A Normal Death

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Abstract

Death—the word is spoken with low and hushed voice, with ominous tone. I suppose I first became acquainted with death as a small child in Rochester, Minnesota, where my brother Natty and I would wake up early on rainy Saturdays and eat bowls of Wheaties and watch the cartoons on television...
Death—the word is spoken with low and hushed voice, with ominous tone. I suppose I first became acquainted with death as a small child in Rochester, Minnesota, where my brother Natty and I would wake up early on rainy Saturdays and eat bowls of Wheaties and watch the cartoons on television. But this was a painted death—painted in the sunny yellows and splashy greens of the world of Bugs Bunny, Mighty Mouse, and Woody the Woodpecker. Blinking slowly at the dizzy dancing laughable atrocities, diabolically plotted and gushing with revenge, as the humanistic animals mauled one another in every possible way. Natty and I soaked it up, and after the morning had finished its round of shootings, drownings, and steam roller crushings, we went outside to play “army men.” With his miniature green recruits and tiny olive-hued plastic tanks and trucks, we would concoct episodes that often surpassed the cartoons’ gory shows in casualties and horror.

It was a normal childhood.

Death, to me, was a fantasy of manipulations. Among other worldly secrets, I knew that grown-ups had devised the characters in the cartoons. They could draw them any way they pleased, just as Natty and I could hand-grenade as many platoons as we pleased. But always, the dead could come back. Elmer Fudd, who blew off his head with his own shotgun one morning, returned the next Saturday well intact. Our army men, those tough green plastic privates, suffered no cuts, no bruises, no broken bones. The only damage they could undergo was what we sometimes applied with our incisors. Death as I know it today did not exist in 1959.
But slowly as I grew, I became disenchanted with cartoons, preferring instead the Lone Ranger, Perry Mason, and even Walter Cronkite. I became impatient with Dr. Seuss and turned to "Jane Eyre" and Ray Bradbury and "Newsweek." Death changed from a fantasy of red and ouches to a hard, necessary evil inflicted by tough trench-coated detectives to the stiff quick shot in the head of a Vietnamese peasant. I watched the news; I read the papers. Death was everywhere, in every form. Death was closing in on me. I changed. I grew.

It was a normal adolescence.

I wrote poems on the subject. One dealt with suicide. "I've committed suicide, I'm heading straight for hell. Sobbing, they will see I've tried. To cope, though I could not abide my soul's failure to sell." I had a good time with death. I beautified it; I made it lovely to listen to, to read of—while still retaining the horror. But something was missing in my poems. I read of death in the papers until I became numbed by the steady repetition of statistical fatalities, as an extended drumroll paralyzes the ear. No one single death had ever occurred close enough to so much as choke me up.

Then Grandpa died.

He had lived the wild life of a roving naval alcoholic and now had paid the ultimate price. We were expecting it, I had known. For the entire month before his passing, friends and relatives would make carefully soft suggestions about "his condition." The old man's lungs daily filled with more fluid as emphysema set in. We visited him in the hospital, and I was shocked at his appearance—the very first gaunt person I had ever seen. Every breath rattled in his frail, brittle body; every bone was visible through blue-white veiny skin. Every time I looked at him, I stifled an impulse to throw up. I kept waiting for him to spurt out some profound piece of wisdom about life. It had come from the dying hero in every book I'd read. Where was it now? And this stench of ether in every spotless corner—no volume had ever carried such a revolting smell.
He died one day; I was glad I had not been present. We went see him after they had drained the blood from his body and rouged his cheeks and made him fat again like a stuffed turkey. I saw how antiseptic death really was. I saw crying relatives and the somber undertaker and the windy tent on a graveyard hillside. I saw it all and felt very little.

Because for all the deaths I had witnessed, whether on Saturday cartoons or in the muddy battlefields of our backyard, in novels or in newspapers, this was but one more. I had waited for this day to come, just so I could feel the rush of emotion. But it never came. They lowered him into the hillside, and we went home to a late supper and bed and school the next day, and it never came.