bit when we became teammates for the school intramurals back then. She wasn't a snob. She was considerably popular in her grade.

My class, along with other sixth graders, planned to go the funeral home where her body was laid out. We were a rowdy lot but quickly adapted to the solemnity of the place when we arrived. In the whitewashed room where her coffin was placed, there were already a number of people who occupied the seats or stood and milled around. They talked in whispers and were dressed in drab grays and somber blacks. Some were just staring at the coffin or bowing their heads, I assumed they were praying. There were students from another school. Must have been her friends. There were adults, presumably relatives or family friends. A man and a woman standing by the coffin, receiving condolences and hugs. I assumed they were her parents.

It was a sad sight, parents mourning their child. It was strange seeing parents outliving their daughter. Somehow wrong. Always, we would assume that parents would be the first to go, their legacy living on through their children. But things don't happen the way we want them to.

We put our bags on the nearest monobloc we could find. We walked up to where her parents were and offered our condolences.

"How do you know my daughter?" The mother asked. One classmate answered for us, told her we were her schoolmates and friends. She nodded with a sad smile. We were an affirmation of how friendly her daughter was. She gestured to the coffin. One by one my classmates approached it and looked at the dead. The solemn expressions on their faces didn't change as they looked on. Finally it was my turn. I walked slowly, taking one careful step at a time. When I was near enough, I looked down. She was lying there peacefully, wearing a white dress, her eyes closed. The whiteness around her – the dress, the coffin, even the powder the embalmer put on her face – brought out her dark brown skin even more. But her skin didn't have its usual shine. It was dull and pale.

I wondered again why I didn't cry. Some of her classmates did. Some of my classmates were teary eyed too. My nose didn't even twitch, which was how I could tell I was close to crying. I was sad, to be sure. But not enough to shed tears.

Later, we sat down and whispered among ourselves too just like the gossips in the tents outside. Then the mother came to us, holding two notebooks in her hand.

"She was intuitive, you know. We discovered in her diaries some entries that may have predicted this. It's like she knew this would happen to her sooner rather than later. Would you like to read it?" She offered the diaries and my classmates took them. I was apprehensive. *Diaries are private possessions, meant for the owner alone. She's dead all right, but that shouldn't give them the right to flip through the pages and read her thoughts.*

But they were already reading, looking for the entries the mother told us about. Once they found it, they passed the diaries around. I declined reading them. I wanted to respect her thoughts. I would just have to take her mother's words for it. At home, I didn't remember being bothered by it very much anymore. I supposed, sometimes, all I could do for someone was to respect their memory and sympathize with the loved ones. Then move on.

The last encounter with death was with someone very dear to me.

His name was Carlo and he was our first dog. We had him when I was still in high school. He was a pup when he was given to us by my mother's officemate. At first, my father was against it and mother had to take him to the office, where he lived for a while. But Carlo came back to us, all grown. Our father had no choice but to live with it.

He was a silly dog, excitable and sweet. I loved him a lot. Before the thought of death crowded my mind, by the time we got Carlo, it manifested into something like: *what if Carlo dies*. The first time I did that, I kept crying. I cried for 10 minutes, maybe even more. By that time he was already a part of the family. Even my father had learned to love him. *Dogs have a shorter life span than us humans, I know, I know. A year for us is approximately seven to them. They age faster and therefore would die first*. These thoughts broke my heart and I fell asleep crying that night.

A couple of years passed. I was already in college. The dogs in our household became two. Carlo's sister, which I named Leia, had joined the family. Carlo was already an old dog, I even noticed that some of the black furs on his face had become gray at the tips. He moved slower and coughed often. He would still run around but didn't stray far from the house as he was wont to do when he was younger. He became mellower and I loved him just as much. He still loved belly rubs and hated baths.

Then there's one morning. My parents already awake (as usual), but father was a little louder than usual. He went into the room my brother and I shared and shook my brother awake. I was half-awake, enough to hear him say "Carlo is dead, help me bury him." It didn't register immediately in my head. I simply went back to sleep. An hour later I was fully awake. I mulled the words my father said over and over in my head. *Carlo is dead*.

My father and brother buried him outside the gates in front of the house. A mound of freshly dug up earth was the only indication he was there.

Over breakfast, father told us that he found Carlo at the side of the house lying stiff on his side. Rigor mortis had set in when father discovered him. "He must've died during the night. Well, he was old. It was bound to happen. But so sudden..."

We finished our breakfast in silence after that. I went out to greet Leia and she bounded over to me happily, blissfully unaware of the loss we suffered. It was weird only seeing one dog come to me. Carlo would always come without being called. As soon as he heard my voice, he would trot over and let himself be petted, lying down as close to me as possible. Couldn't cry. *Have I exhausted myself from all the imagining I did of his death that I have grown numb to it?*

That scared me: that I could grow used to death that I couldn't cry about it anymore. Somehow it didn't feel right that the worst I could feel at that moment was sadness. *Give me grief, heartbreak, despair! He deserves more than just a sad face*. I wasn't even in denial. I accepted his death fully with a straight face.

I was able to mourn eventually, unexpectedly.

I was catching up with a friend online and it was Carlo that I chose to talk about. I typed out the whole thing. The moment I hit *send* and saw the words on my phone screen, my nose started to twitch and hurt. Words are powerful, it could awaken an experience up and clarify the truth of life

(or death) for yourself.

He replied with "I'm sorry" and my eyes clouded over with wetness. The heaviness in my heart set in and I was finally able to cry. I let myself sob, only stopping to excuse myself from my friend, then continued sobbing. Perhaps the past deaths and the whole of life had finally caught up with the present and decided to break the walls of my naïve, cerebral interrogation. The tears never seemed to stop until they did. I was dehydrated, my eyes were puffed up to hell, and my nose red and runny. But I felt infinitely better after that.

There was no other way I could mourn for him.

Last December, I was reminded of Carlo again and his sudden passing. I didn't cry anymore. Instead I remembered something from way before when I was feeling lonely and pathetic. I didn't want to talk to anyone. And so I went out to sulk. He saw me and happily trotted over to me. He sniffed close to my face. Could he smell the misery in me? I edged away before he could lick my face. He seemed surprised at my aversion that his tongue stuck out only halfway. He didn't even pull it back in. I couldn't help but laugh at how silly he looked that time, staring at me with a bit of pink tongue sticking out. "You silly boy," I whispered and bopped his nose gently with my finger.

He seemed satisfied at that and lay down, resting his head on my lap. He let out a sigh as I started to stroke his head. His sighs always amused us. With his doleful eyes, he looked emotional. But I assumed, at that particular moment, that it was an expression of contentment. He just made his human friend happy for a moment. He had done his job well and was rewarded with an ever-growing love and some affectionate head petting.

I could only hope to live like him, that simple and fulfilled life.