

Kia Thomas

Le Petit Mort

I never realized my life had been riddled with deaths. Little ones, like rejection or break-ups, but big ones too. I've been to funerals I can't recall for people I never knew. They became gatherings I anticipated, full of kisses and hugs and barefoot tears, and some good old down-home cooking. I couldn't comprehend what it meant to die, so I never thought it could touch me.

When my Uncle Charles died, death became tangible enough for me to become obsessed with it. My mother always laughs about the fact that, shortly after, I tried to touch her father in his casket. I'd never met him; just one of the resting, formaldehyde pumped faces of my youth. In my bed at night, I would come up with thousands of topics to think of when I was in the casket. I thought death just meant you couldn't move and somehow, the corpses managed to occupy themselves.

My grandmother was diagnosed with Stage 4 Lymphoma shortly after I was born. My earliest memories are of her, swaying to Donna Summer with her forearms elbow-deep in dishwater, or belting Diana Ross while dusting the curtains. We would dance and sing to Alicia Keys in the living room. In our few photos together, we are in motion, heads thrown back to whatever melody was playing, hand in hand, smiling hard. Nobody can tell me why I called her Boogie, but I could only imagine why.

I remember her laugh, a grounding sound, and the way curses would stream from her mouth with stunning cleverness. Her profanity was endearing and intentional, a homage to our Southern roots. She'd boost me up at the makeshift counter when we'd go to buy bootleg DVDs from the kind man at laundromat and quick as she'd pat my butt for running out into the street while she wasn't looking.

My earliest memories are also of hospitals. Sometimes I think about the nurses I used to know by name, who would bring me food and sweets from home or toys to play with. The bright white halls were a

labyrinth to me. The sterilized tools and stark white coats intrigued me. When asked, I could recite the treatments Boogie had been through and the ones to come. I spent my weekends in the chemotherapy ward with her and the friends she'd make along the way, trying to understand their dirty jokes and sneaking away to munch on crushed ice. For some reason, it never occurred to me that she might die.

Whenever I left my bookbag in my locker at school, something bad would happen. I'd either forget something, get yelled at, trip and fall, or miss my favorite television show. It never failed, and you'd think I would catch on. That day, I left homework help, my least favorite after-school activity, and placed my bag in my locker. I wouldn't need it because I had already finished everything I needed to, I rationalized. I left the building around 6pm and began my walk home when my cellphone rang.

"Hey Kia!"

"Hey Daddy. What's up?"

"Your mother isn't home, so you'll be staying at my house tonight. Do you remember how to get here?"

"Yes."

"Okay, I'll see you soon then. Love you! Bye."

The air became a vacuum as I hung up the phone. All the omens came together: my bookbag left in the locker, my mother not being home. I walked to the bus stop in silence, glancing at people's mouths move wordlessly, letting the blue and red lights from the sirens wash over me, soundless. My feet made hollow sounds against the pavement and reverberated up to my empty brain.

It didn't make any sense - my mother was constantly at the hospital with her, but always made it home before I did. Where else would she be, and why couldn't she come back?

I boarded the M4, the bright lights of the bus bringing my mind's voice. The empty space where my bookbag was supposed to be weighed heavily on my back. *She's dead*, I thought. *No, she isn't*, I thought. The months I'd let pass by without visiting her began to creep into my mind. Unanswered calls and clipped conversations where I'd be begging to see her a year before. *Do I deserve to feel this way?*, I thought.

A sleepover at my Dad's house was always a reason to celebrate; I visited often but rarely stayed. I always thought his house was fancier than me and my mom's, hardwood floors instead of public housing linoleum, painted walls and a defunct fireplace stuffed with ancient newspaper clippings. My sister lived with my Dad and stepmother at the time, so we played all night until bedtime. She knew Boogie too, but I didn't tell her about my premonition. I didn't want to jinx it.

When my stepmother woke us up for school, I'd forgotten about the night before. I showered, moisturized and dressed myself like it was any other day. Right before I was set to go, my mother called and told me to come home. I thought it was strange, because stopping at home meant I would be late for school. When I started looking for my bookbag, everything hit me again. The walk to my mom's house was somber, the early morning quiet and barren.

As soon as I entered the apartment, my mother swept me into an embrace. This all but confirmed my suspicions, but I couldn't find it in myself to cry. I couldn't even find it in myself to think. She told me what I already knew behind misty eyes that seemed to be holding back for my sake. I only felt a chilling emptiness and dry guilt for not being able to cry. I pushed forward for her, shedding a few tears and laying down before I demanded to go to school, three hours late.

Sometimes I watch My Sister's Keeper and shed the copious tears I wanted to at her funeral, where my sister and I got in trouble for giggling to each other and avoided looking into the casket. Other times I go through old photo albums, struck by how real and recent all the memories feel, how deeply my love is

still rooted. Sometimes I cannot remember what her voice sounded like. Other times I hear her voice in my own. There is no conclusion to our story, although now I understand death. It means I can take comfort in the fact that I lived through her, and she lives through me.